TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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Too Much Of A Good Thing

At the beginning of Parshas Vayechi, Yaakov Avinu gathered his sons to speak to them. In Bereishis 49:16, Yaakov addressed his son Dan: "Dan will judge his nation". Yaakov was, in a sense, saying that Dan (as his name implies) has a unique sense of justice within him, and as a result it is appropriate that his tribe will produce judges for our people. Our Rabbis tell us that Yaakov was referring to Samson, who was from the tribe of Dan. Samson would judge the Jewish people for 20 years. Samson inherited this ability from his great grandfather Dan, who possessed a tremendous sense of fairness.

The Talmud (Pesachim 4a) tells of an individual who would always say, "Judge my case" and concludes that this individual must have come from the tribe of Dan. Rash"i explains that this man would insist on going to court about every little matter, refusing to settle without taking the matter before judges.

This Gemara [Talmud] is hard to understand. When Yaakov said, "Dan will judge his nation" he was referring to a beautiful attribute of the tribe of Dan -- his sense of fairness and justice. However, here the Gemara implies that Dan's attribute is bad, by assuming that this fellow, who would always say, "sue me" or "I'll see you in court," must have been from the tribe of Dan. How do we reconcile this contradiction?

Rabbi Henoch Leibowitz says that this Gemara teaches us an important lesson about character traits (midos). We speak about a person having good character traits -- being honest and humble, not losing one's temper, not being haughty. Why are they referred to as "midos" (literally measurements)?

An underlying principle of character traits is that they have to be measured. The ba'alei mussar ask why there is no commandment in the Torah that a person should have good "midos". They explain

that there is no such thing as a character trait that is all bad or all good. The challenge is to use the various character traits in the proper measure. Sometimes it is appropriate for a person to have a 'measure' of anger, and sometimes a person needs to have a 'measure' of haughtiness.

The trouble starts if a character trait gets out of hand. This Gemara is telling us is that Dan had a tremendous sense of Din (justice). However, this trait that the founder of the tribe had in his genes went haywire in the fellow mentioned in tractate Pesachim. He took the 'measure' of justice too far. His sense of justice was too strict. There was never compromise. It was always 'Din' -- "See you in Court!"

Any trait, even the best, if not applied in its proper measure and in its proper context, can go bad.

Chushim Was Deaf, But Not Dumb

The verse (50:13) says, "His sons carried him [Yaakov Avinu] to the land of Canaan and they buried him in the cave of the Machpelah field, the field that Avraham had bought as a burial estate from Ephron the Hitite, facing Mamre."

There is a very interesting Gemara (Sotah 13a) that describes Yaakov's funeral: When they reached the Me'aras HaMachpelah, Yaakov's brother, Eisav came and tried to stop them. Eisav claimed that Yaakov had already used his allotted plot in the cave -- by burying Leah there -- and that the remaining plot belongs to him (Eisav). Yaakov's sons reminded Eisav that he had sold his birthright to their father. Eisav countered that he only sold the birthright but he did not forsake his own burial spot in the cave to which he would have been entitled even as a non-firstborn. They argued back and forth and finally the brothers said they had the receipt for the sale of the plot -- but it was in Egypt.

They sent Naftali -- the fastest runner among them -- to Egypt to retrieve the document. Naftali began running to Egypt to retrieve the receipt. In the meantime, Chushim, son of Dan, came forward. He was deaf and he had not heard the exchange between Eisav and the children of Yaakov. He inquired about the cause of the delay. The brothers explained why they were waiting to bury Yaakov until Naftali returned from Egypt. Chushim was incensed that his grandfather should remain in shame, unburied, until Naftali returned. He took the situation into his own hands. Chushim took a club, hit Eisav over the head, and killed him. End of problem. Yaakov Avinu was buried.

Who was on the mark here and who was off the mark? Chushim son of Dan was clearly right. What kind of insult was this to Yaakov to let him lie unburied while they retrieved the paperwork of the sale? What kind of nonsense was this to put up with this harassment from Eisav after all these years? However, Chushim was the only person, out of the entire delegation of sons and grandsons to have this sensitivity to object to what was transpiring. What was Chushim's special trait that gave him this clarity of insight?

Rabbi Henoch Leibowitz explained that the difference between Chushim and everyone else was that he was deaf. Everyone else became involved in the argument. When someone is involved in an

argument, he sometimes forgets the ultimate point over which he is arguing. The goal sometimes becomes winning the argument, for the argument's own sake. People become so involved in the back and forth -- "You did sell it", "You didn't sell it", "I'm right", you're wrong" -- to the extent that they forget the ultimate point. We are in the middle of a funeral over here! Yaakov Avinu is laying in disgrace!

It is easy to become so involved in the peripheral -- in argument for argument's sake, in which egos are involved -- that we lose perspective. People can sit and argue whether the Peace Table should be round or square for weeks, while thousands of people are killed every day in a war. People come to negotiate a peace treaty to save lives, and instead argue about the size and shape of the table!

Chushim was deaf, and did not need to become a party to the arguments. He was not concerned about who was right and who was wrong. Chushim saw one issue. The issue was "my grandfather is laying in disgrace". When grandfather is laying in disgrace, forget arguments, forget bills of sale, forget receipts, and forget who is right and who is wrong. This is a travesty and it can not be allowed to continue!

How often does this happen to us? We lose sight of the bigger picture and allow an argument to take on a life of its own. We often forget what it is all about. We must never lose sight of the forest because of the trees. We must never fail to distinguish between the 'ikar' (main issue) and the 'tafel' (the peripheral).

Glossary

Ba'alei Mussar -- Masters of ethical behavior

Midos -- (literally measurements) character traits

Sources and Personalities

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