ANCESTRAL ARCHERY AND PEACEFUL PEBBLES

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

He dwelt in the desert; and he became an accomplished archer. (21:20)

A Texan, a Frenchman and an Israeli are on a plane flying over the Pacific Ocean when their engines die. The plane crashes on a Pacific Island and the three are immediately captured by a tribe of cannibals and taken to their village. The Chief tells the three captives that his cannibals are civilized, and they have a custom that before they eat anyone, they grant that person his or her last wishes - no matter what they are.

He asks the Texan, "What is your last wish?"

The Texan replies: "I want a two-inch thick steak with all the trimmings, french fries, and a beer."

The Chief motions to some of his tribesmen, who immediately run into the jungle and come back with the steak, the fries and the beer. The Texan eats his meal, and he is thrown in the simmering pot.

The Frenchman is asked: "What is your last wish?"

He replies: "I'd like a case of the most expensive champagne, and I'd also like a big plate of escargot cooked in the French manner."

The Chief motions to his tribesmen, who immediately rush off into the jungle and bring back everything the Frenchman asked for. He eats and drinks his fill, and he is then thrown into the pot.

The Chief turns to the Israeli and asks, "And what is your last wish?"

The Israeli looks the Chief squarely in the eyes and replies: "I want you to take a steel club and beat me over the head as hard as you can." The Chief is bewildered and asks the Israeli again, only to receive the same reply. The Chief shrugs his shoulders, motions for a steel club, and raises it over the Israeli's head. But before he even begins to bring the club down, the Israeli pulls out a gun and kills the Chief and all of the other cannibals.

The Texan and the Frenchman look at the Israeli and say: "If you had that gun all along, why didn't you do anything sooner?"

The Israeli replies: "What? And risk being condemned by the U.N. for reacting without sufficient provocation?!"

While it is not my area of expertise to offer political commentary on the present situation in Artzeinu ha-Kedosha (our Holy Land), the following insight occurred to me: It seems our Arab brethren have shrewdly captured public opinion by claiming that stone-throwing is an innocent expression of peaceful protest, without malice or intent to injure/kill. (One might think they were tossing pebbles! Somebody forgot to tell them that 50 pound cinder-blocks and two-foot boulders don't go 'ping' when they bounce off a car, or G-d forbid, someone's head.)

So I was thinking, as I'm sure were many others, that all-in-all it's a pretty brilliant tactic. Where did they think it up??

Well, to cite an oft-quoted Chazal (see Sotah 34a), Ma'asey avos siman la-banim - the deeds of the fathers pave the way for their future progeny. I believe the B'nei Yishmael (descendants of Ishmael) may have found a precedent to this kind of prank in our parsha. The Chumash (21:9) relates that Sarah was aroused to drive Hagar and Yishmael out of their house, "because she saw the son of Hagar [Yishmael] joking." Rashi relates the following episode:

[Yishmael] would argue with Yitzchak over their inheritance. He would say, "I am my father [Avraham's] first-born, and am entitled to a double portion." They would go out to the field, and [Yishmael] would take his bow, and shoot arrows [at Yitzchak]. As it is written (Mishlei/Proverbs 26:18-19), "Like one who wears himself out, throwing firebrands, arrows, and deadly objects [stones?]... And says, 'Am I not merely jesting?'"

The murderer practices by throwing firebrands, that extinguish in midair. If questioned as to his motives, why - he's just fooling around! Once he gets the range, he moves to casting deadly objects. Sound familiar? Yitzchak, strolling in the field, minding his own business... Suddenly, a razor-sharp arrow whizzes right past his head. Trembling, he turns to see brother Yishmael, his bow still perched in his hands, smiling. "Just playing around, brother!"

The power of leitzanus - jest! The most earnest and deadly attempts at destruction, veiled in a cloak of jest, take on the most innocent of appearances...

Yitzchak was almost identical in looks to Avraham. Rashi (21:2) understands that this is the meaning of the verse, "And [Sarah] bore a son to Avraham -- li-zekunav," - Yitzchak's 'ziv ikunin' (facial appearance) was almost identical to Avraham's. At the beginning of Toldos, Rashi explains this in more detail:

The 'leitzanei ha-dor' (jokers of the day [gossip columnists?]) were saying that Sarah had become pregnant from Avimelech (King of Plishtim, by whom she had been taken captive). After all, she had spent many years with Avraham, yet she never (until now) bore children. What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do? He fashioned the form of Yitzchak's face similar to Avraham's...

Why does Rashi refer to these wicked, slanderous people as "jokers?" The answer, explain mefarshim, is obvious. To say, in earnest, that Yitzchak was the son of Avimelech would have borne

no fruits. Avimelech made no claim to having lived with Sarah. Furthermore, Yitzchak looked identical to Avraham! But in the form of a joke, they can say whatever they want. It doesn't even have to make the least bit of sense! And if anyone calls their bluff, they'll just brush it off with a laugh: "Can't you take a joke!"

There is a famous adage: One wisecrack can destroy many warnings. We've all seen it happen. It could be after a moving derasha, or perhaps a quiet moment of reflection. Just one snide remark is all it takes, and any meaningful thoughts are driven from the mind just as fast as the laughter leaves the lips. This is why leitzanus is so deadly; its words worm their way into our subconscious more insidiously than we may ever realize...

"Praiseworthy is the man who did not walk in the counsel of the wicked, and did not stand in the path of the sinful, and did not sit in a gathering of scorners ('Moshav Leitzim') (Tehillim/Psalms 1:1)."

Why does the Psalmist refer to not walking with the wicked, not standing with the sinful, and not sitting with the scorners? With one who is blatantly wicked, we would not even walk. With the sinner, we hesitate to stand in his path. But the leitz - he seems so innocent. After all, he doesn't mean what he says seriously. It's only a joke!... Even to sit together with him might not seem so bad. Beware!

Perhaps, the next time we hear a joke that innocently mocks Torah or Yiras Shamayim, we should remind ourselves of the zeideh Yishmael, innovator of "peaceful" devastation, and realize the damage that an ill-placed quip can do. Arrows, sticks and stones can break bones (and worse G-d forbid!), but words can hurt in untold ways.

Have a good Shabbos.

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