

SPIES AND STONES - THE SHEPHERD STICKS WITH HIS FLOCK

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Hashem said to Moshe: Take a head count (lit.: Lift up the heads) of the sons of Gershon. Hashem commands Moshe, leader of Israel and shepherd of His flock, as He likewise says to all subsequent 'Moshes,' that they must (amongst their many other responsibilities) intervene on behalf of His children with their prayers and blessings, and elevate the heads of an otherwise broken (Gershon=divorced, exiled, unconnected) nation.

What form should their prayers take? Also them ('gam hem')—beseech Me to give them more and more (the word gam in the Talmud always comes to include or increase [see Esther Rabbah 3:9]).

In what merit will Hashem find us deserving? In accordance with their families and their Father's houses—remind Me of their righteous ancestors, Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov; in their merit I will bring all forms of blessing and grace upon their descendents. [Be'er Moshel]

The Mishna (Bava Metzia 83a) tells the story of Rabbi Yochanan ben Masya, who sent his son to hire workers. He told them, "Come and work for us, and my father will take care of your meals." When he returned and related to his father what he was done, R' Yochanan told him, "My son, what have you done?! Even if you prepare for them feasts like those of King Solomon, you will not have fulfilled your obligation! After all, they are the descendents of Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov."

So many of our prayers begin with the formula, "Elokeinu v'Elokei avoseinu/Our G-d and G-d of our ancestors." Perhaps due to its frequency, we often gloss over this introductory phrase, focusing instead on the entreaty that follows. If we appreciated the power invoking the merit of our great forefathers carries, and its potential to increase the efficacy of our prayers, maybe we would give these words more than just a cursory recital.

Descending from such giants of the spirit is itself a matter of immeasurable merit. How much more so if we not only invoke the righteous deeds of our ancestors, but also emulate their lives.

Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov, the Gemara relates (Bava Basra 17a), were all blessed with "kol/everything (i.e. there was no form of good they did not receive [Rashi])." Avraham: "And Hashem blessed Avraham ba-kol/with everything (Bereishis/Genesis 24:1)." Yitzchok: "And I have partaken mi- kol/from everything (Ibid. 27:33)." Yaakov: "And I have kol/everything (Ibid. 33:11)." This is the source to our prayer at the end of Birkas Ha- mazon (Grace after Meals): Just as our forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov, were blessed—bakol-mikol-kol—so too may He bless us all together.

What did the Avos do to merit such comprehensive blessings? The Gemara (Sotah 5a) implies it came to them in the merit of their humility; when we humble ourselves, their blessings will be perpetuated in us: "The haughty will be reduced, while those who humble themselves, ki-kol/like all they will leap (Iyov 24:24)"—like Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov, who merited the blessing of kol."

If the essence of arrogance is self-centredness, then the essence of humility must be its opposite—the realization that our purpose in life is not to serve ourselves but rather subservience to Hashem and to His people. The bolt that fastens the propeller to the airplane indeed plays a most critical role in its flight; without it, the aircraft would be doomed. Yet as critical as its role is, it's still just a small part of the overall picture. It would be foolish to say that the flight of a plane centres around its propeller-bolt.

Each Jew likewise has a critical and irreplaceable purpose in the function of the nation Israel which he must find, recognize and fulfill, and there's no arrogance in saying and believing this. It's when we start seeing our role and function as more critical than that of others that we part ways from the example of our holy ancestors. As long as we remember that we're 'gam hem/them too'—we're just a small piece of a giant puzzle that spans continents and millennia—then we will be firmly backed by the merit of their families and their Father's houses. [Ibid.]

The Gemara (Berachos 20b) relates a question (challenge) that the administering angels (mal'achei ha-shares) put to the Holy One, Blessed is He, regarding the Birkas Kohanim (Priestly blessings) found in this week's parsha:

Master of the Universe: Did You not write in Your Torah, 'Who does not show favour, and does not accept bribes (Devarim/Deuteronomy 10:17)?' Yet You do show favour to Israel, as it says, "May Hashem show favour to you, and grant you peace! (6:26)"

Replied the Almighty: How can I not show them favour? I wrote in the Torah (Devarim 8:10), "And you shall eat, and you shall be satisfied, and you shall bless Hashem your G-d." (I.e. the mitzvah to recite Birkas Ha-mazon only applies if one has eaten his full.) Yet they are particular to recite it even when they've eaten only an egg-sized, or even an olive sized portion of bread!"

How does our scrupulousness to recite Grace even over a small portion explain Hashem showing us favour? R' Bunim of P'shischa explains: We evaluate the presents we receive based on two criteria; the size or worth of the present, and who it came from. Even a relatively small present can still be extremely valuable to its recipient if its giver is someone very special.

By reciting Grace after eating, we recognize that our food, along with everything we have, are the gifts of Hashem. Our added enthusiasm to bentsch over even small amounts of bread from which we are halachically exempt expresses the gratitude we feel to be the recipients of Hashem's kindness. The exact amount of food we've eaten is far less important to us than from Whom it came.

In return, Hashem 'shows us favour' by rejoicing with and rewarding us handsomely for our Torah

and mitzvos even when they're sub-optimum. He takes into account the fact that we are just lowly flesh-and-blood, with all kinds of complex problems and character flaws. He too looks at the who, and not at the what. [Arugos Ha-bosem]

Perhaps, based on what we discussed above, we can offer a different answer along the same lines. Another factor that may cause the recipient of a present to feel honoured and 'gifted' despite its size is when, in his extreme humility, he feels any gift at all is far more than he deserves. Obligating ourselves to bentsch over even a bite-sized portion, as much as it demonstrates our love of Hashem, also speaks volumes about our lack of self-centredness and egoism. Instead of the self-pity of one who always feels he deserves more, we recognize our place in the scheme of Hashem's universe: He calls the shots, and we're thankful for having the opportunity to be a bolt in His great machinery. We don't presume to expect or demand anything in return, and are sincerely thankful for anything we receive.

The Hebrew word for showing favour is "yisa Panav/He will lift His face to you." Picture a very busy and important businessman sitting at his elegant mahogany desk, his head buried in the important papers in front of him. Someone, perhaps a lowly clerk, enters his office to ask him a favour. If the supplicant finds grace in his eyes, he lifts up his face to listen to his request and grant him the favour. Perhaps, then, the idea of nesi'us Panim, Hashem so to speak lifting His face, implies Hashem showing us favour by listening to our prayers and granting our wishes.

We already established that in the merit of our forefathers—especially when we walk in their steps and emulate their modesty and humility—our prayers are answered and our wishes granted. They recite grace on even the smallest portion of bread—thereby expressing humility and appreciation that we're just a cog (though remember the importance of each and every cog!) in Hashem's wheel. So how can I not lift My face to them—and answer their prayers whenever they call out to me?!

The Mishna (Shabbos 14:4) quotes the opinion of Rabbi Shimon (bar Yochai) that it is permissible to smear one's skin with rose-oil on Shabbos, even though under normal circumstances only royalty (b'nei m'lachim/sons of kings) would use such rare and expensive oil as an ointment. After all, says R' Shimon, "All Jews are the sons of kings!" Being sons of kings—our great and illustrious ancestors—carries some hefty benefits. It also carries the noble responsibility of remembering that our behaviour must reflect the lessons they bequeathed us, and give honour to the King Whom we serve.

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