

The rabble that was among them cultivated a craving, and Bnei Yisrael also wept once more and said, “Who will feed us meat?” (11:4)

The *erev rav*, mixed multitude, who left Egypt with the Jewish People, now showed their true level of commitment to Hashem. Nothing! Instead, they were the first to complain, the first to undermine Moshe *Rabbeinu's* leadership, thereby showing that they had come along only for the ride. How careful we must be of those usurpers who claim to stand with us, but, in truth, stand only for themselves. Only someone who is truly committed to Hashem is able to withstand the various challenges our People have encountered during our long journey.

Horav Avraham Schorr, Shlita, offers a novel interpretation of this *pasuk*. He quotes Yehudah *ben Teima*, whose well-known dictum in *Pirkei Avos* 5:20 accompanies the Jew throughout his life: “Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong as a lion, to carry out the will of your Father in Heaven.” In his commentary to the Aggadic portions of the *Talmud*, **Horav Elchanan Wasserman, zl**, derives from here that man is a composite of all of the creatures in the world. This means that he possesses the strengths and characteristics – both good and bad – which control the individual nature of each creature. Man has within him: the strength and ability to lead like a lion; the viciousness of a snake; the foolishness of a donkey; the playfulness of a monkey, etc. He is, thus, unfortunately capable of the most heinous sin and, conversely, the most sublime act of kindness. He can run like the deer to perform a *mitzvah*, use brute strength in the service of his fellow man, and harness incredible energy to study Torah. He can do anything if he is properly motivated. If he is negatively provoked, he can fall into the abyss of evil and commit unbelievable atrocities. This is a man.

Rav Elchanan explains that this composite known to us as “man” must be guided by *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, in order to control his animalistic urges and tendencies. Otherwise, he reverts to his creature instincts and is capable of just about any type of behavior.

Shlomo *Hamelech* says (*Sefer Koheles* 7:29): *Asah HaElokim adam yashar, v'heimah bikshu chishvonos rabim*, “G-d has made man simple, but they sought any intrigues.” He begins the *pasuk* in the singular (*adam*, man) and concludes in the plural (*heimah*, they). Why is this? *Sefer Eizor Eliyahu* explains that this refers to the multifaceted strengths and natures of man, the fact that he is a composite of the various other creatures. All of these abilities are housed within the body and mind of “simple” man. Man is singular, but his tendencies -- based upon the various creative instinct within him--are plural. These tendencies, if left unchecked, provoke desire, passion, lack of control, base behavior – all of the negative instinct that pull man away from his Heavenly-intended “simplicity.”

The word *yashar* is an acronym for *Yehei Shmei Rabbah*, “May His Great Name (be blessed).” This was Hashem’s intention when He created man *yashar*, simple: that his life should be spent

glorifying His Name. Thus, he controls his animalistic tendencies and fulfills his Heavenly mission. Otherwise, he falls prey to the “multitude” within him.

Rav Schorr now returns to our original *pasuk*, *V’hasafsuf asher b’kirbo hisaavu taavah*, “The rabble (mixed multitude) that was among them cultivated a craving.” This refers to the multitude of creature characteristics imbedded in the psyche of man. They crave so much; they even initiate cravings for the sole purpose of craving! The purpose and mission of *Klal Yisrael* run counter to this life of abandon. We are charged to be *me’acheid*, unify all of our proclivities, for one purpose: to serve Hashem. We are created *yashar Keil*, simple by G-d, thus, accounting for our name, *Yisrael*. In order to maintain this name, we must live up to its meaning and objective.

If there were ever an era that brought out the worst in the human psyche, it was during the Cantonist period, during the mid-nineteenth century in Russia. Young Jewish boys were kidnapped by the Russians in order to serve in the Czar’s army. The goal of the Russians was to dehumanize these children, alienate them from Hashem - with the goal of eventually baptizing them. While they did not always succeed in baptizing them, they did destroy their humanistic nature. These boys remained in the army for twenty-five years, during which they were subjected to the most cruel and inhumane torture. Indeed, the *Tzemach Tzedek* of Lubavitch compared the suffering of the Cantonists to the persecution of the Jews during the Hellenistic Greek rule, because of the spiritual nature of the abuse. He said, “We cannot imagine the greatness of praying and chanting Psalms by the Cantonists (this refers to those who survived spiritually intact). It is worth more in Heaven than the intention (*kavanah*) and fervor (*dveikus*) of the holy *Arizal*. Their prayers are filled with self-sacrifice (*mesiras nefesh*) and simple faith (*emunah peshutah*).”

The following story has made the rounds. I selected it to demonstrate how one can ascend from the abyss of being a conglomerate of creature instincts, to achieving spiritual sublimity – as long as his tendencies are all focused toward Hashem and guided by *yiraas Shomayim*. The most distant, base-minded Jew can be brought back to embrace Hashem, as long as he has the proper motivation and the right *rebbe* – as was the story with this Cantonist soldier.

The holy **Chafetz Chaim, zl**, often traveled from city to city. Once, at an inn in Vilna, he observed a burly Jew sitting at a table and ordering the waitress to bring him a portion of roast goose and a glass of whiskey. Without first making a *brachah*, blessing, he quickly devoured the meal and washed it down with the whiskey. His “dessert” consisted of a coarse berating of the waitress, for no other reason than he felt like it. Observing the entire scenario from a corner of the room, the *Chafetz Chaim* was about to get up and rebuke the man for his degrading behavior and foul language. The innkeeper rushed over to prevent the sage from following through with his intended reproof. He feared that the man, a simple illiterate individual, who had just recently been released from serving two and a half decades in the Czar’s army, might be rude to the saintly *Rav* and even strike him.

“Please, *Rebbe*, leave him alone. You cannot speak to such a person. He is very crude, a true

boor, who knows no way other than bullying. When he was merely seven-years-old, he was abducted with other child Cantonists and dragged off to Siberia. Until the age of eighteen, he lived among farmers, and then he served for another twenty five years in the Czar's army. With such an "education" could he have fared better? Is it any wonder that he is crude, wild and base? He was out of touch with anything Jewish for thirty years. He neither learned, nor spoke one letter of Torah. Judaism was foreign to him. It would be best that you do not speak with him. I value your honor too much."

A calm, affectionate smile radiated from the face of the *Chafetz Chaim*: "Such a Jew! I know quite well how to speak to him. I only hope that good will come from the conversation."

The *Chafetz Chaim* approached the man and greeted him warmly, "*Shalom Aleichem!* Is it true what I have just heard about you – that you were kidnapped as a child and dragged off to Siberia? That you grew up among gentiles and did not learn even one letter of the Torah? You suffered unbearable persecution, pain and misery. You endured torture by day and nightmares at night. The evil ones attempted numerous times to force you to reject your faith, to be baptized to their godless religion. They forced you to eat pork and all kinds of non-kosher food. Nonetheless, you persevered: you did not convert; you remained a loyal Jew.

"How blessed I would be to have such merits! You are so fortunate. Your place in the World to Come is guaranteed. You will sit among the greatest Jews of our nation. Your sacrifice and devotion is no trivial matter. You suffered immeasurably for over thirty years for the sake of Judaism and Heaven."

Suddenly, tears welled up in the eyes of the former soldier. He was moved by the warm and good-hearted outpouring of love from this pure, living fountain whose words refreshed and invigorated his weary spirit. When he finally realized that he was none other than the saintly *Chafetz Chaim*, the holiest man of their generation, a sage who had no peer, he broke into bitter weeping and kissed the hands of the *Chafetz Chaim*.

The sage continued, "Enough! A man like you deserves to be amidst those holy Jews who gave their lives to serve and sanctify Hashem's Name. If you would be an observant Jew for the remainder of your life, no one would be more fortunate than you."

The man remained with the *Chafetz Chaim* until he became a fully observant Jew.

This man had demonstrated what can become of a person who does not have Heaven as a control over his animalistic tendencies. He had become the opposite of *yashar*. Once the holy *Chafetz Chaim* activated his spiritual GPS, he became focused on Hashem, thus allowing him to become *yashar – Keil – Yisrael*.