

PASSING G-D'S TESTS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

The Children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty. The land was filled with them. (Shemos 1:7)

Kabbalah teaches that a person should never enter a test without permission from Heaven. It doesn't mean a test at school, it means a spiritual test.

That is, that someone should never put himself into a spiritually compromising situation unless that is where he ends up due to no negligence of his own. In the process of trying to do the right thing, he finds himself in a place that can easily test his spiritual mettle.

The reason why is somewhat obvious. Who really knows himself so well that he can take his yetzer hara head on and withstand the test. Great people have succumbed to the machinations of their yetzer haras, so why should lesser people take similar risks?

On the other hand, if God tests you by placing you in spiritually challenging situations, we are told, not only can we pass the test, but God will even help us to pass it if we turn to Him for assistance. A Divinely orchestrated spiritual test is designed to allow a person to pass, if he makes a reasonable effort to succeed. In this manner, God encourages people to grow spiritually and can likewise reward them for their successes. If so, then one might ask the question: Why did we fail the test in Egypt? We did not go down there of our own volition, but were sent there by God Himself. He even encouraged Ya'akov Avinu, who had serious doubts about entering the home of the yetzer hara in Creation at that time to go down there. That being the case, we should have been able to pass the test, and not have assimilated.

There are a couple answers to this question, but one of them is that what we define as passing a test and what God calls passing a test is not always the same thing. It's nice when we can get through a spiritual difficulty in the ideal way, but life doesn't always allow for that, especially given the nature of some people's souls.

On the surface, all of us seem pretty much the same. Physically, we may all be different, and intelligence level varies from person to person, but overall, we're all pretty much the same. That's why we get so angry at people who break the law; we wouldn't do it, so how can they?

No question that there is a certain common denominator to all mankind. On the other hand, every soul is different, and it is the soul, in essence, that drives a person. And, depending upon which body

a soul is paired up with, a person can be driven to do very good, or very bad, and God takes that into account when judging everyone.

For example, a person may have a soul that can make stealing from others easy, and when such a person holds himself back from stealing large things and restricts himself to stealing small and trivial items, it can impress Heaven. He is doing the best he can to be the best he can be given the nature of his soul, and body.

On the other hand, when a person with a high level soul does something nice, but with only half a heart, Heaven may not be impressed at all. The action may be well received by others, and earn the person some accolades, but Heaven might be saying, "You have such a good natured soul and that's all you put into your mitzvos?"

Then, of course, there are the circumstances. Sometime the circumstances in which we find ourselves bring out so much good in us that even we don't recognize ourselves. The opposite is also true: sometimes the circumstances can bring out the worst in us, and we don't want to recognize ourselves. God takes that into account as well when judging us.

There is a story in the Talmud of a certain rabbi from the Second Temple Era who spoke about Menashe HaMelech somewhat disrespectfully. After all, Menashe, the son of the righteous Chizkiah, turned the country to idol worship for 33 years, after his father spent all of his time and effort turning the people towards God. Only towards the end of his reign did he finally do teshuvah.

That night, Menashe visited the rabbi in his dream and criticized him for speaking disrespectfully about him. He even asked the rabbi a halachic question, which he could not answer, earning him some instant respect, and the question: "If you were such a talmid chacham, why did you worship idols and turn the country to idol worship as well?"

Menashe HaMelech's answer was somewhat surprising, especially that it is in the Talmud itself. He told the rabbi that, had he lived in Menashe's time, then he too would have lifted the hem of his garment to run after the same idols! Really?

Really.

What the Talmud does not mention here, but it does mention elsewhere (Yoma 69b), is that in the time of the Second Temple, the rabbis prayed to have the desire for idol worship completely removed. Apparently it was too big a test for people of that time, and too many were violating one of the most serious transgressions in the Torah. So the rabbis asked to have that stumbling block moved from the world altogether, and apparently Heaven obliged.

This means that, since that time, idol worship does not really hold sway with man, not like it used to. You know that drives for money, or illicit relationships and pleasures, that have caused many to risk so much, and even cheat and kill others for them? The drive for idol worship used to be stronger, and therefore, could easily break many a good and unsuspecting man.

So, said Menashe to the rabbi: Don't judge if you can't do it from inside my shoes.

And, when we read about the Spies who rejected Eretz Yisroel, resulting in an additional 39 years of wandering in the desert, we wonder, what were they thinking? How they could reject the Land that God had taken them to, and right before God as well. At least today there is room for some doubt about whether or not to make aliyah, but not in Moshe Rabbeinu's time! However, I read years ago that the souls of the Generation of the Spies were those which had difficulty with the concept of living in Eretz Yisroel at that time in history. The source from which they came from in the Sefiros still had to evolve somewhat before they could embrace the land, and therefore it was difficult for them to consider entering the Land at that time.

So, then, why were they punished so severely? Because, they should have realized that God was fully aware of the trouble they were experiencing, and that the reason why they were not entering the Land at that moment was because God knew that it was too hard for them. A lot can happen in three days, and would have happened, and they merely returned and said, "Look, we're not so comfortable about entering the Land, but then again, God is taking us there, and won't bring us in until three days time, so let's wait and see how it goes then."

After all, hadn't God redeemed them from Egypt, given them Torah, fed them in the desert and cared for every other need of theirs? Did He not know them and their weaknesses better than they knew them? :If God has had our best interest in mind until now," all of them should have reasoned, "He must be taking us to the Land for our own good as well, and know how difficult it is for us to go up."

So, they weren't punished for their fear, or for being nervous to go to war against the 31 kings of Canaan and to take the Land. They were punished because, in their panic, they closed their minds and the door to Eretz Yisroel and, in effect, had outlived their usefulness. By rejecting Eretz Yisroel when they had, they rejected God's plan for Creation, and signed their own death warrants.

This is why the Jewish people are praised for not changing the language, their clothes, and the food they ate, which does not sound like much of deal. After all, they had fallen down to the 49th level of spiritual impurity, so what difference did it make that they still had something to distinguish them from the Egyptians all around them?

It made all the difference in the world to Heaven, and was the merit they needed to be saved from spiritual oblivion. God knew their souls, and the test that was Egypt, and though they failed to maintain the high spiritual level on which they ancestors descended to Egypt, after 210 years it was pretty significant that they maintained anything at all, from God's perspective.

Likewise it says about the final generation in advance of the Messianic Era:

I will remember the land, which will have been left behind by them, enjoying its sabbaths, lying desolate without them. The transgression of despising My judgments and detesting My laws, will

[also] have been atoned for. In spite of all of this, even though they live in the land of their enemies, I will not discard them, or detest them to the point of annihilating them, or void My covenant with them, for I am God, your God. For their sake, I will remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt before the eyes of the nations, to be their God. I am God. (Vayikra 26:40-45)

Why shouldn't God discard us, knowing how much we have assimilated into foreign cultures? Because, He knows our souls, and our circumstances, and how difficult the test is, and He takes it all into account. Not everyone may survive, but at least those who try the best they can to be the best they can be, will have a special place in God's plan at the end of history.

Text

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