

GET THE MESSAGE?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Send out for yourself men who will scout the Land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Children of Israel... (Bamidbar 13:2)

A FRIEND OF mine told me a story the other day about a friend of his. He told me that when his friend came home from yeshivah for a visit, his father asked him, "Are you learning mussar?"

"Of course, Abba," the boy answered.

"No," the father pressed, "Do you have a SEDER in mussar and learn it seriously?"

The son was taken aback by his father's insistence. In all his years, his father had NEVER shown that much concern about his learning mussar. Why all of a sudden? So he asked, and his father explained.

"Today I was with someone I consider to be a BIG talmid chacham, and for whom I have had a LOT of respect over the years. But then he started going on and on about something that happened to him, and how he was not shown adequate kavod—honor. It REALLY bothered him."

"At first I just ignored it, but when he began to sound so petty about the lack of honor accorded him, I became very uneasy. I saw for the first time that his learning was not as much a part of him as he made it seem. So," his father concluded, "it is CRUCIAL that as YOU become a bigger talmid chacham, that you learn mussar as well. This should keep you humble and appreciative. Then your Torah will help you grow and do great things."

Unfortunately, this is not such an uncommon experience. We are not surprised when we see religious inconsistency in ourselves—disappointed, but not surprised. It is not easy to integrate knowledge, especially since the yetzer hara it wants to control has been around for a lot longer. Some people, on lesser levels, don't even try.

But when it comes to a "gadol b'Torah," we expect more from him. Past a certain point in someone's learning, they should have enough spiritual awareness to keep their yetzer hara in check. It is hard to ELIMINATE a particular bad tendency, and few people have ever done it throughout history. But many people have been able to, and should be able to, keep a yetzer hara or two under wraps, with only a few minor slips here-and-there.

When the Mussar Giants of the 1800s realized that there was not enough consistency between what people were learning and how they were acting, they instituted specific "sedarim" of mussar. We see

this as early as the Ramchal in the 1700s, from his introduction to "Mesillas Yesharim—The Path of the Just."

In truth, life itself should be one big ongoing mussar learning session. The Talmud even shows us how to learn specific traits from the animal world. Avraham discovered God by simply paying attention to Creation.

Watch a child who sees a candy he wants. Observe his focus and concentration, and perhaps, even his scheming. He is so connected to the candy that he ceases to connect to the world around him, which can cost him in the end.

But talk to that child about behaving, and you lose his interest. He just ignores you as if you don't exist for the moment. As far he is concerned, what you are saying is not relevant to him, and a waste of his time. But that candy...NOTHING could be MORE relevant.

Who loves life? Someone who wants to maximize their living of it. Someone who understands and appreciates that the world is an ongoing educational experience that can ALWAYS benefit them. And CERTAINLY when something noteworthy happens around them, they pay attention and try to glean whatever they can from the success or failure to enhance their living experience.

To not do so is more than just unfortunate, as Rashi points out in this week's parsha:

Why is the section dealing with the spies juxtaposed with the section dealing with Miriam? Because she was punished over matters of slander, for speaking against her brother, and these wicked people witnessed [it], but did not learn their lesson. (Rashi, Bamidbar 13:2)

In last week's parsha, Miriam and Aharon questioned Moshe's judgment regarding the treatment of his wife, Tzipporah. They meant well but made a bad mistake, and God took them to task for it. At the end of the day, Miriam was sent out of the camp with tzara'as, holding up the travels of the nation for seven days.

Everyone knew what had happened, and why. It was hard to miss, as should the lesson have been as well. The spies should have said to themselves and to one another, "Before we go back and speak loshon hara about Eretz Yisroel, we should recall what happened to Miriam because of what she said about her brother...and with good intentions! WE should be very careful about what WE say when we report back on our return from spying the Land."

Because, don't forget, they weren't only speaking badly about Eretz Yisroel. Since it was a gift from God, and He was the One Who led the nation there, speaking loshon hara about the Land was also speaking it about God! It was a double no-no, in the worst way possible!

Instead, they came back and "spilled the beans" as they saw them, completely ignoring the mussar of the previous parsha. Inexcusable. In fact, so-much-so that Rashi, quoting the Midrash, actually calls them "evil," GREAT people gone BAD.

And just think of all the consequences because they failed to learn a little mussar. They brought horrible deaths upon themselves. They postponed entry into Eretz Yisroel and the Final Redemption, not only by 39 years, but for three millennia...and we're still waiting. And because of that, MILLIONS of Jews have died over that time, and often in the cruelest of ways. And all because the spies didn't take a "little" mussar.

WOW.

It's not usually the lesson we focus on when discussing this week's parsha. Yet, if you think about, it is such an important part of who we are, or at least who we're supposed to be. We see this from an episode in the Talmud:

The nations will then plead [on the final Day of Judgment], "Offer us the Torah again and we will obey it."

But The Holy One, Blessed Is He, will say to them, "Foolish among peoples, the person who took trouble [to prepare] on Erev Shabbos can eat on Shabbos. But the person who has not troubled himself on Erev Shabbos, what will he eat on Shabbos? Nevertheless, I have an easy mitzvah called Succah. Go and fulfill it"...

Everyone will immediately go and make a succah on the top of his roof. But The Holy One, Blessed Is He, will cause the sun to blaze forth over them as at the summer solstice, and each will kick his succah [on the way out] and go away...

But occasionally it happens that the summer solstice extends to the Festival for the Jews, and they suffer. And does not Rabbah say: "He who suffers is exempt from dwelling in the succah?"

True, they would be exempt, but would a Jew [kick the succah on the way out]? (Avodah Zarah 3a)

Apparently not. Then what DOES a Jew do on the way out of his succah when such a situation occurs?

Take mussar. They feel the rejection of their hard efforts and wonder what was missing that made it unacceptable. God is not trying to make our lives difficult, or to punish us. He wants us to go to the World-to-Come, and to have the best portion we can. That takes work in THIS world, and anything He does to "teach" us is called "mussar." Teaching is a defining trait of GOD. Learning what He teaches us is supposed to be OUR defining trait.