

## SELECTIVE PRUNING

One of the great principles of Torah life is *kiruv rechokim*, bringing those who are far from Torah into the fold. The less familiar flip side of this concept is *meracheik kerovim*, distancing those who are too near. There are times when those with whom one has close contact can become an impediment to one's own achievement of perfection, and those individuals must therefore be cast away. This is true on an individual level as well as a national level.

The contemporaries of Noach, the generation of the flood, were doomed to destruction due to the severity of their sins. They were guilty of immorality and idol worship (*Sanhedrin 57•*), but their greatest transgression is openly stated in the Torah:

ותמלא הארץ חמס

The earth was filled with violence (*Bereishis 6:11*).

The dynamic of this sin was “*Bein Adam Lechaveiro*” — man-to-man — as opposed to man-to-G-d. The *Gemara (Shabbos 31•)* declares that any crime perpetrated by one man upon another is to be severely condemned because it violates the most important aspect of Torah. Rashi (*ibid.*) explains that most of the *mitzvos* of the Torah deal with issues pertaining to human relations. The primary purpose of Torah is to establish and maintain peaceful interaction between individuals and groups (*Gittin 59:*). The sins of the generation of the flood were so horrendous that this generation had to be sentenced to annihilation.

Three hundred and forty years after the flood, 1996 years from Creation, the sin of the “*Dor Haflagah*,” the generation of the Tower of Babel, was in attempting to displace Hashem from the heavens; they tried to wage war against Hashem (*Sanhedrin 109.*)! However, their interpersonal relationships were peaceful; unity prevailed and they felt a common sense of purpose amongst themselves:

ויהי כל הארץ שפה אחת ודברים אחדים

The whole earth was of one language and of common purpose (*Bereishis 11:1*).

Rashi (*ibid. 11:9*) explains that because they dwelt amicably together, they were therefore spared annihilation despite their blasphemies . Their punishment consisted of being dispersed over the face of the earth, and their one common language was now replaced by seventy languages (*Yerushalmi Megillah 10•*).

Their “*achdus*,” which was so desired by Hashem, was nevertheless disrupted by Him. The primary reason for this was to facilitate Avraham *Avinu's* mission on earth. Avraham presented fresh, innovative ideas about the Creator of mankind. He would have found a unified front of contrary opinion to have been insurmountable. As great as Avraham was, he could not battle a brick wall. The fragmentation of mankind into smaller diverse groups made it easier for

Avraham's ideas to be accepted. Avraham was thus able to plant the seed of his ideas into more pliant, less resistant minds. In *Bereishis*, the Torah narrates the creation of the heaven and earth, the celestial bodies, the firmament, the waters, vegetation and the creatures. But once the narration reaches Adam, the focus remains on Adam, man, and the Torah no longer returns to the other topics. The reason for this is to underscore the fact that everything created was only a prelude to the creation of man. Once the Torah introduces man, there is no need to discuss the other subjects, because man is the purpose of Creation.

Similarly, once the Torah introduces Avraham, the focus remains on Avraham and his progeny. There is no further mention of other topics or other nations unless they relate to Avraham and his progeny, the purpose of Creation.

The “*Yad Hashem*” guaranteed that the circumstances surrounding Avraham would encourage him to flourish. The environment had to be manipulated so that his ideas could take root, and the unified society had to be broken down into more manageable, more amenable groupings. For Avraham would never have succeeded against an intransigent, united mankind.

While the “*achdus*” of mankind was commendable, in this case it was an impediment to the implementation of perfection. Similarly, there are many other instances in history which demonstrate the significance of distancing those who are too near.

Terach, the father of Avraham, initiated the idea of leaving Ur Kasdim to go to *Eretz Canaan* (*Bereishis* 11:31). He took Avraham, Sarah and Lot along with him. For some inexplicable reason, he was detained in Charan. Terach acted with the purest of intentions: he wanted to rescue Avraham from Nimrod's sinister plot by removing Avraham from Ur Kasdim (*Sefer Hayashar* 58; *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* 25:9). Terach earned his reward in *Olam Habah* (*Bereishis Rabbah* 30:4), for he repented of all his sins. Nevertheless, the “*Yad Hashem*” did not allow Terach to continue with Avraham into *Eretz Canaan* because close association with him would have hindered Avraham's attainment of perfection. Avraham could grow only by distancing someone who was close to him.

Lot, Avraham's nephew and devoted disciple, stayed on with Avraham for the rest of the journey (*Bereishis* 12:5, 13:1). Lot learned much from his great teacher and emulated him to a great extent: Lot was kind to wayfarers (*Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer* 25) and learned to pray for those who did not pray for themselves (*Bereishis Rabbah* 26:5). Lot so identified with his teacher that he even developed facial features identical to his (*ibid.* 41:6). Nevertheless, the “*Yad Hashem*” discerned that Lot would inhibit Avraham's progress, and so it was arranged that Avraham would request of Lot:

הפרד נא מעלי

Please separate from me (*Bereishis* 13:9).

Avraham was again relieved of an encumbrance by distancing himself from someone who was close to him.

Yishmael, Avraham's first and certainly beloved son (*Ha'emek Davar*, *Bereishis* 25:12) was deeply influenced by Avraham (*Tosefta Sotah* 6). He repented of his sins during Avraham's lifetime (*Bava Basra* 16:) and anyone who sees a vision of Yishmael in a dream can be certain of having his prayers answered (*Berachos* 56:). The expression “*vayigva*” (expired) is reserved to describe the passing of *tzaddikim*. It is used in relation to the *Avos* in order to denote their high

caliber of righteousness. At the same time the Torah uses it to describe Yishmael's passing (*Bereishis* 25:17). This indicates that Yishmael died a righteous man (*Bava Basra* 16:). His age at the time of his death is enumerated in the same lengthy fashion as the ages of the *Avos*, again hinting at his righteousness (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishis* 110; *Bereishis Rabbah* 59:7). Yet, the *Yad Hashem* determined that it was imperative for Avraham to shed further excess baggage, in the form of Yishmael, and so Avraham sent him away (*Bereishis* 21:14).

Eisav, the twin of Yaakov, was considered a Jew. In fact, the *Gemara* (*Kidushin* 18.) refers to him as a *Yisrael mumar* — an apostate Jew. Yitzchak was convinced that Eisav was righteous and deserving of continuing the legacy of Avraham (*Bereishis* 27:7). Yitzchak Avinu was nobody's fool, and the fact that he was misled by Eisav would indicate the degree of righteousness exhibited by Eisav. Eisav's deception of Yitzchak, as well as the rest of society, can only be understood if we grant that Eisav was indeed of noble character. After all, a scion of the house of Avraham and Yitzchak could not be that much unlike them. It is only relative to his family that Eisav falls short in fulfilling his potential, rendering him, in Torah terms, a sinner. The actions of Eisav are secrets that the Torah reveals to us; the people of his time had no inkling of his wickedness.

The Torah reveals that Eisav could not tolerate living in the same country as Yaakov:

וילך אל ארץ מפני יעקב אחיו

and he [Eisav] went to a land because of his brother Yaakov (*Bereishis* 36:6).

Canaan was large enough to accommodate many inhabitants; there was certainly room enough for Eisav to live an independent life. But, the "*Yad Hashem*" put the idea into Eisav's head that he could not live in the same land as his brother. Hence, Yaakov was divested of close family which might have presented an obstacle in his path to achieving excellence.

On a national level, *Klal Yisrael* was often confronted by indigenous groups with an agenda opposite to that of the Torah. Moreover, the opposition to Torah values sometimes came from within the Jewish people. The *Tzedokim*, who took *Torah Shebeksav* (the written Torah) literally and rejected *Torah Shebe'alpeh* (the oral law), gained dominance over *Klal Yisrael* from the latter part of the *Chashmonayim* period through the destruction of the Second *Beis Hamikdash*. They had a stranglehold on the nation, and particularly over the *Beis Hamikdash* and its treasures. In the famous dialogue between Vespasian and Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, Vespasian utters the prophetic statement: "If a barrel of honey is surrounded by a serpent, is it not worthwhile to even break the barrel so that the serpent is killed?" The barrel of honey represents the *Beis Hamikdash*, the serpent represents the *Tzedokim*. Vespasian suggested that to rid *Klal Yisrael* of the *Tzedokim* it might be necessary, and indeed worthwhile, to destroy the *Beis Hamikdash*. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai acquiesced with his silence (*Gittin* 56:). Once the *Beis Hamikdash* was destroyed and its treasures no longer existed, the *Tzedokim* had no reason to remain. They disappeared from the scene, and *Klal Yisrael* was rid of them forever.

Another group that represented close association from whom *Klal Yisrael* had to divest itself was the Nazarenes. As a Jewish Messianic group, the Nazarenes caused great grief to *Klal Yisrael*. They constantly challenged the nation and acted as a fifth column for the Romans. From just before the second *churban* (destruction) up until the period of *Milchemes Beitar*, they considered themselves to be part of *Klal Yisrael*. At the end of *Milchemes Beitar*, the Romans

took great revenge against *Klal Yisrael*, unleashing devastating destructive forces against the Jewish nation. The Nazarenes decided to call it quits and distanced themselves from *Klal Yisrael*, asserting themselves as an independent religion. Even today, *Klal Yisrael* is still reeling from the punishing effects of *Milchemes Beitar*. Nevertheless, it was an event with some positive consequences. That rotting limb had to be pruned away from the tree that was *Klal Yisrael*. What was left was a healthy trunk whose branches have continued to flourish and grow stronger through time (see *Derech Hashem* II 4:3).

Hence it becomes manifestly evident that as important as *kiruv rechokim* is to *Klal Yisrael*, there are instances when the principle of *meracheik kirovim* must be brought into play. If close contact to a certain individual serves as an impediment to one's own achievement of perfection, then that individual must be cast away.

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