

PARSHAS VAYISHLACH - MISTAKES WILL PROVIDENTIALLY HAPPEN

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Mistakes Will Providentially Happen¹

Why, Hashem, do You let us stray from Your paths, letting our heart become hardened from fearing You? Return to us for the sake of Your servants, the tribes of Your heritage. For but a short time did Your holy people possess it; our enemies have trampled Your mikdosh[2].

Look carefully, and you will see our parshah addressed in this passage. Next week's as well. In these parshios, we see the shevatim commit two aveiros: their overreaction against Shechem, and the sale of Yosef. According to Chazal[3], the navi here affirms that despite the aveiros, they have not lost their special favor before G-d. They remain Hashem's servants, the tribes of His heritage. Moreover, Yeshaya points a finger, kivayachol, at G-d Himself! You, Hashem, You let them stray! The Medrash is quite clear. "When You wished, You gave them the idea to love; when You wished, You gave them the idea to hate." In other words, the shevatim, Hashem's precious servants, would ordinarily not have acted the way they did in these two episodes. His providential plans for the course of the Jewish people, however, required the unhappy outcomes of both of those incidents. He therefore deliberately led them astray. In the one case (the incident of Dinah's abduction), He burdened them with a surfeit of love for their sister, which led them to take unwise and precipitous action against the city of Shechem. In the other, He provided them with unnatural animosity towards their brother, leading to his sale. In both cases, they later regretted their actions[4].

We would not call this treatment the primary sense of the pesukim in Yeshaya. Chazal's words are meant to be taken in the spirit of a secondary meaning, another level that Chazal detected allusions to, as they so often do in their derashos. From their handling of the pesukim, however, we can better appreciate the primary message of the passage. What prompted the comments of Chazal was their noting that the navi here speaks of the shevatim, which is uncommon in Tanach. Ordinarily, when asking Hashem to remember the merit of the ancients, it is always the avos, Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov whose names we invoke. Chazal understood the reason for the anomaly in our passage. The navi was calling attention to something that the Jews of his day shared with the mistakes of the shevatim, rather than the righteousness of the avos.

We can identify two chief categories of aveiros in general, separated by their different causes. One type of aveirah is sourced in poor judgment. People trying to live in accordance with Hashem's Will come to faulty conclusions about what He in His Torah expects us to do. The other kind of aveirah is far more common. People will transgress known prohibitions because they are deficient in yiras Shomayim.

When the beis ha-mikdosh stood, both types of sinners could be rehabilitated by a simple visit there. The presence of the Shechinah remarkably transfigured a visitor to the revered site. Visitors could expect to draw from the ruach ha-kodesh that was available there. If a person did not feel the exhilaration of connection with Hashem, he knew that something was amiss in his inner self. (In fact, the arguments upon which he erroneously acted were lost to him while he stood on Har ha-Bayis. The voice of falsity became mute!) On the other hand, a visitor whose yiras Shomayim was previously lacking suddenly began trembling in the presence of undeniable holiness. He became infused with new reverence for Hashem.

This, then, was the cause of the navi's lament. Foreseeing the impending destruction of the beis ha-mikdosh, he understood the terrible consequences its destruction would have upon human sinners. People who suffered from faulty ideas and conceptions would no longer be able to cure them by a visit to Yerushalayim; rather, they would continue to "stray from" Hashem's paths. Those lacking in yiras Hashem would no longer turn around their lives after a visit there. Instead, their hearts would stay "hardened from fearing" Him.

Yeshaya implores Hashem, by asking Him to consider the example of the shevatim. They, too, sinned. Their shortcomings stemmed from the same two categories of deficiency: mistaken presumptions about proper conduct, as well as coming up short on yiras Shomayim. The two great episodes of failure in this parshah and the next make a strong case for the need for Divine assistance in overcoming flaws and weakness.

In their case, it was Divine Providence that they should err. Therefore, the Divine assistance that was ordinarily available to them was withheld. As a result, they stumbled. Their very failure makes a strong case, however, for the need for Him to provide the rest of us with the help that we need to get past our flaws. Give us a chance, continues the navi, to live our lives properly. "Return to us" by restoring Your Temple, which once again will give us the corrective boost we need to mend our ways.

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1. Based on Harchev Davar, Bereishis 34:25
 2. Yeshaya 63:17-18
 3. Bereishis Rabbah 84:18
 4. The Torah explicitly speaks of their later regret over the sale of Yosef. Bereishis Rabbah 85:2

describes their second thoughts over the slaughter of the city of Shechem.
