

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM THE JEALOUSY OF MOSHE RABBEINU

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These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 561, Lo Bashomayin He and Tape # 562 Rosh Hashana - The Apple in Honey and Other Simanim. Good Shabbos!

Lessons To Be Learned From The Jealousy Of Moshe Rabbeinu

In Parshas VaYeilech, The Almighty informs Moshe of the sad news that "Behold the day of your death is approaching" [Devarim 31:14]. I would like to quote a fascinating Medrash [Yalkut Shimoni 941] that carries a powerful message in and of itself without any further elaboration:

Moshe Rabbeinu did not want to die, and the sun did not want to let him die. The sun threatened G-d that it would no longer set or rise and thus Moshe's appointed time would never arrive. If Moshe was scheduled to die the next day and the sun would never set on the prior day, Moshe would live forever.

On that last day, Moshe wrote 13 Torah scrolls, one for each tribe plus a master copy that would remain in the Ark. Moshe reasoned, "since I am occupying myself with Torah which is the source of life, the day will pass and the decree (that I am to die) will be nullified."

The Medrash says that Hashem instructed Moshe to call Yehoshua. Moshe, as it were, offered the Almighty a deal: "Let Yehoshua take over my role and lead the Jewish people, but allow me to live." Hashem responded: "If so, you will have to relate to Yehoshua as he related to you. He will be the leader and you will be his disciple."

According to the Medrash, Moshe Rabbeinu agreed to this offer. He went to Yehoshua's house (as opposed to the former arrangement that Yehoshua came to him). From there they both went into the Tent of Meeting - Yehoshua the Rebbe and Moshe the disciple. The Pillar of Cloud descended and spoke to Yehoshua. When the Pillar ascended, Moshe asked Yehoshua "What Word came to you?"

Asking such a question for the first time in his life must have been a most humbling experience for

Moshe. But even more humbling was the response that the Medrash put into Yehoshua's mouth answering Moshe: "When the Word came to you, did I know what was spoken to you?" This was a very gentle way of telling Moshe "It is none of your business. I am the Rebbe and you are the disciple now."

The Medrash concludes that at that moment, Moshe began to scream "Let me die 100 times rather than suffer this one pang of jealousy that I am now feeling."

There is no need to elaborate on this Medrash. The above quoted passage, as it stands, is mind-boggling. However, there are two insights that may be pointed out:

The first insight is that Moshe Rabbeinu felt jealousy. "I will no longer have the exclusive company of the Almighty that I've enjoyed all these years. Someone else will!" He was envious of Yehoshua. The Chidushei HaRim asks how it is possible that Moshe was jealous of Yehoshua. We are taught that a person is jealous of everyone except for his son and his student [Sanhedrin 105b]. That being the case, what is the Medrash saying? The Chidushei HaRim gives a mind shattering answer.

The Chidushei HaRim says that if I am a Rebbe and my son becomes a Rosh Yeshiva I will not be jealous. I will be proud of him. If he becomes far more successful than I ever was, I will take it in stride and with pride. However, not if he takes MY job! Not if I am forced into retirement, and he takes over my congregation or my yeshiva! That is hard to take, even from a disciple and even from a son.

The second observation to be made on this Medrash is the following: Moshe Rabbeinu is 120 years old. He is about to die. And yet, he, himself, feels that he was being gripped with envy. He himself admits that the emotion he felt was worse than one hundred deaths. We see from here that if anyone ever claims: "I am too old to be jealous", "I am above that already" - don't believe him. We are never finished with the challenge of being jealous - until we are in the grave. At least Moshe Rabbeinu recognized it and admitted it. He was sensitive enough and wise enough to feel it and to declare "I don't want any part of it!"

That is the difference between Moshe Rabbeinu and us. We don't see it. We don't feel it. We are just overcome and consumed by it. Moshe's words, as quoted by the Medrash should become our philosophy -- death 100 times over is better than succumbing to the feeling of jealousy.

Teshuva Is Not a Futile Exercise

When we arrive at a certain stage in life and we enter the period of the Yomim Noraim [High Holidays], we often experience a sense of futility. We are all familiar with our track records. Perhaps when we were younger and in Yeshiva, the Yomim Noraim would bring a sense of hope and a sense of excitement that, with G-d's Help, the next year will be spiritually different for us.

But as a person moves into his adult years -- middle age and beyond -- he realizes that he has been

doing this year after year, and many times his hopes and aspirations for the New Year quickly fall by the wayside. It does not take long for him to go back to his old ways, sometimes within the first several hours after Yom Kippur. Therefore, if a person is honest with himself, he may ask "why should I go through the entire process, if I know where I am going to be spiritually next year at this time -- exactly where I am right now and exactly where I was last year and the year before at this time?"

This is a fallacy that I would like to try to dispel. Despite the fact that we don't have the best of track records, there is a tremendous opportunity as we experience this period of Repentance, for us to accept upon ourselves New Year's resolutions and make concrete attempts to improve ourselves.

The first rule of thumb, as we have said many times, is that a person should not try to bite off more than he can chew. A person should try to improve incrementally. If every single year a person is able to adopt something small and is able to keep that resolution, then after many years he can look back and say -- "I have indeed changed."

Beyond that there is tremendous value in trying to do better and trying to adopt improved behavior patterns both in the area of abstaining from evil (sur m'rah) as well as in the area of positive action (aseh tov).

In other contexts I have quoted a Gemara in Sotah [13a] describing the burial of Yaakov Avinu. I believe it contains a very apropos concept:

When the procession arrived at the Machpelah Cave, Eisav wished to prevent the burial. He presented a simple claim: "There was room for four couples in the Machpelah Cave (Kiryat Arba literally means "the village of four.") Adam and Chava, Avraham and Sarah, and Yitzchak and Rivkah occupied the first 6 plots. Of the two remaining plots - one should rightly go to Yaakov and one to me. However, Yaakov already buried Leah in his plot. The remaining plot is mine."

Yaakov's sons told Eisav, "You sold it." He replied, "Granted, I sold my birth-right (with the double portion), but I did not sell my plain heir's right." They argued that he did sell everything. He demanded that they produce the deed. They responded that the deed was in Egypt. He demanded that they retrieve it. The brothers dispatched Naftali, a swift runner, to retrieve the document from Egypt.

In the meantime, Chushim son of Dan who was hard of hearing (and had not been privy to this entire dialogue) asked: "What is happening?" They told him "Eisav is preventing the burial until Naftali returns from Egypt." He responded "Is my grandfather to lie there in contempt until Naftali returns from Egypt!" He took a club and struck Eisav on the head so that his eyes fell out and rolled to the feet of Yaakov...

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz explained the unique reaction of Chushim. It was not so much that he was more particular about the honor of his grandfather than were any of his uncles or cousins; it is just

that he had not become slowly accustomed to the outrageousness of the situation, as had the others. He was not any more or less a zealot than any of the others, but only he reacted in this violent way.

We see from here, said Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, one of the most significant aspects of human beings - they have the capacity to adapt. Human beings can adapt to almost anything, even to terribly unspeakable conditions. The others -- in the course of the dialogue and negotiations with Eisav - became accustomed to the idea that Yaakov Avinu's casket was lying there in a disgraceful fashion. They adapted to that unconscionable state. Chushim, who, as a result of his deafness, was not privy to the dialogue, heard the whole unseemly story at one moment, without having had time to adapt to it. He recognized the ludicrous nature of the demand and reacted the way any clear-headed person should react to such a situation. Everyone else resigned himself to the "reality". Chushim son of Dan did not.

Rav Shmulevitz delivered this mussar thought in Elul 1970 in the following context: On September 6, 1970 TWA Flight 740 was hijacked to Amman, Jordan together with two other planes by a group of armed Palestinians. The planes sat on the runway in Jordan while the hijackers demanded that Israel release imprisoned PLO terrorists. Among hundreds of other Jews on these flights that had left earlier in the day from Lod Airport, was none other than Rav Yitzchak Hutner, zt"l, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Chaim Berlin.

Those were unbelievable days in the Yeshiva world. Rav Hutner was a hostage! There were special Tehillim and special all-night mishmar learning sessions held in every Yeshiva in the world for all the hostages and especially for the Rosh Yeshiva. Two weeks into Elul, Rav Chaim Shmulevitz approached the lectern in the Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem and told the students "We have been saying Tehillim for two weeks. When it first started, the walls shook from our Tehillim recitation. However, two weeks later, it has become like our regular davening -- we say a few more chapters of Tehillim and that is the extent of our emotional involvement. What has happened? What has happened is that we are getting used to the concept that Rav Hutner is a hostage."

In that context, Rav Chaim Shmulevitz developed the interpretation of the Medrash about Chushim son of Dan, who did not adapt to his grandfather's humiliation while everyone else had adapted to it. Rav Chaim Shmulevitz then went on to bemoan the tendency to adapt to spiritually untenable and unacceptable situations.

It is very hard to fully evaluate and appreciate the unacceptability of that situation when the situation does not suddenly appear, but develops slowly on a day in and day out basis.

The same thing happens to us in terms of the "unraveling" of our previous year's Teshuva. We can start out a year with much enthusiasm and with the most noble of intentions. We may accept many new resolutions upon ourselves and be full of determination to start a new slate clean: "We are going to be better this year." "We will do such and such this year."

But as the weeks and months slide by, we become accustomed to where we've been and where we've come from. We get used to our present spiritual situation. This situation includes all those failings that every person realizes that he possesses in the secrets of his heart. We get used to those failings as one can get used to anything.

There is a ready proof that one can get used to anything. Merely turn on the radio today and that proof will become self-evident. I contend that if someone was taken out of society in 1990, put into isolation and then brought back today, he would be shocked. If after these relatively few years of being incommunicado, he would suddenly listen to the radio or read a newspaper or watch television and see what is presented in today's media he would suffer major culture shock. The words spoken on the radio today or printed in the newspaper today -- and we are not even speaking about pictures -- drastically differs from what was broadcast and printed in 1990.

Why aren't we shocked? When we hear words that were never before spoken over the public radio airwaves during prime time, why are we not shocked? The answer is that we are like the rest of Yaakov's sons and grandsons. We have gotten used to it. However, the person who has been out of touch with the world for 15 years and then rejoins our society is like Chushim son of Dan. He will be horrified: "What has happened here? I can't believe what has happened to society!"

How do we combat this? The way that we combat this is through a yearly process during the High Holidays and the Ten Days of Repentance when we say: "Stop! I am starting over!" Even if during the day after Yom Kippur or the meal immediately after breaking my fast, I start speaking Lashon Harah [gossip] again, it will not be the same Lashon Harah. Perhaps we catch ourselves and decide to leave out some of the juiciest details. Perhaps we recognize that we are speaking Lashon Harah and it bothers our conscience. Just recognizing our words to be Lashon Harah is an accomplishment of our Teshuva process. If nothing else, let these days accomplish that much for us.

At least our Teshuva process should achieve a "time out" for us. If and when we resume our sinful ways, at least we are restarting from 'zero' - from a more pristine spiritual level, rather than continuing from the corrupted level we had fallen to, immediately before Elul began.

Let me restart davening the way I am supposed to. Let me restart talking to my friends the way I am supposed to. Let me learn again the way I am supposed to learn. Teshuva recalibrates our spiritual expectations of ourselves.

I have a certain watch that loses 2 or 3 minutes a month. I cannot get it to work any better. So every six to eight weeks I reset my watch. If I didn't recalibrate, then the watch would become further and further off the correct time. Spiritually too, we must recalibrate. We must resynchronize. We must realize that which we are doing is in fact forbidden; this is how we should talk, this is how we shouldn't talk; this is where we should look, this is where we shouldn't look; this is what we should think, this is what we should not think; this is what we should do; these are my priorities.

America needs is a national Yom Kippur. American society has not had the opportunity to recalibrate

their moral compass and to reset their values from time to time to those of a more pristine era. It would take such a day for society to wake up and exclaim "My G-d! Where have we gone?" Without a national Yom Kippur, society faces creeping spiritual decay. Matters get worse and worse and worse. There is no end to the decline. Concerned Americans could turn around in 2005 and ask: "What happened?" The answer is that they do not have a national Yom Kippur.

We Jews have an annual period of Ten Days for Repentance. Each year, we experience a Yom Kippur that tells us to start over. When we start over, even if the following day we go back to our old ways, it is not the same thing anymore. It is a 'new lashon harah.' It is a 'new "mind-wandering" davening.' It is a 'new making the wrong bracha.' But at least it is new and we may be able to catch ourselves: "I really should say that bracha over again. I really should not make a bracha like that."

Therefore, no matter how many Aseres Yemei Teshuvahs we've experienced and no matter how successful or unsuccessful we may have or not have been, it is very much worthwhile to merely say "I am starting over." That itself has tremendous value.

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