

PARSHAS ACHAREI MOS: A FORMULA FOR LIFE - AND LIVING

by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz

There is an interesting Midrash (Vayikrah Rabbah 16:2) connected with a central theme of this week's parsha - the halachos of a metzora and the prevention of lashon horah (hurtful speech).

It relates how Reb Yannai had observed a peddler who was hawking his wares in a marketplace near the city of Tziporri. The peddler made a provocative pronouncement that attracted the attention of all the shoppers. "Who would like to obtain a potion for long life?" he announced. A crowd of people looking to purchase this elixir that would assure them longevity quickly surrounded the peddler. At that point, he removed a sefer Tehilim and read the verses (34:14,15) "Mi ha'ish he'chafetz chaim ... netzor l'shoncha merah..." (Who is the man who desires [long] life? ... Guard your tongue from [speaking] evil).

Reb Yannai concluded this Midrash by stating that he had read these pesukim in tehilim throughout his life, but he never understood their meaning properly until he heard the words of this merchant.

Upon reflection, this Midrash is quite difficult to comprehend. What did Reb Yannai find lacking in the basic meaning of these pesukim of Tehilim? They seem to be rather straightforward: Dovid HaMelech informs us that the recipe for long life is to refrain from speaking ill of others. What deeper understanding did the merchant offer Reb Yannai that he had not previously gleaned from his many readings of the pesukim?

I would like to suggest that it might have been the location and the bold initiative of the peddler that offered to Reb Yannai a fresh insight into the timeless words of Dovid Hamelech.

Reb Yannai may have wondered why Dovid Hamelech started his thoughts with a rhetorical question. - "Mi ha'ish he'chafetz chaim. "What was the point of that question? After all, which person would not want life? Why didn't Dovid HaMelech simply instruct us to refrain from harmful speech without beginning with the leading question that he asked?

An answer may be that the peddler offered Reb Yannai a deeper understanding of these pesukim by giving his âshiur in Shmirah Halashon' in the middle of a bustling marketplace. It is much simpler to refrain from harmful speech and hurtful words during the time that we spend in the Beis Hamidrash. It is much trickier to maintain our moral compass in the playground or in midst of a hectic workday in the marketplace. The peddler may have been hinting this with his opening line, "Who wants life - in all aspects of daily living? He then followed with the sage advice to refrain from degrading types of speech.

Reb Yannai may also have been focusing on the fact that the peddler took the initiative to deliver this message when there was no evidence of wrongdoing at all. The segment in Tehilim that begins with, "Mi ho'ish he'chafetz chaim ends with, "Bakesh shalom v'rodfehu.." Dovid Hamelech is advising us to follow in the path of Ahron HaKohein and be proactive in seeking peace, not reactively waiting to put out the fire of machlokes.

Reb Yanni watched with admiration as this simple peddler brought spirituality and the word of Hashem to people from all walks of life - and caused the marketplace to bask in the glow of the Torah. Like any master teacher, he opened with an introductory question (as did Dovid HaMelech) - which enabled him to share his priceless advice with Reb Yanni - and all future generations.

Best wishes for a Gutten Shabbos.

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