

WITH ALL DUE RESPECT

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

With All Due Respect - Opposing Questions

In parshas Matos, members of the tribes of Re'uven, Shimon, and Menashe approach Moshe with a surprising request [32:1-5]:

The land [the Trans-Jordan] that Hashem smote before the congregation of Israel, it is a land suitable for livestock - and your servants have livestock! If we have found favour in your eyes, let this land be given to your servants as an inheritance; do not force us to cross the Jordan and inherit Canaan with the rest of Israel.

Their request takes Moshe completely off guard. Here he had spent the last forty years of his life leading a fledgling nation through a desert wasteland - all in the hope that they would eventually inherit The Land. Moshe himself wanted nothing more dearly than to join his flock in crossing the Jordan, yet he had already been informed by G-d that such would not be the case. And now, they come and request that their inheritance be given them in the Trans-Jordan?! Moshe feared that if these 2« tribes would not join them in the difficult task of conquering the "31 kings" now in possession of Canaan, perhaps other tribes would fall prey to fear and apprehension, and everything he had worked for would in a moment be destroyed! He spares no words in criticizing them about the detrimental implications of their request [32:6-15]:

Moshe said to the children of Gad and Re'uven: Shall your brothers go out to war, while you settle here? Why do you dissuade the heart of the Children of Israel from crossing [the Jordan] to the Land that Hashem has given them? This is just like what your fathers [i.e. the Spies - see Bamidbar ch. 13-14] did when I sent them to see the Land... they dissuaded the heart of the Children of Israel not to come to the Land that Hashem has given them... And behold - you have risen up in place of your fathers, a group of sinful people, to add to Hashem's burning wrath against Israel!...

B'nei Gad and Re'uven answer that in fact they had never intended to remain on the other side of the Jordan while their brothers waged war over Israel. They had every intention of going along for the battle. Indeed, they would willingly place themselves in the "front-line." They would leave their wives and children here, and would return to the Trans-Jordan only after the Land was conquered and their brothers securely settled in their Homeland. Hearing this, Moshe's anger is placated, and after some complicated legal negotiations, a deal is struck.

The obvious question is: Why did B'nei Gad and Re'uven allow Moshe to go on lecturing them for 10 verses about the sinfulness of their ways, if they knew that he plainly misunderstood their intentions. Why didn't they stop him immediately: "Moshe - Moshe, please! There's been a misunderstanding..."?

The standard answer is that it would have been a shame to pass up such a ripe opportunity to hear a "mussar derasha" (ethical discourse), albeit misplaced, from their beloved leader. Although they knew he misunderstood them, they still cherished his words of wisdom, and thus allowed him to go on.

Perhaps, though, there is an even simpler answer.

A true story: A yeshiva bachur approached his rebbe with a question about parshas Chayei Sarah (Bereishis/Genesis 24): When Eliezer is sent by Avraham to look for a bride for Yitzchak, he finds Rivkah, daughter of Besuel, by a well. He is instantly taken by her piety, and asks to see her father to request that she become Yitzchak's wife. After presenting his case, her family prepares their answer [24:50]:

Then Laban and Besuel answered and said: The matter comes from Hashem; we can say neither good nor bad... Rashi comments: "From here we see that Lavan was a wicked man, for he hastened to speak before his father." "Now," asked the bachur, "I could have understood that Rashi would consider Lavan ill-mannered or even contemptible for jumping in before his father - but 'wicked?' Just because he spoke up before his father? Isn't that taking things a bit too far?"

"You know," said the rebbe, "that's interesting. You are bothered by this question. A few generations ago, the holy K'sav Sofer (quoting Sh'ela) was perplexed by the opposite question! He asks: Sure, Lavan was a wicked man. But even the most evil and sinful people have some respect for their parents. How is it possible that even Lavan could have stooped so low?! (He answers that it was intentional rudeness on Lavan's part, in order to put off Eliezer through his repulsive behaviour.) I guess it all depends which generation you grew up in. For the K'sav Sofer, this was a question. And for you - the opposite is a question!"

Perhaps our questioning why B'nei Gad and B'nei Re'uven didn't cut Moshe off, allowing him to continue with his misplaced derasha uninterrupted, in fact demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of what it means to fear one's rebbe. They were likely in such awe of Moshe's presence that the idea of interrupting him mid-speech was one that simply never even entered their minds.

The Gemara (Pesachim 7a) addresses the following question: What if a student, after coming to yeshiva to study Torah with his rebbe, remembers that he left an unbaked dough at home that if left unbaked will soon become chametz (leaven)? The Gemara says that he may rely on bittul - he should nullify the dough in his heart, rendering it like "the dust of the earth," so that even if it later leavens, it will not be considered his chametz.

Rashi asks: Why rely on the halachically questionable premise of bittul? Why doesn't he simply get up, go home, and bake the dough before it rises? Impossible - says Rashi. The fear for his rebbe's honour - that perhaps it would be disrespectful to interrupt his rebbe's shiur - would never allow him to do so!

I fear that, in our generation, we wouldn't even consider not interrupting the rebbe's shiur. After all, chametz on Pesach is no small issue; we are talking about a very serious prohibition. How different an attitude towards our teachers and our parents pervades today's generation than that of generations past!

A while ago, the Jewish Observer ran a series of articles regarding Children at Risk. The articles addressed why it is some Yeshiva students are experiencing difficulties continuing on in the ways of their parents and ancestors. Many of the writers, it seems, were of the opinion that youth were being lost due to a lack of communication between themselves and their parents, and the rigidity of their parents in their unwillingness to consider the real challenges their children faced.

I was asked at the time by someone to write an article which, they said, would present another side of the story: That perhaps, by not properly teaching our youth the halachos (laws) of derech eretz and respect for their teachers and elders, we were quietly undermining their ability to fear and submit to authority. That parents and teachers - perhaps out of (misplaced?) kindness and permissiveness, and in submission to the laissez-faire attitude that is the very backbone of Western society - were not fulfilling their roles as educators in teaching their children and students a critical lesson; that authority must be feared and respected. And that if one lacks the ability to fear and respect others, he will ultimately lack the ability to fear G-d too.

In the end, I did not write the article. The point, however, I feel was well taken. While there are many sides and many angles to the "Children on the Fringe" debate, all of them with an element of truth, this perspective certainly deserves a prominent place among them.

While it is easy for adults to bemoan the lack of respect of "today's children," we must remind ourselves that it is we who are the educators and role-models today's youth look towards for direction. While it may at first seem self-serving, teaching fear and respect of rebbes and parents and elders is a mitzvah as much as any of the other 612 mitzvos. While change comes slowly, perhaps if we begin to tip the scales ever-so-slightly away from permissiveness and over- tolerance towards respect and even fear, then perhaps a time will come when the Ksav Sofer's question will bother us as much as the question of the yeshiva bachur...

Have a good Shabbos.

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