

HORSES AND LADDERS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

The horse is readied for the day of battle - but salvation is to Hashem. (Mishlei/Proverbs 21:31)

Rabbeinu Bachaya, author of Chovos HaLevavos, begins his commentary on the parsha each week with a verse from the Nevi'im/Kesuvim (Prophets/Writings), followed by a discourse relating that verse to the weekly Torah reading. He begins Parshas Shelach with the above pasuk. There is nothing wrong per se, he explains, with the concept of sending spies to reveal the most strategically viable way to enter a foreign and hostile land. To the contrary, it's expected of us.

Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon) in the above passage makes it clear that we are obligated to do everything within our means to assure success in whatever we endeavor to accomplish. When you go to war - prepare the best horses, chariots and armour. Heavenly salvation, even miracles, he explains, come into play only after we ourselves have done as much as we possibly could.

This is why the Almighty told Noach to build himself an ark. Surely had the will of Hashem so dictated, Noach and his family could have survived the Mabul (Flood) without any Ark at all. Yet although ultimately Noach's salvation was completely dependent on Hashem, this did not prevent Hashem from giving Noach very detailed instructions as to the construction of the Ark; its specific dimensions, of such and such a type of wood, with a certain number of compartments... Noach had to do as much as he could on his own.

One who relies on faith, but fails to take the appropriate precautions, is setting himself up for failure. The ill man must research the source of his sickness, and try to implement lifestyle-changes and medicinal cures, all the while remaining aware that his ultimate salvation is completely dependent on Hashem. Hashem may or may not choose to bring it about through the steps the individual has taken.

If fault is to be found in the Meraglim/Spies, it is not with the steps they took, but with the fact that they came to rely solely on their own preparations and tactics, to the extent that they lost faith in Hashem's promise due to what they had seen. Indeed, before entering Eretz Yisrael, Yehoshua too sent out spies. If the sending of spies is inherently wrong - if it expresses a lack of sufficient faith in Hashem's word - then how could Yehoshua have fallen prey to the same error made 39 years previously? And why, indeed, was he not punished for his spies? The fault, evidently, was not in the process, but in its implementation.

"Not in the strength of the horse does He desire; nor in the legs of man does He favour.

(Tehillim/Psalms 147)" G-d is unimpressed with great strength. "A king is not saved by a great army; nor is a hero rescued by great strength. A mockery is the horse for salvation; despite its great strength, it provides no escape. (Tehillim 33)" After one has done all that he can, he must cast his faith completely upon Hashem. The Meraglim got so caught up in their strategies, that they completely forgot they had been assured victory by Hashem Himself!

The task before us is not a simple one; it is a delicate and sensitive balance we are asked to maintain: If we do not take the necessary steps to ensure our physical/material well being, we will be taken to task for relying on miracles. If, on the other hand, we count on the steps we have taken, forgetting that our ultimate salvation lies in Hashem's hands, we will also be subject to criticism.

I heard from a friend that this may be the meaning of a strange Rashi. Kalev, one of the two "good" Spies [the other was Yehoshua], countered his counterparts with the words, "Alo na'aleh, We will surely go up! (13:30)" Rashi comments, "Even were [Moshe and Aaron] to tell us to take ladders and ascend to the very heavens, we would surely succeed!" Why bother with ladders? Why doesn't Rashi simply say that if Moshe and Aaron were to tell us to ascend to the heavens, even then we would succeed? Perhaps Rashi means to illustrate just this point: We are obligated to function, to the best of our capabilities, through normal means. To go up, one takes a ladder. With his ladder, if Hashem so desires, he can ascend to the very heavens. Although the ladder is of course completely unequipped for such ascents, still it must be there.

At the same time, we must also be careful not to err in the opposite direction. There are times when our laziness and indolence might get the better of us by disguising itself as faith and emunah. Instead of getting up and taking the steps necessary for success, we utter a silent prayer, and hope that everything will be alright. This too is wrong. While it is true that success and failure emanate from Hashem, one must do everything one can to make sure he is on the right path. If one has a child who is not succeeding in his/her studies, it is commendable to take out one's Tehillim and say a few chapters, but it's not enough. One must go to the experts, and do everything one possibly can. The same is true in business and commerce. To throw one's savings into the first investment that comes one's way in the blind faith "that if Hashem means me to succeed, then I will succeed no matter what I do," is to set oneself up for failure. (And to hope our characters will grow and blossom without taking the time to learn mussar (ethics) and make a daily cheshbon ha-nefesh (self-reckoning) is wishful thinking!)

Such is the way of the world. We must set up the ladder. We must climb it as far as it takes us. And then we must hold on tight, because Hashem will be taking care of the rest of the way.

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