

A CLEAR UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week we read the parsha of Shemini. "Va'y'hee ba'yom ha'shmuni (And it was on the eighth day) [9:1]." Rashi explains that this was the eighth day of the consecration of the Mishkan. Whereas during each of the first seven days, Moshe would build and then disassemble the Mishkan in order to familiarize himself with it, on this day the Mishkan was erected and remained as such.

Our parsha then goes on to discuss the sacrifices that were brought on that day and ultimately the "aish zarah (foreign, uncommanded flame)[10:1]" brought by Nadav and Avihu, two of Aharon's sons. Two threads of fire emerged from the Holy of Holies, entered through their nostrils and consumed their souls. Moshe tells Aharon: "I knew that there would be a sanctification of the Mishkan through the death of the ones closest to Hashem and I thought it would be either you or I. Now that this sanctification has come through them I realize that they were greater than you and I [Medrash quoted by Rashi 10:3]."

We've explained earlier that, being a composite of a spiritual being and a physical being, we need to experience events on different realms. Whereas the 'malach (angel)' of the person was influenced by the revelation of the Shechina (Hashem's Holy Presence) at the Mishkan, the physical aspect couldn't be reasoned with. It needed to be frightened by the awesome power of Hashem. To witness that in the Mishkan, in the presence of Hashem, no sin would be overlooked, even when performed by the greatest of tzadikim. The greater the tzadik, the greater the sanctification. Moshe understood that if they were chosen for the sanctification, then they were the greatest.

We need to understand how they could have been greater than Moshe when we see that Moshe was chosen to lead the Exodus, to split the sea, to receive the Torah, etc.

The Talmud [Bava Basra 10:] tells of what we now call a near death encounter. Rav Yosef the son of Rav Yehoshua was 'dead' for a short period of time and then was resuscitated. To his father's question of what did he see, he responded: "I saw an olam hafuch (an upside down world). The elyonim ('high' people) were low and the tachtonim ('low' people) were high." "You saw an olam barur (a clear world)!", was his father's response.

Rashi there explains what he saw in the following manner. The people who were 'high' in this world due to their wealth were in a lowly position in the next world. The poor who were treated lowly in this world were the important ones in the next. His father responded that there he saw with clarity each person's true state.

Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l asked how could Rav Yosef have called what he saw in the next world 'upside down'? Isn't it obvious that here in this world, with our physical eyes, we are very easily misled by the revealed actions of a person. We see the outer shell. We don't see with clarity. Why did he call it an upside down world?

He explains the Talmud differently. The true elyonim ('high' people) of this world were considered to be the elyonim of the next and the tachtonim ('lowly' people) of this world were considered to be the tachtonim of the next. Yet, these elyonim were lower than the tachtonim! It truly was an olam hafuch (upside down world)! He couldn't understand why Hashem had arranged the world of truth in such a fashion.

His father explained that what he had seen was an olam barur (a clear world). Hashem only demands from a person that which is within that individual person's ability. Those with lesser abilities and more modest potential are not expected to 'accomplish' as much as others. If they maximize their potentials to fulfill the purpose for which they were sent to this world, even if they'll actually 'accomplish' less - performing less ma'asim tovim (good acts), studying less Torah - they will truly be the elyonim in the world of clarity. Those 'high' people who might have 'accomplished' more but were blessed with tremendous abilities which weren't used to their fullest, those elyonim will be the tachtonim in the next world.

With that we can understand how those who might not have the most auspicious list of accomplishments might be considered greater than others who boast such a list. Perhaps, this could explain how Nadav and Avihu were greater than Moshe and Aharon.

Living in a rather uniform community, I had a relatively rare treat this past YomTov (holiday). We had received a phone call asking if we'd host a family for one of the meals. We agreed to do so. Our guests had been brought up in the former Soviet Union and had emigrated to the United States about nine years ago when they were in their early thirties. Hearing their story, getting a sense for the struggles and challenges that they had faced and still face in their growing observance, and feeling their excitement and their honesty in regard to their Judaism was truly an exhilarating experience for my whole family. As he kept referring to me as 'Rabbi', I kept thinking that here we have a real case of tachtonim being the elyonim and elyonim being the tachtonim.

One of my Rabbeim z"l had children who were somewhat challenged. Every year he would devote one of his Friday night talks to discuss these boys. Within their limited capacities, these two young men are incredibly motivated and passionate about their Judaism. I often see one sitting in the Beis Medrash (study hall) with a volume of the Talmud before him, flipping through the pages, bothered by a question here which is seemingly answered by a later passage. On the outside, he seems to be studying like all the others. Those who know him, know that he's simply parroting their actions because there is nothing more important and precious to him than the incomprehensible books that lay before him.

This Rav, in his talk, would discuss how Hashem appoints us as parents to be the guardians of the different neshamos (souls) that he sends to this world. We have no say in the type of neshama that we are entrusted with. We take those children and do as much as we can to help them connect to and form a true relationship with Hashem. If we can help them to use their abilities to the fullest then they will be the true elyonim.

This lesson was even more vividly taught to me by his wife, a few weeks after he had passed from this world. Parents of a former student of mine had been visiting me. This Rav had also been a Rebbe of this student and had been instrumental in convincing this student to attend the Yeshiva. I suggested to the parents that they should go and also visit the Rebbetzin. They were very hesitant being that it was so close to the death of her husband. After I had urged them, explaining to them that it would mean a lot to her, they agreed on the condition that I'd accompany them.

As we were visiting, one of these sons walked out of the shower wearing just a robe and looking like a total mess. It was clearly a very awkward situation. Without batting an eyelash, this woman put her arm around his shoulder, turned to this very wealthy, polished and classy couple and proudly said: "I'd like to introduce you to my son". She made the introductions and the conversation then continued.

I was totally blown away. She had such a clear understanding that this child was Hashem's child. She didn't make him - Hashem did. There was nothing to be ashamed or embarrassed about. She was now raising this child (alone) to be a proper servant of Hashem to the best of his abilities. She was doing it in an extraordinarily successful way.

I believe that for the rest of my life I'll remember her voice proudly saying: "Mr. and Mrs. ----, this is my son ----". She was wise and insightful enough to be proud. In her eyes, she was raising a true elyon.

Good Shabbos,

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