

KEEPING HUMAN ENDEAVOR ROOTED

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

"Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they realized that they were naked. They sewed together a fig leaf and made themselves aprons."^[1] R. Abba bar Kahana said, "It does not say 'apron' but 'aprons.' They made many aprons – a number of men's garments, and a number of women's garments."^[2]

All of us understand that human life took a turn for the worse after the first sin. Without the insight of Chazal, we would not comprehend the vastness of the change.

There are no negotiated social communities among animals. They have no need to organize themselves by working out their differences. Most animals have no need at all, really, for group living. Nature – and their instincts – provides them with all they need to survive and thrive.

Man is different. It is almost impossible for him to be self-sufficient, and be able to provide food and shelter for himself. Or so we think. Chazal thought otherwise.

Before the sin, Man was as self-sufficient as animals. He received what he needed from Hashem, though a world that responded to Man's will. After the sin, he had to work for whatever he needed, and coax it out of a resistant Nature. Moreover – and just as importantly – his conception of "necessity" was transformed when the *yetzer hora* took up residence within him. Food was no longer a question of something – anything – that would fill his stomach; shelter did not mean just any structure that would keep out wind and rain. Man saw himself as wanting – needing! – much more than that. Along with newly acquired emotional reactions like hatred, jealousy, lust and the hunger for honor that came with the *yetzer hora*, he also changed the parameters of what he believed to be essential needs. He would now be dependant on a much larger group of people with whom he would have to live than if his basic needs were defined more strictly.

This is what our passage means. No sooner did Adam and Chavah realize that they needed to cover up, than they conjured up multiple forms of cover. Not one apron for each, but various styles – several for men, and several for women. Man became unwilling to sustain himself with just enough to get by. He developed complex needs. Procuring them became so complicated, that he had no choice but to associate with and rely upon many other people to provide him with his assumed needs. He would also have to wage internal battles with himself to live peaceably with others – something that would have come naturally before the sin.

Rambam^[3] views a major part of human endeavor with utter contempt. He speaks of people who travel great distances at great personal discomfort in order to eke out some profit. They keep at it, even after amassing enough money to live comfortably. Having established themselves firmly, they push on with their worldly pursuits, expending huge sums of their hard-earned profits on building magnificent residences, knowing full well that they may never have an opportunity to enjoy their monuments to themselves. Rather, disasters occur, tragedies strike, or they may die and abandon their projects to the enjoyment of others.

Is there anything more foolish and futile than these pursuits? Despite the fact that the Rambam recognizes that a Divine purpose may be fulfilled through them – e.g. so that some righteous person passing by many years in the future might take refuge there for a few moments – Rambam calls this kind of activity “madness.” Yet, he concedes, without such madness the world would remain desolate. Meaningless pursuit drives human creativity, as well as the market.

If, then, Hashem has His plan for everything, and Man's futile pursuits also serve a higher purpose, what difference is there between “madness” and spiritual accomplishment? A midrash^[4] questions the coincidence of Yishmael's progeny being exactly as prolific as that of Yaakov. Our forefather had twelve sons who became leaders of large groups; so did Yishmael. “These are the sons of Yishmael...twelve *nesi'im* for their nations.”^[5] No problem, responds the midrash. Look again. Yishmael's offspring are called *nesi'im*, in the way the word is used elsewhere – “Clouds/ *nesi'im* and wind without rain.”^[6] Yaakov's are called *matos*.

Perhaps our discussion thus far shines some light on this enigmatic midrash. It is indeed true that human activity per se makes itself useful to the purposes of both Man and G-d. But not all endeavor is equivalent. Clouds are an essential part of our weather system. They carry the moisture that feeds our crops and our thirst. Looking at an individual cloud, however, you can never predict how useful its payload will be. Will it drop its cargo over a well-tended field, or over a swollen lake, miles from habitation? Eventually, its water will find its way into something useful, perhaps after many years and cycles of evaporation and rainfall. But the close-range effect of the cloud is unknown. They may become useful only a great distance away, and after a great span of time. Such is the nature of Yishmael's empire. It will produce things valuable to some people – but not in an immediate or predictable manner.

Yaakov's sons, on the other hand, are *matos*, wooden staffs. The staff comes from a tree, which is certainly valuable for the fruit that grows on it. Unlike the cloud, the tree is firmly rooted, and not going anywhere. Whatever blessing is associated with that tree will be appreciated in a definite place and time. It will not have to wait for convoluted vicissitudes of life to carry it off elsewhere, and trickle down to distant characters.

It is better, claims the midrash, to be the lonely tree of Yaakov, than the vast ocean of storm clouds

of Yishmael. Now we know why.

1. Bereishis 3:7
2. Bereishis Rabbah 19:6
3. Introduction to Perush HaMishnah
4. Yalkut Chabakuk #564
5. Bereishis 25:16
6. Mishlei 25:14