A PLETHORA OF PREACHING

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

A Plethora of Preaching - What Do We Take Out of a Derasha?

The night of Yetzias Mitzrayim, the Exodus from Egypt, was certainly one of the most remarkable and significant nights in our nation's history. One can imagine the panic and hysteria that night as one firstborn after another died - "for there was no home where dead were not found! (12:30)" In stark contrast to the frenzied circumstances of the Egyptians, the Jews that night enjoyed complete tranquillity. True, they left Egypt "in a rush" - but that was because they were driven out by the Egyptians themselves. Leaving in a rush does not mean fleeing in confusion; to the contrary, the night of leaving Egypt is described by the Torah as, "Leil shimurim - a night of protection." On that night, "No dog so much as whet his tongue towards the Children of Israel (11:7)!"

What is the significance of the dogs not barking at the Jews as they left? Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Chasid explains that dogs, as a rule, bark at a dead body. This is because dogs have the ability to perceive the Malach Ha- Maves, the Angel of Death, as he comes to perform his morbid duty. Sensing the Malach Ha-Maves, dogs bark and carry on. Although Mitzrayim was full of deadly angels who had come to perform their duties, in respect for the Bnei Yisrael, the dogs remained quiet.

The recitation of this pasuk has actually become known among Jews as somewhat of a dog-charmer. It is said that if chased or attacked by a wild dog, all one has to do is to recite the verse, "And to all of the Children of Israel no dog whet its tongue," and the dog will immediately become quiet. While I don't personally suggest aggravating a bloodthirsty Rottweiler and banking on this pasuk's salvation, it's still a good thing to know when the need arises. There are many stories of people who were saved from dog attacks through this pasuk.

Rabbi Yaakov Krantz zt"l, better known as the Dubner Maggid, was famous for his poignant parables - he somehow managed to come up with the most incredible parables to explain almost anything he wished. He used parables to explain difficult passages in the Gemara and to illuminate complex sections of the Written Torah. Most of all, he used parables to couch his piercing ethical and moral sermons in a vehicle more palatable to his listeners. Parables, he felt, allowed one to laugh at oneself - to recognize and acknowledge one's faults without feeling the need to defend oneself or deny their existence.

One time, the Maggid's travels brought him to a somewhat "enlightened" congregation in Germany. The Maggid's fame as a storyteller and public speaker was so great that the leaders of the

community, despite their unenthusiastic stance vis-a-vis Torah and mitzvah observance, felt obligated to invite him to deliver a derasha in their synagogue. They sensed, however, that there was a need to clarify beforehand to the old- school Rabbi exactly what his role was when addressing such a apathetic (to Torah) and enlightened (to everything else) community.

"Rabbi," they said, "we know you are world-renowned for your parables and stories. You use them to beautify your derashos and drive home your powerful message of Torah adherence, and to articulate your biting criticism and reproach. Let there be no mistake: We love a good story, but we have no interest in your rebuke. We don't need some old- fashioned rabbi coming and telling us that we're not as dedicated as we should be to the Torah. We love the Torah - we just understand it differently than you. So please, rabbi, just give us the stories, and leave out the mussar!"

"Let me tell you a parable," said the Maggid. "A yeshiva rebbe once decided to take his students on a walk through the forest. 'Now boys,' he told them, 'we're going to be walking through a forest, and there's a good chance we might come across wild dogs. Well boys - have no fear! All you have to do if we come across wild dogs is to recite the pasuk, And to all the Children of Israel no dog whet its tongue, and no harm will become us. Did you all get that?'

"Just to make sure, the rebbe had them repeat the pasuk back to him. When he was satisfied, he confidently led his class into the forest. Sure enough, they hadn't been walking long when they stumbled upon the lair of a wild and ferocious dog. None too pleased with his intruders, the dog began to bark and howl, sending a piercing shudder of fear through the hearts of the young children and their teacher. All eyes turned to the rebbe - which is just as well, for the rebbe was already a good 50 feet away, darting for safety as fast as his feet could carry him. Reminding himself of his young charge, he screamed over his shoulder as he fled, 'Run for your lives!'

"They ran out of the forest, and found their rebbe still shaking with fear as he huffed and puffed from the ordeal. 'But rebbe,' they asked, 'why did you take-off like that? You said all we had to do was to say the pasuk and we would be safe!'

"Of course all you have to do is to say the pasuk!' said the rebbe. 'But how on earth am I supposed to say the pasuk if that crazy dog chasing after me doesn't let me say it?!'

"Let there be no mistake," concluded the Maggid, "I am not a storyteller. I am a rabbi. I use stories to bring out my points and to illuminate my words - but the stories to me are never just stories. There's always a point to be made, or a lesson to be learned. What point is there in me talking to your community if all they want is to hear a nice derasha, but have no interest in taking anything home? Talk is cheap."

In today's world, we are (Baruch Hashem!) exposed to derashos to an extent never before realized in our community. Every week there are posters describing some community gathering to hear the splendid words of a well-known public speaker. Tapes of speeches by our Gedolim and Roshei Yeshivos are distributed worldwide, often on the very same day their speech was delivered. One can

even hear a "daily derasha" over the phone! (You can also hear a daily derasha from your spouse, if you choose to consistently come home late, but that's another story.)

The danger of this plethora of preaching and surfeit of sermons is that they become commonplace and routine, until we no longer return home from a derasha asking ourselves, "How can I change?" but rather, "How polished a speaker was he/she? How good were his jokes? How touching/scary/absorbing were her stories? Was he/she better or worse than the speaker I heard last week?" We no longer approach a good speech as an opportunity for growth, but rather as a diversion - a chance to be entertained and amused by someone with the gift of the gaff. While we would never be so brazen to say as they said to the Maggid, "Just give us the stories," we must be careful that our actions in this regard don't end up speaking louder than our words, and that we really, sincerely, try to listen to the lessons being taught and the mussar being given, and make changes for the better - even small ones - in our lives. Next time you go to a derasha, make sure you take something home - besides just the stories and the leftover chocolates!

Have a good Shabbos.

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