

דברים

A PERSPECTIVE OF HISTORY

The Gentile world has done a very thorough job of denigrating the merits of our early great generations. They sought to label our early generations as rebellious sinners who turned to idol worship at every opportunity. Their false assumptions are based on the strong criticism leveled against *Klal Yisrael* in *Tanach* by Hashem and the *Nevi'im*. What is unfortunate is that many of us have come to accept this as fact.

The first concept which must be understood is that Hashem, and subsequently His *Nevi'im*, would challenge each individual to achieve his greatest spiritual potential. This is accomplished by severe castigation and criticism. Hashem's purpose is not to mollify, pamper and coddle us into a status quo, but rather push, pressure, and galvanize us into higher levels of greatness. Our forefathers were thus severely criticized in *Tanach*, but that was the tool used to help them achieve greater heights. This criticism was not a reflection of their wicked ways; they were a great people whose only desire was to become even better.

The purpose of the *Navi* was to scold, not to compliment. Rarely do we ever find a *Navi* paying *Klal Yisrael* a compliment — it would not serve the purpose (See page 348 for an explanation of *Shir Hashirim*). However, just for the record, Hashem did want to portray a true picture of the early Jew in the Torah; Hashem permitted a *Navi* from outside of *Klal Yisrael* to testify on their behalf. Bilaam *Harasha*, one of the greatest enemies of *Klal Yisrael*, was this *Navi*. Bilaam's prophecy (*Bamidbar* 23:21 — 24:25) is a most eloquent, admiring, and impressive testimony on behalf of a people. He bore witness to a majestic nation which strove to grow close to Hashem. This unusual prophetic message was a special deviation for informational purposes; the general role of the *Nevi'im* was to severely scold our people. Hashem said to Moshe:

כאשר מריתם פי במדבר צן

“For you rebelled against my commandments in the desert of Tzin” (*Bamidbar* 27:14).

Now, Hashem was speaking to Moshe, the greatest Jew who ever lived; he was almost an angel. Did he actually rebel against Hashem? This is only an example of the severe system of criticism employed by Hashem to improve man.

In *Yehoshua* (7:1) we find:

וימעלו בני ישראל מעל בחרם ויקח עכן בן כרמי...מן החרם ויחר אף ה' בבני ישראל

But the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing; for Achon the son of Carmi... took of their accursed thing; and the anger of Hashem was kindled against the children of Israel.

Only a single Jew surreptitiously committed a sin, but the entire nation is considered blameworthy. This is an example of the high standard to which Hashem held *Klal Yisrael*. The entire nation was responsible for the actions of a solitary Jew.

The *Navi* in *Shoftim* (4:1) declares:

ויספו בני ישראל לעשות הרע בעיני ה'

The children of Israel again did evil in the eyes of Hashem.

This occurred at the end of the reign of Ehud and the beginning of the reign of Devorah. Yet the *Gemara* (*Megillah* 14•) testifies for *Klal Yisrael*, during Devorah's reign:

מה תמר זה אין לו אלא לב אחד אף ישראל שבאותו הדור לא היה להם אלא לב אחד לאביהן
שבשמים

Just as a palm tree has only one heart, so [*Klal*] *Yisrael* in that generation had only one heart devoted to their Father in heaven.

The *Navi* in *Shoftim* (8:22) testifies to the piety of a typical *Shofeit*, Gidon. The people beseeched him to accept the monarchy, which they promised would remain in his family for generations. Which gentile could possibly refuse such a seductive offer? Gidon, however, chided them:

לא אמשל אני בכם, ולא ימשול בני בכם, ה' ימשל בכם

I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you, Hashem shall rule over you (ibid. 8:23).

Melachim I (21) chronicles how, during a famine in Israel, Achav and Izevel plotted to murder and confiscate the property of Navos *Hayizreili*. As part of the plot, Izevel called for a day of public fasting and introspection in an attempt to discover who had sinned, causing the prevailing famine. Izevel, who was responsible for the re-introduction and popularization of Ba'al-worship, was nevertheless totally credible in her call for a day of public fasting and introspection. Although Izevel had a weakness for idolatry, *Klal Yisrael* was convinced that she still shared their deep faith in Hashem. They understood that Hashem caused the famine, and therefore they accepted her call for prayer and self-examination. It is evident that even in this worst-case scenario of the royal couple's deep devotion to idolatry, there endured a deep-rooted faith in Hashem on the part of *Klal Yisrael*.

Melachim (I, 17:6) recounts how the ravens provided Eliyahu *Hanavi* with bread and meat during his tenure in Nachal Kris. The *Gemara* (*Chulin* 5•) explains that the meat came from the butcher of the idolatrous King Achav. Although Achav was responsible for the proliferation of idolatry within *Klal Yisrael*, he was still trustworthy enough to maintain a standard of *kashrus* that was high enough to satisfy even Eliyahu *Hanavi*.

Melachim (II, 10:21) relates how King Yeihu cunningly trapped and killed all the worshippers of Ba'al:

וישלח יהוא בכל ישראל ויבאו כל עבדי הבעל ולא נשאר איש אשר לא בא ויבאו בית הבעל וימלא
בית הבעל פה לפה

and Yeihu sent through all Israel; and all the worshippers of Ba'al came, so that there was not a man left that did not come. And they came into the house of Ba'al; and the house of Ba'al was filled from one end to another.

In this case, all of *Klal Yisrael* were accused of idol-worship. The truth is that all the idol-worshippers in the land were so few in number that they were all able to fit into one building. Not only did Yeihu kill all the idolators, but he destroyed all the images of Ba'al and destroyed the Temple of Ba'al. Due to certain circumstances, though, he was unable to destroy the golden calves in Beth-el and in Dan (*Sannhedrin* 102•). Yet the *Navi* castigates him in the harshest manner:

ויהוא לא שמר ללכת בתורת ה'... בכל לבבו, לא סר מעל חטאות ירבעם
But Yeihu took no heed to walk in the law of Hashem... with all his heart; for he departed not from the sins of Yeravam (*Melachim* II 10:31).

When Michah discusses the kings of Yehudah, he uses the most frightening words:

בנה ציון בדמים, וירושלים בעולה
They build up Tzion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity (*Michah* 3:10).

The reference is to the lack of sufficient charity donations (Ibn Ezra, *ibid.*), which certainly is criticizable, but the severity with which it is criticized is frightening.

When Yechezkel *Hanavi* discusses the generation of the *midbar*, he uses the expression:

ואת שבתתי הללו מאד
“My Sabbath they greatly profaned” (*Yechezkel* 20:13,21).

The Torah informs us that there were actually only two instances of *chilul Shabbos* in the *midbar*:

1) The *Mekosheish* — the Gatherer —gathered wood only so that he could be held up as an object lesson for the rest of *Klal Yisrael* (*Tosafos, Bava Basra* 119:). Although he committed an *aveirah* — transgression — his motives were pure (*Bamidbar* 15:32).

2) On the first *Shabbos* when manna fell, wicked people went out to collect manna and thereby desecrated *Shabbos*. No manna was to be found, but their intentions were criticized (*Targum Yonasan, Shemos* 16:27).

The desecration of *Shabbos* was just about non-existent in the *midbar*; nevertheless, in keeping with the system of the *Nevi'im*, *Klal Yisrael* were criticized in the harshest terms.

The *Kuzari* (*Sha'ar* 5) addresses the apparent laxity of religious practice evident in *Nach* (the scriptures exclusive of the Pentateuch): “From a passage in the Book of *Nechemiah* (8:14) it appears that the people of that generation had forgotten the Torah and were ignorant of the laws of *Sukkos*, and the law that an Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter the congregation of G-d (*Nechemia* 13:1) ... in those days they were well versed in the Torah and were meticulous in the fulfillment of its commandments... *Nach* is not concerned with recording private, obscure facts but only facts which were of public concern... The words ‘They found written’ [implying that the people of that time were unaware of Torah law] only refer to the uneducated masses... and serves

to accentuate the significance of the event... and to underline the prominence of this public event.”

This explanation should be applied to the many other references in *Nach* which imply that Torah was forgotten or neglected by *Am Yisrael*.

A passage in *Tehillim* (94:6) refers to *Klal Yisrael* as the most cold-blooded, murdering gangsters one could ever imagine:

אלמנה וגר יהרגו ויתומים ירצחו

The widow and the stranger they slay, and the orphans they murder.

Even in the very worst societies this behavior would be abhorrent — how could *Klal Yisrael* be described accordingly? The answer is simple. In the severe system by which the *Nevi'im* judged *Klal Yisrael*, giving inadequate *tzedakah* (to the widow and orphan) is tantamount to murder. Only *Klal Yisrael* could be held to such high standards.

There are many who interpret the opening sentence of *Rus* (1:1):

ויהי בימי שפט השפטים

And it was in the days the judging of the judges

in a denigrating fashion: “when the people judged their judges,” — implying wickedness within *Klal Yisrael*. Rashi, in commenting on Moshe’s remark about being a judge, (*Devarim* 1:9):

לא אוכל לבדי שאת אתכם

I am not able to bear you by myself,

forewarns against such conclusions. Rashi asks: “Is it possible that Moshe was not able to judge *Klal Yisrael*?” Rashi offers the following response: “Hashem has made you [*Klal Yisrael*] superior and elevated you higher than your judges; He has taken punishment away from you and has placed it upon the judges.”

Similarly Shlomo *Hamelech* said (*Melachim* I 3:9): ‘For who is able to judge this great people?’ ...the judges of this nation are not like the judges of other nations; for if they (the gentile judges) slay, smite, strangle, pervert justice and rob, it is of no consequence. But, if I cause money to be paid unjustly, my soul is demanded in return.” (see *Midrash Shemos Rabba* 27:8).

In light of the fact that all of the apparent wrongdoings of *Klal Yisrael* are merely exaggerations, this description itself seems unwarranted and tantamount to slander. If the transgressions were indeed so subtle, why does the *Tanach* seem to mislead us by describing them as such flagrant outrages? In *Derashos HaRan* (*Derush* 6) *Rabbenu* Nissim attempts to resolve this problem by offering the following solution regarding the alleged transgression of David *Hamelech*, about which *Chazal* declare:

“Whoever says that David sinned [in his relationship with Bas Sheva, wife of Uriyah *Hachiti*] is in error” (*Shabbos* 56•). One must explain why the transgression concerning Bas Sheva was written literally as if David had actually sinned, especially since it is the general nature of verses to cover up and hide such errors. How then could the text have portrayed the incident of Bas Sheva and Uriyah in a manner that would have us think that David has committed a truly monumental transgression? The resolution, however, is that both what is

apparent to us (*peshat*) and what is hidden from us (*derush*) provide tremendously significant lessons for the *ba'al teshuvah*. As our sages have stated: “If an individual has sinned, one tells him to learn (the lesson of genuine repentance which brings about Divine forgiveness) from ‘that individual’” (*Avodah Zarah* 5•).

Now, *Chazal* portray David as having sinned grievously, because the subtle transgression that the Rabbis of the Talmud did in fact attribute to him was reckoned [by Torah standards] as tantamount to someone else having actually transgressed all that which is suggested by the literal text. In so doing, the text indicates to us that, should a person commit even a grave sin, he can still be forgiven, as was David forgiven for his sin. Nevertheless, our Rabbis caution us, based upon the ancient tradition, that David did not in fact commit the sin ascribed to him by the *Navi*. From this dichotomy between the actual deed and the implied sin, we can derive another valuable lesson: that a *ba'al teshuvah* ought to continuously envision his sins, like David, who although he did not actually sin, nevertheless states: “My sin is always before me” (*Tehillim* 51:5). (see *Moed Kattan* 16:).

Consistent with the policy of allowing praise for *Klal Yisrael* only from her adversaries, the testimony borne by Haman *Harasha* is noteworthy. Haman stated: “They are scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of thy Kingdom” (*Megillas Ester* 3:8). Haman bore witness that *Klal Yisrael* was scattered all over the globe, they were no longer in their own land, and they had no centralized form of government. Nevertheless, “Their laws are different from those of every other people” (*ibid.*), meaning they do not eat of Gentile food, nor marry Gentile women, nor permit Gentiles to marry their daughters. “Neither keep they the King’s laws” (*ibid.*), meaning they continue to observe all their religious holidays (*Megillah* 13:). What a beautiful testimony from an enemy!

There is no nation on earth that could compare to *Klal Yisrael* in compassion, in kindness, and in devotion to Hashem. Because we are the *Am Hanivchar* — Chosen People — we are held up to very strict standards, standards not expected of any other nation (*Kuzari, Sha’ar* 5). Our only role in *Olam Hazeih* is to gain perfection, and the system of castigation used by the *Nevi'im* was designed to push us in that direction. The demand that *Klal Yisrael* must strive for perfection is intimated in Yaakov *Avinu’s* dream:

והנה סלם מצב ארצה וראשו מגיע השמימה

A ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven (*Bereishis* 28:12).

The only way to reach for perfection is one step at a time; and the surest way to reach the pinnacle is to be encouraged by the severe system of criticism.

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