

אור פני משה

שיחות מוסר על התורה
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*Shmuessen from
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פרשת וישב

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לעילוי נשמת
מנחם צבי בן חיים יהושע ז"ל

פרשת וישב

וַיָּבֹא אֲלֵיהֶם יוֹסֵף בְּבֹקֶר וַיִּרְא אֹתָם וְהֵנָּם זֹעֲפִים. וַיִּשְׂאֵל אֶת סְרִיסֵי פְרֹעָה אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ בְּמִשְׁמַר בֵּית אֲדֹנָיו לֵאמֹר מִדּוּעַ פְּנֵיכֶם רָעִים הַיּוֹם. (מ' ו-ז)

And Yosef came to them in the morning, and they were upset. And he asked the officials of Paroh who were with him in the jail at the house of his master saying, "Why are your faces downcast today?"

After Yosef was imprisoned by Potiphar, he was joined by two important ministers of Paroh, the *Sar Hamashkim* and the *Sar Ha'ofim*. The *passuk* tells us that one morning Yosef perceived that they were unhappy, and he questioned them about it. וישאל את סריסי פרעה אשר איתו. וישאל את סריסי פרעה אשר איתו. במשמר בית אדניו לאמר מדוע פניכם רעים היום / *He asked the officials of Paroh who were with him in the jail at the house of his master saying, "Why are your faces downcast today?"*

Not Allowing Oneself to be 'Let Down' by the Situation

In a previous shmuess¹, we presented the Ohr Hachaim's understanding of the *passuk*:

- Yosef, a lowly slave, was able to question these high-ranking, important ministers because they were **איתו במשמר /with him in jail**. When people share in a situation of hardship, their ranks and differences become irrelevant.
- Although they were not in the most pleasant of locations, Yosef took the trouble to notice that their facial expressions were **רעים היום/downcast today** i.e. more downcast than normal. For this nuance of extra pain that they displayed, Yosef expressed concern for them.

¹ Now printed in the sefer of Rav Moshe Rabinowitz, "Lighting the way".

As we explained then, the lesson we learn from Yosef is that despite his terribly difficult situation, he did not allow himself to be let down by it. He continued to try to accomplish what he could in whatever circumstances he found himself. Utilizing the situation of hardship as a pretense to consider himself an equal, Yosef took the bold step of questioning these high-ranking officials about their difficulties. True, things were always difficult in the prison, but Yosef was astute enough to perceive even a nuance of difference in the ministers' expressions from one day to the next. We too must learn to make the best of every situation and not allow ourselves to 'lose it' when the situation is rocky. When we maintain our standards of behavior in those times, we can accomplish great things bs"ד, which we may not have otherwise accomplished in times of serenity.

With Whom was Yosef Involving Himself?

Now we will bs"ד present the angle in which Rabbeinu Bechaya's approached these *pessukim*. Rabbeinu Bechaya also focuses on the seemingly superfluous ending of the *passuk*. Why was it necessary for the *passuk* to spell out that Yosef asked **סריסי פרעה אשר אתו במשמר בית אדניו /the officials of Paroh who were with him in jail at the house of his master?** These officials were already introduced in the previous *pessukim*, and the *passuk* is already referring to them. If so, would it not have been sufficient for the *passuk* to say **וישאל אותם /and he asked them?**

Rabbeinu Bechaya explains that the *passuk* is addressing a question which one may have in this story. After all, who were these people with whom Yosef was involving himself so heavily? Were they perhaps great *tzaddikim*, to whom it is a great *mitzvah* to be of assistance and service? Perhaps they were members of Yosef's family to whom Yosef felt a sense of familial responsibility to help them? Maybe they were members of Yaakov Avinu's household who represented the beginning of the Jewish Nation, and certainly deserved special treatment and assistance as the Torah would later command?

Yosef Concerned Himself with Two Goyishe Officials of the Wicked Paroh

The answer to all these questions was 'no'. They were not *tzaddikim*, nor members of Yosef's family, nor part of Klal Yisroel. Who were they? They were **סריסי פרעה /officials of Paroh**. Paroh was a sinful king, and his officials were not any better. These were two sinful, goyishe officials, of a sinful, goyishe king.

Why, then, was Yosef engaging with them at all? Yosef was a *masmid* in his father Yaakov's home, and we know that he did not fall from his *madreigah* even when he was in Mitzrayim. Even when he sent for Yaakov during the years of famine, he hinted at the sugya of *Egla Arufa* which they had learned 22 years earlier. Clearly, he had remained 'in his learning' even while in Mitzrayim, and we can assume that he spent as much time learning as he possibly could. Accordingly, what was he doing, involving himself with these ministers? Let him engross himself in his learning, and pay no attention to these two *pros'te goyim!*

These Officials were אהו/With Him

Rabbeinu Bechaya explains that the *passuk* is hinting the answer to this question through the seemingly superfluous words mentioned earlier. True, says the *passuk*, they were סריסי פרעה/*officials of Paroh*, not the sort of people with whom Yosef would generally seek to make acquaintance. However, at the same time, they were אהו במשמר בית אדניו/*with him in jail at the house of his master!* In his outstanding character, Yosef concerned himself with the feelings of the people in his immediate vicinity, regardless of their identity or level of *tzidkus*. If he perceived that their faces appeared downcast, he felt a responsibility to try to help them.

Showing Concern even for Goyim whom We Encounter

Rabbeinu Bechaya implies that this lesson is relevant for us as well. Certainly, Klal Yisroel are our brothers, and our primary concerns should always be directed towards אהינו בני ישראל. Our *chessed* should be for our fellow Jews, as the Torah repeatedly demonstrates to us by using the word אהיך/*your brother* in the *mitzvos* of *chessed* that we are commanded. However, there is a level of concern and respect that is appropriate even for *goyim*. The Torah teaches us that we should ingrain within ourselves the concepts of *derech erez* and *midos tovos*, and these apply to every human being with whom we come in contact. We should not be seeking out *goyim* to help, but if we encounter a *goy* in need, it is the right thing to express concern and offer our assistance.

Shloimy works in an office in which goyim are employed as well. One day, Shloimy notices that one of the goyishe workers seems distracted; something is clearly disturbing him. Shloimy has a responsibility to say to his fellow employee, "George, you don't look yourself today! Is everything okay?"

George may then go on to tell him whatever problem he may be having. In a limited way, Shloimy must show empathy and concern, and even offer a measure of assistance.

Certainly, he should not become overly friendly with his goyish acquaintances, as we are specifically cautioned by Chazal. However, a level of respect and decency must be displayed toward them.

One should behave toward the janitorial workers in a yeshiva with decency and respect. He should express appreciation for their work and briefly wish them a good day. There is no need to become overly friendly, but they should be treated with courtesy.

Bringing about Yeshuos Many Years Down the Line

When *yidden* treat *goyim* properly, aside from maintaining and improving the level of their own character, they also bring about a *Kiddush Hashem* through their behavior. Moreover, they are causing the *goyim* to have a favorable attitude toward Jews, which can have effects even for years afterwards. There are various stories which reflect this point; here, we will mention two of them.

This first story, told by Rav Yankel Galinsky, took place in a Jewish shtetl during a period of wartime between Poland and Russia, in the early twentieth century:

A Polish soldier knocked frantically on the door of a Jewish home. The door was opened, and the soldier asked to be allowed in. "Please," he begged, "the Russian army is after me. If they catch me, they'll execute me. Let me hide in your home!"

The Jew who answered the door was extremely uncomfortable. "I would love to help you," he told the soldier, "but how can I endanger my entire family? In a few minutes the Russians will be here, and I'll be considered guilty of harboring an enemy. At the very least, I myself will be taken, leaving my family with no husband or father. I wish I could help you, but I just cannot do this. Please understand me." And with that, the Jew regretfully showed the soldier the door.

This soldier quickly ran to the next Jewish home, hoping that they would take him inside. There, the soldier got a different reception. The Jewish man – we'll refer to him as Reuven – quickly sized up

the situation and grabbed the soldier into his home. He took out an extra pair of his own clothing and told the soldier to change into them. He then took the soldier's uniform and threw it into the fire. Reuven stood the soldier, who was now dressed in a kapota, in front of a shtender with a siddur. He placed a talis over the soldier's head and gave him clear instructions: "Don't take your eyes off this book. Just stare at it and shake!"

Sure enough, several minutes later, there were Russian soldiers pounding on the door. They burst in the home, demanding to know if anyone saw the runaway Pole. Several times, they bumped into the 'Jewish' man praying in the corner, muttering about how that Jew keeps on getting in their way. After a few minutes of searching, the Russian soldiers left the home. When it was safe enough for the Polish soldier to leave, he thanked his benefactor profusely and went on his way. Reuven closed the door after him, assuming that this was the last that he would hear from that soldier.

Two years, later the two neighbors received a summons in the mail from the Prime Minister's office. At first, they ignored it, assuming that there must be some kind of mistake. However, a few weeks later, the police showed up at their homes to bring them to the Prime Minister. The two men had no idea what was happening, but they had no choice but to enter the carriages and be taken to the palace.

The men were taken to the Prime Minister's palace and were escorted into his chambers. The Prime Minister looked at them for a few moments, before finally greeting them. "Do you recognize me?" he asked.

The men looked at him blankly, but they could not remember him. Suddenly, a flicker of recognition came into the eyes of Reuven, the man who had saved the soldier. "Oh, are you the soldier that came to my house two years ago?"

A smile passed over the Prime Minister's lips as he confirmed that it was indeed himself. Since then, he had received many promotions until he had made his way to the top of the country.

Before dealing with his savior, the Prime Minister turned to the other man, who had sent him away in his time of trouble. "I have no complaints against you," he said. "Your behavior was

understandable under the circumstances. At the same time, I want you to witness what I am going to do for your neighbor who extended himself for me even at his own personal risk."

The Prime Minister then proceeded to give Reuven a document consisting of the license for the selling of liquor in Poland. This document was the one only of its kind in the man's region, giving him absolute control of all liquor sales in his vicinity. Anyone else wishing to sell liquor would need to pay him for a license. Reuven would be able to become a massively wealthy person, a magnate. The Prime Minister also invited Reuven to come to him whenever he needed any sort of favor. With that, the Prime Minister sent the two men on their way.

After this incident, Reuven approached the gadol hador, Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzenski, and related to him what transpired. Rav Chaim Ozer told him that he can take full advantage of his privileges, while using them for the benefit of his fellow Jews. He should use his license to make money and support poor people, and he should utilize the favorable attitude of the Prime Minister to help Jews in need. Rav Chaim Ozer himself took Reuven's address for future reference.

Sometime later, there was a group of some 70 yeshiva bochurim who were caught while trying to cross over the border from Russia into Poland. The fate of these bochurim hung in the balance, as no one knew what terrible sentence might await them. The askonim at the time came Rav Chaim Ozer to ask him if there was something for them to do. Rav Chaim Ozer lost no time in summoning Reuven and apprising him of the situation. He instructed Reuven to approach the Prime Minister with this problem.

Reuven traveled to the Prime Minister as directed and requested that the Prime Minister make good on his promise of assisting him in time of need. True to his word, the Prime Minister issued 70 Polish visas for these bochurim. The bochurim were allowed to leave the prison as completely free men. – One of those bochurim was R' Yaakov Yisroel Kanievsky, the Steipler Gaon.

After recounting this story, Rav Galinsky would comment – "That man thought he was saving the life of a Polish soldier, but in reality, he was saving the life of the Steipler!"

The story of 'The Longest Pesach' is well-known. The Noda B'Yehuda saw a young goyishe boy who had lost his day's wages. The boy was terrified to return to his master and the Noda B'Yehuda took pity on him. He gave the boy the sum of money that he was missing.

Years later, this boy came to the Noda B'Yehuda and informed him of the local baker's plot of poisoning his bread on the day after Pesach, when the Jews would normally buy from him. As is known, the Noda B'Yehuda was then able to take a courageous step, saving the lives of all the Jews in Prague in the process.

In both of these stories, compassion was extended to a *goy* in his time of need. As demonstrated by the *yeshuos* that were wrought as a result of these incidents, it is certainly the proper approach for one to follow, particularly when the *goy* in need is in one's immediate vicinity or circle of associates.

Showing Concern for our Fellow Jews

It would seem to me that aside from the direct lesson that we can learn from the story of Yosef, there is an indirect, though more obvious, application of this idea which we must derive as well. If we are supposed to behave with compassion toward *goyim* whom we meet in prison, how much more compassion must we display toward our own fellow Jews! It does not need to be in a prison – it can be in the Beis Medrash, in shul, in the office, or even at home. We may not close our eyes to the needs of others. True, we must concentrate completely on our learning, but that does not negate the obligation upon us to be attuned to the needs of those around us. On the contrary, we can apply the wisdom which we acquire from the Torah to discover the proper manner in which we can help our friend in need.

It is our responsibility to notice if someone is in pain or distress, and we need to try to assist the individual in some way. As discussed in last week's shmuess, it is so important for us to say a friendly word to those whom we meet each day. Even a simple word of encouragement and concern can go a long way strengthening a person, providing him the fortitude to face his problems. Certainly, if we can accomplish in more areas than that, we should do so. Each situation demands its own mode and level of assistance.

It may be in a financial way if one is able, by offering a loan or gift, or by raising some desperately needed funds. Other times, it is a helping hand in a practical sense. There may be a chore he must do for which he needs assistance. Perhaps there is someone in his life who must be spoken to bring about a certain understanding.

Obviously, not every person is equipped to handle each scenario, but if we pay attention to the feelings and vibes of those around us, there is a world of chessed to which we have access, which when one closes his eyes, will go completely unnoticed.

By acting this way, surely Klal Yisroel will find favor in the Eyes of HaKadosh Boruch Hu, and He, in turn, will grant all of us a *siyatta d'shmaya* in our various situations and circumstances.

When the Individual on the Other End is Difficult

What about, though, when the person in question is one for whom it is difficult to show concern?

'I would try to say a good word to my mother-in-law, but she is just impossible to deal with!' 'My son never listens to me; it's not my fault that don't have a peaceful relationship with him!' 'My wife is upset at me right now, so I don't have to be so nice to her!'

In these scenarios, where a person feels that he cannot be expected to behave with proper *middos* based on the difficulties that he faces in his circumstances – what is the correct answer? Is he indeed entitled to feel a sense of resentment toward his situation, and thereby exempt himself from his own responsibility to behave properly, or does the Torah require more of us?

Hashem Places Each Person in the Situation Most Appropriate for his Needs

To determine the answer to this question, let us turn back to the beginning of the *parshah*, where the *pessukim* describe the difficulties that came upon Yaakov Avinu in the form of the rivalry between his children. The *passuk* prefaces the story with the words ואלה תולדות יעקב / *And these are the offspring of Yaakov, Yosef was seventeen years old, shepherding the sheep with his brothers...* The Ohr Hachaim explains that when the *passuk* says ואלה תולדות יעקב / *And these are the offspring of Yaakov*, it is not referring to Yosef, the individual, who is mentioned immediately following those words, but rather to the entire story which is described in the continuing

passukim. The Ohr Hachaim explains further that this *passuk* is a direct continuation of what was mentioned in the previous *passuk*. There we are told ביקש יעקב לישב בשלוה קפץ / *And Yaakov lived in tranquility*. As Rashi tells us, עליו רוגזו של יוסף / *Yaakov wished to live in tranquility; [therefore] the travail of Yosef befell him*. This, explains the Ohr Hachaim, is the intent of our *passuk*. The 'offspring of Yaakov' i.e. the outcome of his own actions was the story that transpired between Yosef and the *Shevatim*.

The lesson we can learn from this *passuk* is that nothing happens to a person haphazardly. If he is in a situation, it is because Hashem placed him in it, often as a result of his own actions. Regardless of whether or not the person is to blame for the situation, Hashem placed him in it because that is how the person will *shteig* in his *Avodas Hashem* and in his own *middos*. Rather than complaining about the way other people are behaving, a person should ask himself what it is that HaKadosh Boruch Hu wants him to accomplish in this circumstance. When the focus is on the *ratzon Hashem*, the entire picture changes. It is no longer a frustrating situation, but a challenge sent specifically to make the person *shteig*.

We illustrate this idea with a *maschal*:

Two yidden, Reuven and Shimon, meet each other in a rehab center, where they are both prescribed therapy for their needs. Reuven had gotten his legs smashed against a building, and he had been confined to a wheelchair for a few months, and now his legs were in the process of healing. He needed therapy to help him begin walking again. Shimon had fallen down a flight of steps and had broken an arm. He needed therapy to regain his strength in his arm. Each day, Reuven and Shimon would meet at the rehab center, where Reuven is given a bicycle to pedal, while Shimon is told to turn a heavy wheel. Each of them struggles mightily, and their cries of pain can be heard in every pedal of the bicycle and every turn of the wheel.

It happens one day that the therapy instructor left the room for a few minutes. Reuven notices how hard Shimon is working at his wheel, while he himself is struggling mightily on his bicycle. Reuven suddenly has an idea. "Shimon," he calls, "listen to me. Look how hard we are both working, you on account of your weak arms, and me with my sore leg. Now, we both realize that I would have no trouble turning a wheel, while for you, riding a bike will be a simple matter. Why did the instructor have to prescribe what

is hard for each of us? I have a great idea. Let's switch jobs, and life will be easier for both of us!"

Shimon agrees to the suggestion, and they switch places. Shimon pedals happily on the bicycle, while Reuven spins the wheel. They feel so relieved with their new plan. Now they can finally relax at an activity that does not cause them so much pain and difficulty!

At that point, the instructor steps back in. He looks at them with complete exasperation. "Do you think I am giving you your activities because I need you to be doing them?! You came here for the purpose of rehab, and to accomplish that goal, you specifically need to work on what is difficult for you. If you are each going to perform the activity of the other person, you may as well just go home, rather than wasting your time needlessly spinning a wheel or pedaling a bicycle!"

Therapy is specifically prescribed for one to strain himself in that area of his body which is weak and needs strengthening. For 'Reuven' in the above *mashal* to have therapy in his arm, or 'Shimon' in his legs, is a waste of energy for both of them and is completely pointless.

Similarly, when we are in a difficult situation, Hashem is putting through a 'therapy' that is tailor-made specifically for our *ruchniyus*. The situation is not an unfortunate accident or mistake which we must deal with; rather, Hashem specifically placed us in those situations because He knows that we need to correct ourselves in that very area. When viewed in this fashion, we are equipped to face our challenges with fortitude and even *simchah*, knowing that it is completely for our best interests and growth.

When we acquire this attitude, we will surely be able to behave properly in all situations, even when it seems difficult to deal with the other individual. The behavior of the other person has no bearing on our own. Our task is to pass our own challenges as Hashem desires from us.

Bez"V we should reach these *madreigos*.

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