

IN THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Judges and officers you will set up in all your gates... (Devarim 16:18)

There are many commentaries that explain this posuk on several levels, one of which is the level of the individual acting as a judge in his own life. For, life is one judgment after another; correct judgments lead to growth and eternal reward in the World-to-Come, whereas bad judgments lead to just the opposite.

The Talmud teaches, advises, and warns:

A judge only has what his eyes see. (Bava Basra 131a)

In other words, if a judge is a prophet, then he can know that which has been presented to him, and that which has been omitted. However, if he has yet to achieve the high level of prophecy, then his decision can only be based upon the presentation of the facts before him. Yes, he can receive help from Heaven, but still, it is not the same as prophecy.

Oftentimes, the presentation of the facts is not entirely dependent upon others over whom we have little or no control. The information we may need to make an 'informed' and correct decision about, whether in a legal case or in our own personal lives, may exist 'out there,' available to those who seek it. Knowing this can lead to knowledge of the necessary information, which can lead to an entirely different vantage point in life, as the following account portrays.

There is a story at the end of Tractate Makkos of Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud) that, like many others, says much more than it seems to be saying. Chazal (Chachamim Zichronam L'Brochah) were unbelievably good at layering meaning in what they taught. The account goes like this:

It happened again that they (Rabban Gamliel, Rebi Elazar ben Azariah, Rebi Yehoshua, and Rebi Akiva) were going to Jerusalem. When they arrived at Har HaTzofim (Mt. Scopus), they tore their clothing (as a sign of mourning over the destruction of the Temple, which could be seen from there). When they reached the Temple Mount and saw a fox coming out from the place where the Holy of Holies had been, they began to cry; Rebi Akiva laughed.

They asked him, "Akiva, why do you laugh?"

He answered them, "Why do you cry?"

They said, "If the prophecy concerning the place which the posuk says, 'The stranger who approaches (the Holy of Holies) will be put to death' (Bamidbar 1:51), is now fulfilled that, 'For the mountain of Tzion, which is desolate, the foxes walk upon it' (Eichah 5:18), should we not cry?"

He said, "That is precisely why I laugh! It says, 'I will take faithful witness to record, Uriah HaKohen and Zechariah...' (Yeshayahu 8:2). Why is Uriah mentioned together with Zechariah? The former was from the time of the First Temple and the latter was from the time of the Second Temple! It is, therefore, to make the prophecy of Zechariah dependent upon the prophecy of Uriah. Uriah said, 'Because of you Tzion shall be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps' (Michah 3:12). Zechariah said, 'There shall still sit old men and old women in the streets of Jerusalem' (Michah 8:4). Now, until the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled I was very concerned that the prophecy of Zechariah might not be fulfilled. However, now that I have seen the fulfillment of Uriah's prophecy, it is clear that the prophecy of Zechariah will come to be."

Having heard this, they told him, "Akiva, you have consoled us! Akiva, you have consoled us!" (Makkos 24b)

Huh? Just like that? With so short an explanation Rebi Akiva succeeded in turning his colleagues around 180 degrees? Yes. And, if you know what he said you'll understand why.

Shabbos Day:

Do not take a bribe, because a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and distorts the words of the righteous.
(Devarim 16:19)

This is true even if it is done unconsciously. There is nothing new about bribes blinding the eyes of the unwise or distorting the words of the evil. The novelty here is that even great people who only want to do the truthful and righteous thing can stumble when inappropriate relationships develop, whether people are involved or just ideas.

These four great rabbis were from the phenomenal era of the Tannaim, the rabbis who authored the mishnayos, upon which the Talmud and halachah are based. They were great and powerful people for whom the performance of miracles, including reviving the dead, was second nature.

However, they were also the rabbis who had to bear witness to some of the worst destruction in Jewish history at the hands of the Roman Empire. As the story portrays, they were forced to walk upon the ruins of Jerusalem and suffer the pain of seeing the place to which they made regular pilgrimages completely destroyed, knowing that the Divine Presence had since left for higher spiritual planes.

Upon one of their journeys, they found themselves within view of the Temple Mount. As if to "add salt to the wound," at that moment they witnessed a fox emerge from the very place that the Kohen Gadol used to perform the holiest service on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur. The pain of such a profanation, for three of the four great rabbis, could only result in more tears and added mourning.

Who would not cry at a painfully depressing moment such as that one?

However, Rebi Akiva laughed. It is one thing not to cry, Rebi Akiva, but to laugh? We find nothing funny about a fox stomping all over the holiest part of the entire planet, but obviously you do. Would you mind sharing your perspective on the matter?

Equally interesting and elusive is Rebi Akiva's evasive answer.

They ask, "Akiva, why do you laugh?" to which he answers, "Why do you cry?"

Wait a second, Rebi Akiva, we're asking the questions here, not you. Crying, as you well know, is a logical and Torah-based response to our situation at hand; laughing is not. Therefore, we are justified in questioning your behavior, but you are NOT justified in questioning ours. So, again, we ask, "What made you laugh at this tragic scene?"

"That's exactly my point," Rebi Akiva is saying. "The very thing that has made you cry has made me laugh. And, if you would go past the pshat of the matter, if you would delve beyond the surface of what your physical eyes perceive, you would see my point and laugh as well. You would see that what you perceive as exile and devastation, is really the beginning of redemption and the rebuilding of the Jewish people and Eretz Yisroel. It may take some time to see it take concrete form, but began it has."

To which his colleagues immediately and unanimously answered, "Akiva, you have consoled us! Akiva, you have consoled us!" - Not just once, but twice, as if to emphasize the depth to which his vision consoled them.

Four rabbis, one vision, two perceptions: This is not just a simple case of "Two Jews, and three opinions," because in the end they all agree with Rebi Akiva's version of reality. Rather, this is a case of one Torah, and four levels of understanding. The deeper the level, the more accurate is the perception of G-d's Providence. And, the more accurate the perception of G-d's Providence is, the better with which to determine our role in fulfilling HIS purpose for creation, as we will now see.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

Righteousness, righteousness you must pursue... (Devarim 16:20)

In terms of courts, we must try to establish the most righteous courts as possible. The Talmud does

not mince words when it comes to speaking about the damage non-righteous courts cause, to the Jewish people and to the world in general.

On a personal level, it means you must run after righteousness. It means that if you do not pursue the correct perspective and seek it out, more than likely, it will not seek you out either. The result will be an illusion about life and grossly mistaken understandings about the events of the day.

For example, consider the following and how it might apply to our present day situation, which millions of Jews today tend to only view through the lens of modern-day politics. Writes Rabbi Hillel Mishkelov, in the name of the Vilna Gaon, about 200 years ago (the brackets are my comments):

"The purpose in our bringing about the ingathering of the exiles [from around the world back to Eretz Yisroel] is to set up faithful people for the sake of the unification of the two moshiachs (i.e., Moshiach Ben Yosef and Moshiach Ben Dovid) in the gates of Jerusalem. This is in order to return the Divine Presence to bring about the redemption, the true redemption and sanctification of G-d's Name [the very fact that the Jewish people have to live in exile reduces the world's belief in G-d, and therefore profanes His holy Name]. According to our teacher, the Vilna Gaon, z"l, we can bring about, with the help of G-d and through these strong people, these two moshiachs, and to learn well all the levels and their purposes in practical terms. [In other words, according to the Vilna Gaon, redemption was, is, something that must be triggered through our actions below and not the result of our present waiting game.] The general purpose of the two moshiachs, Moshiach Ben Yosef and Moshiach Ben Dovid, throughout all the generations has been to protect and fight against the three 'heads' of the K'lipos [literally, 'encrustations,' and the source of spiritual impurity and the principle spiritual opponent of the Jewish people], Eisav, Yishmael, and the Erev Rav (Mixed Multitude). [From the moment Moshe Rabbeinu took the Mixed Multitude out of Egypt with the Jewish people, they have been the source of one spiritual downfall after another. Though they have become more covert in history, they are still the single greatest enemy the Jewish people struggle against.] The specific role of Moshiach Ben Yosef is against Eisav who is the k'lipah of the left [within the realm of the sefiros on the side of impurity], the main purpose of Moshiach Ben Dovid is against Yishmael, the k'lipah of the right [within the realm of the sefiros on the side of impurity], and together they go against Eisav and Yishmael who are the ox and the donkey from the side of impurity [all nations are symbolized by specific animals that share their main trait]. The joining of Eisav and Yishmael is the result of Armelius, the sar (heavenly angel) of the Erev Rav, who are able to destroy Israel and the entire world, may G-d have mercy. The main drive of the Erev Rav is to unify Eisav and Yishmael and to separate the two moshiachs. Therefore, our main service and battle is to break and to remove the strength of the Erev Rav, the k'lipah of Armelius the Evil, from Israel; the Erev Rav is our greatest enemy, the one who separates the two moshiachs. The k'lipah of the Erev Rav works only through deception and roundabout ways [like a magician who fools his audience by giving them the impression he is doing one thing when in fact he is deceptively doing something else]. Therefore, the war against the Erev Rav is the most difficult and bitterest of all [since it is VERY hard to know what

they are planning and how much damage they plan to cause. On the surface they can appear peace-loving and docile when in fact their end goal is just the opposite with respect to the Jewish people and Torah ideals]. We must strengthen ourselves for this war, and anyone who does not participate in the battle against the Erev Rav becomes, de facto, a partner with the k'lipah of the Erev Rav, and was better off not being born in the first place. [Hence, there is not neutral ground in this central historic battle; if you are not part of the solution, then you are part of the problem!] The main strength of the Erev Rav is in the gates of Jerusalem, and specifically at the entrance to the city... [which helps us understand why Jerusalem remains to be one of the most divisive issues when it comes to making peace.]" (Kol HaTor, Chapter 2, Section 2, Letter 'bais')

The only question is, who IS the Erev Rav? You can't fight against an enemy you can't recognize! Are they Jewish? Are they gentile? According to some, they seem to be the former. According to others, them seem to be the latter. However, according to everyone, we shall see, b"H, they are VERY problematic and set up the final showdown of history.

Melave Malkah:

The footnote to the above quote says:

"Regarding the k'lipah [of the Erev Rav], the Zohar says: On the right side of Avraham, the level of Chesed, revenge will be taken against Yishmael and his appointed leader [everything in creation has a corresponding spiritual counterpart - "zu l'umus zu" - which is what creates the relationships manifested in the physical world itself]; on the left of Yitzchak, the level of fear (i.e., Gevurah), revenge will be taken against Eisav and his appointed leader, through the two moshiachs, the one from the right being Moshiach Ben Dovid and the one from the left being Moshiach Ben Yosef... "until the coming of Shiloh." (Bereishis 49:10; Shiloh has the gematria of 'Moshe'), [but ultimately through] the 'faithful shepherd' on the level of 'Tifferes Yisroel' [the level of Ya'akov]. Through them revenge will be taken against Eisav and Yishmael and the Erev Rav, because the Erev Rav is a combination of Eisav and Yishmael just as Ya'akov is a combination of Avraham and Yitzchak."

Woe. That is more than a mouthful. It is a lifetime worth of learning, of moving from level to level of Torah understanding. It incorporates learning Torah not just for the sake of knowing the halachah, but also for the sake of understanding Jewish history, G-d's Providence, and HIS expectations of our involvement.

A person who possesses sophisticated secular information and responds accordingly is said to be savvy. In the realm of Torah, he is called a true 'chacham' - 'wise person.' The days of the crusades and pogroms at the hands of Eisav seem to be over (G-d willing), perhaps coming to an ignominious end with the Holocaust, a faded memory in the Western world.

The problem with Eisav has always been that he is a charmer. Whether it is the way he dresses or speaks, or seems to act culturally refined, somehow we Jews get lulled into trusting him, only to get burned royally in the end. Perhaps that is why Chazal saw fit to make it clear from the start that, no matter what you want to believe about Eisav, "it is a well-known 'law' that Eisav hates Ya'akov." (Sifri, BeHa'alosecha, 69).

Since 1948 (and even before), we have been battling against Yishmael, in one form or another. You have to hand it to the Arabs: They make no bones about their feelings for us, thus making it easy NOT to trust them. After five wars and who knows how many skirmishes, with G-d's Divine protection, we have held our ground, militarily, politically, and even in the PR department.

All of a sudden, the situation has unraveled, and we find ourselves embroiled in a conflict that seems to draw from both Yishmael and Eisav. What to make of it? No answers in the world of pshat, so we sit and wait to see whether the conflict will go. However, according to the Vilna Gaon, that is tantamount to partnership with the wrong side, a very bad move spiritually (and ultimately, physically as well).

What to do? How to judge the situation?

"A judge only has what his eyes see."

Treat your eyes and your mind to a little fact-finding mission that goes beyond the realm of the simple understanding of Torah, and watch the BIG PICTURE emerge before your very eyes. And, don't be surprised if your priorities in life change.

Have a great Shabbos,
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