

FLEETING SHADOWS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"And the time drew near that Yisrael must die, and he called his son Yosef and said to him: 'If now I have found favour in your eyes, please put your hand under my thigh and do with me kindness and truth: Please do not bury me in Egypt.'" (Bereishis 47:29)

"Our days are as a shadow upon the earth." (Divrei HaYamim-1 29:15) O, that our life would be as a shadow of a wall or that of a tree. Rather, it is as the shadow of a bird in flight above the ground. (Midrash Rabbah 96:2)

The Navi (prophet) equates our days upon the earth to a shadow. Yet even among shadows, it seems, there are levels. There is the shadow of a wall or a tree, which, while transient, has some degree of permanence. And there is the shadow of a moving bird - a fleeting shadow. Yismach Moshe (Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum zt"l) asks: How is it that our days are likened to the fleeting shadow of a bird, which doesn't remain stationary for even a moment? After all, our days, though relatively few, still have some degree of permanence. People live seventy, eighty, even 100 years. If, indeed, our days are as a shadow, are they not at least like the shadow of a tree, and not that of a bird?

Were we to ask someone, says the Yismach Moshe, "How long will you live?" he would likely take a total of the years he has already lived, add on to them an estimate of how long he figures he will still live, and give you a rough total. If you were to ask me, however, says the Yismach Moshe, I would answer you, "One second." After all, what has already past is of no consequence. And as far as the future: How am I to know if I will even live to see tomorrow? What I do know is that this very moment, I am being given the gift of life. This moment is all I have. So, right now, this is my whole life.

This, he says, is a mussar haskeil, a penetrating insight. Were a person to really value each moment, to realize that all he has in life is this very moment, which fool would while away his "moments" with idleness and meaningless distractions. One who adapts this approach, his life becomes a collection of thousands of meaningful moments, threads of time, which, when woven together, yield an exquisite fabric, the likes of which could not have been produced by anyone else but him.

A poor person once approached an understanding merchant who had a reputation for lending money. "I know that you lend money using the heter iska (a halachic vehicle whereby one may, under certain circumstances, receive compensation for lending money). I desperately need a hundred dinars, and I am prepared to repay you at a rate of twelve percent above the principal. However, I will not be able to repay the loan as a lump sum. I will repay you one dinar at a time until

the loan is paid in full."

The merchant considered the request for a moment. "Twelve percent is indeed a suitable return. Nevertheless, I do not lend money to people who repay in small amounts. I am sorry, my friend, but I cannot help you." The poor man was forced to leave, empty handed and discouraged. The merchant's friend, who stood nearby, questioned him, "Twelve percent was an excellent deal. Very few borrowers pay that amount. Why did you turn down the loan?"

The merchant explained. "When a person gets paid one dinar at a time, he is likely to spend it, as one would small change. When he finally collects the last payment, he then has nothing to show for it except one measly coin."

"The days of man are finite, whether they be seventy or eighty years," (Tehilim 90:10). However, our days and years are not given to us all at once. "Our days are as a shadow upon the earth," but not as the shadow of a tree, which stands tall and erect. Rather, our days are as the shadow of a bird which flies overhead, producing a new silhouette each moment, as the previous one disappears as quickly as it formed.

Man receives his moments one at a time. "The past is gone, the future is yet to be, and the present is as quick as the blink of an eye." The nature of man is to underestimate the significance of a minute. What is a minute, anyway? Many people seem to feel that a minute is not so terrible a thing to waste. Yet, as life "flies" by, these are the minutes that must be utilized. They are our life. And using them properly and constructively is all we have to show for ourselves. [Mashal ve-Nimshal, Likutei Peshatim]

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