

Illuminating Man's Inner World

THROUGH THE LENS OF THE PARSHA

Rabbi Yehoshua Blass, Mashgiach Ruchani – Yeshiva University



Parshas Yisro – The Fading Dream of One Man and One Heart

There are pesukim that reflect critical concepts that are ingrained into the psyche of the Jewish people. Stop any even semi-educated member of the Tribe and they can identify certain ideas that we have all been collectively weaned on. In a parsha filled with seminal ideas perhaps none has gotten more attention than the comment of Rashi on Shemos 19:2.

**וַיִּסְעוּ מִרְפִּידִים וַיָּבֹאוּ מִדְבַּר סִינַי וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמִדְבַּר וַיִּחַן־שָׁם
יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶגְדַּ הָהָר:**

**וַיִּחַן שֵׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל. כָּאִישׁ אֶחָד בְּלֵב אֶחָד, אָבֵל שְׂאֵר כָּל
הַחַיִּית בְּתַרְעוּמוֹת וּבְמַחְלָקָה:**

While other encampments both prior to and after ma'amad Har Sinai were infused with machlokes once Bnei Yisroel arrived at this moment they were unified like a single organism with a single purpose. This wasn't just incidental. Rather achdus in body and spirit was the prerequisite for HKB'H decision to give the Torah in the first place. As is beautifully expressed in Derech Eretz Zutra:

**גדול הוא השלום. שבכל המסעות כתיב ויסעו ויחנו. נוסעין
במחלוקת וחונין במחלוקת. בזמן שבאו לסיני חנו חנייה
אחת. ויחן שם ישראל (שמות י"ט:ב'). אמר הקב"ה הואיל
ושנאו ישראל את המחלוקת ואהבו את השלום ונעשו חנייה
אחת הרי השעה שאתן להם את תורת**

What a powerful idea. Seeing that you as a nation hate controversy and you love peace and you have made a united encampment this is the time to give you the Torah. Words to indeed study, imbibe and fully live by. It is from this statement and other statements like it in which the entire ethic of collective ahavas yisroel takes shape. It's not just a nice idea - let's all sit around the campfire, sing kumbaya and love each other. Rather it is the sine qua non of Jewish life and

the entire reason that we warranted the Torah in the first place. Ahavas Yisroel is not some theoretical idea, expressed by the Rishonim and hung on banners in classrooms throughout the Jewish world. **כאיש אחד בלב אחד** infuses an entire worldview and an ethic of being.

I would like to make an admission. Normally ahavas Yisroel is not a mitzvah I struggle with. There are obligations that for me are more difficult, but loving people and especially Jews is not one of them. With that said, I have been feeling less than generous over the last months as I observe the behavior of many of our coreligionists. We are always confronted by the specter of interacting with segments of the Jewish world who for a host of reasons are totally different than us and typically it is not a challenge to be able to say some variation of 'to each their own' and 'live and let live'. It has been harder personally to say that and feel that during these last many months while witnessing behavior that has often been insensitive at best and life threatening and criminal in its extreme form. What then of the mantra of 'like one man and one heart'. How does one feel that spirit of oneness when tolerance and compassion have withered?

Perhaps one can argue that the mitzvah of ahavta l'reiecha kamocho doesn't apply in a situation in which a person is not acting like rei'echa and are not upholding the laws and principles of the Torah. Indeed, the haghos maimoniyos and others comment on the pasuk of **וזהב לרעך כמוך** and **ואהבת לרעך כמוך** that ודוקא שהוא רעך בתורה ובמצוות and to sit in judgement of another person or of another community. Additionally, there are many Rishonim, chief among them the Yad Rama, who argue that the mitzvah of ahavas Yisroel applies regardless of how the other Jew might be acting.

So once again one is left with an age-old question - how do we feel a sense of genuine ahava for Jews who carry the banner of Torah but who's behavior seemingly is so abhorrent.

There is a lot to be said on this topic and I would genuinely appreciate any of your feedback in how you navigate through this conundrum. I was thinking this week that my efforts in sincere ahavas Yisroel are aided by my efforts in ahavas atzmi. What I mean by that is the following. Reb Aryeh Leib Heller in his introduction to the Shev Shemaysa notices contradictory statements in Chazal. On the one hand the gemarah in Niddah 30b records that **אפילו כל העולם אומרים עליך שאתה צדיק – הוי בעיניך כרשע** and on the other hand, the Mishnah says in Avos that **- אל תהי רשע בפני עצמך - הוי בעיניך כרשע** or should it be positive and accepting - **אל תהי רשע**? These are complicated questions which get to the heart of man's self-perception, sin, healthy shame versus unhealthy shame, self-love and other related categories.

Rav Heller beautifully writes that Chazal's encouragement to view ourselves as **רשעים** is relegated only to one's behavior. I can look in the mirror and honestly evaluate what is looking back at me. I can have a critical eye towards the truth of how I have acted and towards the deeds that I am forced to claim as my own. But, said Rav Heller that's only the outer **צורה** of what one perhaps rightly sees in the mirror. The real essence of a person is uniquely beautiful. His or her aspirations are typically pristine. One's heart calls out for a relationship with **HKB'H** and desires meaning, purity, goodness and overall **שלמות הנפש**. He writes so beautifully that:

והנה כל מה שאינו בעצמות רק בתואר ובמראה אינו אלא מקרה והמקרה לא תתמיד, לכן זרע אברהם אף אם ידיהם מפוחמות, השחרות לא תתמיד, ובהכרח יתלבנו וישובו ליופים ולעצמותם, אבל מעשיהם הטובים הם עצמותם

And that which is in the appearance is only incidental, and that which is incidental will not be permanent. Therefore with the descendants of Avraham, even if their hands are charred, the blackness will not be

permanent; and they will necessarily be whitened and return to their beauty and their essence.

Without sounding simplistic, the measure in which we can apply this to ourselves is often the measure in which we can find ourselves compassionate and loving towards other people. Who are we in essence? What is our **עצמיות**? Can we deeply and truly love and affirm that internal and eternal piece of ourselves? Can we see beyond the 'blackness' and embrace the inner self while at the same time feeling healthy shame for our misdeeds?

If so than let us attempt the same with people and communities whose behavior we find abhorrent. We can acknowledge that the **תואר** and **מראה** of some of our coreligionists have been occasionally 'blackened'. We can have discussions of the societal circumstances that have birthed that reality. We can rightly condemn publicly and privately certain behavior. At the same time, we can affirm the **עצם** of who people are and acknowledge the positive internal values and aspirations that often give way to problematic behavior. We would like in the words of Rav Kook to be able to see the **שפע אור ה' שמאיר בכל אחד**.

That recognition of the overflow of G-d's light is really the cornerstone of our own sense of self. It is a light that penetrates past the layers of our own inadequacies and shortcomings. I hope that it is a light that can shine onto and be seen in others during dark days that require the **שפע אור ה'** for illumination. Like 'one man and one heart' only if we are able to bring our gaze squarely onto our own heart and to the heart of others.

Kein yehi ratzon that we should see peaceful and redemptive times in the days ahead.

Have a good Shabbos

Rabbi Blass welcomes any feedback. He can be reached at blass@yu.edu