

WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES...

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Guard yourself, lest you forget HaShem your G-d, not to keep his commandments, judgements, and enactments, which I command you today. Lest you eat and be satisfied, build nice houses and live in them... and you become haughty, and forget HaShem your G-d who brought you out from Egypt, from the house of slavery... and you say in your heart, my own might and the strength of my hand have made me all of this wealth." [Dev. 8:11-12, 14, 17]

The Talmud [Tractate Sotah 5a] says that there is a Commandment not to be haughty. Any time the Torah employs the phrase "guard yourself, lest...", explains Rebbe Il'a, the Torah is warning us to not violate a Law -- in this case, not to forget G-d. And when the Torah continues "... and you become haughty, and forget HaShem your G-d...", G-d is telling us that the one inevitably leads to the other: if you become haughty, the end result will be that you will forget G-d.

Rabbi Shmshon Raphael Hirsch takes this concept a step further, saying that arrogance is, in and of itself, the beginning of forgetfulness of G-d. The Talmud Sotah also records (in the name of either Rav Chisda or Mar Ukva) that G-d says concerning anyone with the trait of haughtiness, "he and I cannot coexist in this world." Why? Because the arrogant individual is so full of himself that he loses his recognition of all higher authority -- including The Higher Authority.

Rav Eliyahu Dessler points to haughtiness as the root of needless hatred, the hatred "for nothing" that, according to tradition, destroyed the Second Temple. How can hatred be utterly without provocation, truly "for nothing?" He answers that an arrogant person can be so dedicated to reaching the "top" that he can hate others simply because they are in a higher or more respected position. Since he wants the position for himself, he hates those who are in his way.

Rav Dessler further explains how appropriate it was that the Romans should destroy that Temple and take us into exile [Michtav MiEliyahu, v3 p215- 216]. The Romans, according to our tradition, are descended from Eisav and Amalek, the latter being the nation that first came out to fight the Jews in the Sinai Desert. They represented the ultimate in "my own might and the strength of my hand," for they did not come on behalf of any idolatry, but only on behalf of themselves -- claiming the ability to fight against G-d.

A haughty, arrogant individual fails to recognize that all that he or she has received is a gift from G-d.

So if other people have not received the same privileges, this hardly justifies the development of a "superiority complex" -- which one could easily argue is just as harmful as its opposite.

Moshe received the Torah from G-d Himself on Mt. Sinai, and he was unafraid to confront those who were doing wrong. Yet the Torah itself testifies that he was the most humble person in the world. Obviously, humility did not contradict Moshe's recognition of who he was, and the requirements of leadership.

The same is true for us. Humility does not mean failing to recognize who we are or what we can accomplish. On the contrary, it means recognizing that all the blessings we have -- including our abilities -- come from G-d!

Good Shabbos,
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