

PARSHAS REEH: A WAYWARD CITY

by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz

"V'lo yidbak beyodcha meumah min hacherem, ... v'nasan lecha rachamim verichamcha - No part of the banned property should adhere to your hand ... and Hashem will give you mercy and be merciful to you" (Devorim 13:18)"

An "Ir Hanidachas" - A Wayward City

One of the mitzvos of this week's parsha relates to an "Ir Hanidachas - A Wayward City." This occurs when the majority of the members of a city become spiritually corrupt and worship idols. The Torah instructs us to destroy the city completely and not keep any of its spoils.

The juxtaposition of two parts of the pasuk cited above is striking - and requires some careful thought. The Torah warns us not to keep any part of the objects remaining from that city, and then informs us that He will bless us with mercy.

What is the connection between these two seemingly disparate phrases? Additionally, why does the Torah inform us that we will be blessed with the virtue of rachmanus - mercy at this time? If we are being instructed to perform a mitzvah of destroying an 'Ir Hanidachas', which requires firmness and fortitude, why are we being blessed with the quality of mercy at this time?

A Timely Blessing for Mercy

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh offers a powerful thought to explain the second part of the pasuk - the blessing of mercy. He maintains that Hashem created humans with an inborn sense of decency and caring. Throughout our lives, it is our mission to safeguard this feeling of compassion. When people engage in cruel behaviors, this innate decency erodes over time, leaving those people with less rachamim (mercy) as they spiral downward, committing even more acts of cruelty.

Therefore, explains the Ohr HaChaim, it was entirely appropriate to bless those who were involved in destroying the Ir Hanidachas with the quality of mercy. Although they were commanded to be firm in dealing with those who sinned against Hashem, they will still retain their original sense of kindness and decency, undiminished by their destruction of the Ir Hanidachas.

The blessing would, according to the Ohr Hachayim, go into effect only after the city was destroyed - when the people carrying out the will of Hashem would revert to their original state of chesed.

A Selfless Act

I would like to suggest a reason for the linkage of the two parts of the pasuk noted above:

1. The admonition not to retain any part of the spoils of the city, and
2. The blessing of rachamim for those involved in the destruction of the city.

We are instructed by our chachamim (sages) that all our actions be L'sheim Shamayim - that they be intended to do the will of Hashem. This is all the more important when our actions involve an act of firmness where destruction is involved. Perhaps the need for this level of 'L'sheim Shamayim' may not be so self-evident when we are engaged in acts of kindness. But this is surely required when we raise the banner of kanaus (zealotry).

This may be the reason that Hashem instructs us to see to it that not one iota of the spoils of the city remain in our hands after we destroy the city and its contents. *"V'lo yidbak beyodcha meumah min hacherem."* Hashem informs us that we need to see to it that all our zealous actions are of the purest nature. This was signified by not keeping any of the items in the city. I would like to suggest that this is the reason for this cited pasuk mentioning that Hashem will then *"turn back from His wrath"* (Devorim 13:18) - by observing these noble acts committed in His honor.

Only after our actions pass the litmus test of selflessness will we be worthy of the blessings of Hashem. Once we demonstrate that we have not gained materially by our zealous actions - only then will Hashem bestow upon us the bracha of *"v'nasan lecha rachamim verichamcha."*

Hashem will then reward us with the quality of eternal mercy and kindness.

Best wishes for a Gutten Shabbos

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