

Behold! – A caravan of Ishamelites was coming from Gilead, their camels bearing spice, balsam and lotus. (37:25)

Rashi's commentary is well-known. After all, why did the Torah find it necessary to mention the cargo carried by the Ishmaelite caravan? He explains that the Torah is teaching us that Hashem intervened on behalf of Yosef. Ishmaelite caravans usually transported foul-smelling cargo, such as naphtha and tar, but, in order to spare the righteous Yosef the discomfort of smelling the offensive odor, Hashem arranged for this caravan to carry sweet-smelling fragrances.

Many lessons can be gleaned from *Rashi's* interpretation of the sudden change in Ishmaelite cargo. Indeed, *Horav Eliyahu Baruch Finkel, zl*, categorizes these lessons, based on individual insights which (I think) are the product of individual approaches to *mussar*, ethical behavior. The different *yeshivos* represented not only variegated approaches to *Talmudic* analysis and methodology, but they also reflected their own unique approach toward understanding a situation, based upon their personal *derech ha'chaim v'hamussar*. I will quote them with the author's embellishment.

The primary *mussar yeshivos* (or, at least, *yeshivos* which were famous for their strong leanings toward *mussar*, ethical character development, we're under the guidance of their *Roshei Yeshivah*: the *Alter, zl, m'Kelm*, *Horav Simcha Zissel Broide*; the *Alter, zl, m'Slabodka*, *Horav Nosson Tzvi Finkel*; the *Alter, zl, m'Novoradok*, *Horav Yosef Yoizel Horowitz*.

The *mussar* movement had originally been initiated by *Horav Yisrael Salanter* out of recognition that, while *Klal Yisrael's* commitment to observe and study Torah was sufficient, its observance had become habitual, almost complacent, and the emotional dimension of *avodas Hashem*, service to the Almighty, had become lacking. Thus, the young people were especially susceptible to the blandishments of the outside world, the *Haskalah*, Enlightenment, and other various nationalistic movements which were far removed from anything Jewish or religious. They presented Jewish observance as archaic, without meaning, with almost no satisfaction. By formalizing the independent study of *mussar*, the *ben Torah* would grow both spiritually and ethically and would elevate his pride as a Jew.

Some *Roshei Yeshivah* were against this formalized study, fearing that an independent focus would result in differentiating spirituality from Torah study. To put it simply, they were afraid of *frum am ha'aratzim*, observant – but illiterate – Jews. They felt that love and fear of Hashem could be achieved by learning a *blatt Gemorah* with intensity.

The *Chassidic* approach was to use the vehicle of emotional stimulation, through joy, singing, *davening*, and/or *hisbodedus*, seclusion, whereby one would delve deeply into knowledge of G-d. The truth of the matter is that every method worked for different people. Some required intensity, and others needed the joy, while some just studied Torah, and that was their paradise.

In the *mussar* approach, Kelm, Slabodka and Novoradok differed, as we will soon see from their disparate approaches to gleaning the lesson from the Ishmaelite cargo. In Slabodka, it was all about *gadlus ha'adam*, the greatness of man. The *Alter* encouraged his students to learn *mussar*, thus polishing their character traits, so that they could aspire to be true great people in erudition and personal ethics.

In Kelm, it was *shleimus ha'adam*, the perfection of man, to work on self-development; never acting on impulse, without forethought; always maintaining complete order and correct behavior. Only someone who was a “man” could properly serve Hashem.

Novoradok believed in the total negation of one's self and the physical world in which he lives. One's ego should be non-existent, with a person's complete focus only on his spiritual and intellectual dimension. Nothing else matters.

Having shared this bit of historical perspective, we will now see how each mindset plays itself out in understanding Yosef's situation, and the Heavenly change of tar and naphtha to sweet perfumes. Kelm taught that we see from here the exactitude of Hashem's Justice. Yosef was to receive exactly what he deserved – no more and no less. Since he did not deserve to be surrounded by foul-smelling naphtha with its offensive odor, Hashem changed the course of things and the Ishmaelites were carrying a new fragrant-smelling cargo. Slabodka taught that this teaches us the greatness of a person. A person may be down, being sold as a slave, yet he is still turned off by an offensive odor. He may be down in the dumps, but he has not lost his senses. He is a man – not an animal. In Novoradok, they viewed this from the opposite perspective. We see here how absorbed a person is with this world. Even at a moment when he is being sold as a slave, when his life as an independent free person is over, he is still bothered by the insignificance of a foul-odor! Are you a person so small that, at such a time, you are concerned with the inconsequential? This may be compared to a person who just received a devastating diagnosis from the doctor, but is bothered by the fact the doctor's bad breath is offensive. These represent three different perspectives on humanity, three varied ways of looking at Yosef's “predicament.”

Let us go further. **Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, zl** (who was a student of Mir and son-in-law of the son of the *Alter m'Slabodka*), explains that Hashem demonstrated His beneficence towards Yosef. Even in the misery of captivity, Hashem gave Yosef something to think about: “You are not alone. I am with you. Otherwise, the Arabs would have been carrying a cargo of tar. Never fear, even in the most difficult moments of life, Hashem does not forsake us.”

Brisk was of those who countered the *mussar* movement. The *Brisker Rav* and the *Chazon Ish* felt strongly that one who learns with the proper intensity, who prays with the expected fervor, will develop a strong sense of *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, and maintain himself on the highest level of moral and ethical rectitude. The *Brisker Rav* saw in Yosef a person who, despite all of his adversity, continued to maintain his inextricable bond with the Torah. Nothing could sever his relationship with Torah – except, if there were a foul smell, he would not be able to study Torah.

One does not study Torah in a place where the odor is pungent and offensive. Thus, Hashem changed the cargo, so that Yosef could continue his life of allegiance to the Torah unabated.

Yeshivas Telz viewed the study of *mussar* on an intellectual level, integrating its lessons into the total harmony of the *ben Torah*. *Mussar* was not a separate *limud*, but an integral part of the law. In Telshe, learning was *halachic* and *hashkafic* – not something abstract. It was a way of life. When a *Telzer talmid* studies a *sugya*, topic, in the *Talmud*, it is a transformative experience. What he learned became part of his psyche.

Horav Mordechai Pogremonsky, zl, was one of Telshe's most celebrated students. He explains that two individuals may use a knife to cut into the flesh of a person. One is a physician who is performing a surgical procedure. The other is a murderer who is committing an act of treachery against his victim. How does an innocent spectator discern between the surgeon and the murderer? For all intents and purposes, to the uninitiated eye, they are both doing the same act. When we look closely, however, we observe a stark difference between them. The surgeon makes sure that he is clean and that his hands are washed and covered by sterile gloves. He then takes a scalpel which has been sterilized and is germ-free. This is because the cut that he is about to make in the patient's skin is a therapeutic cut and must, therefore, be as clean as possible in order not to contract infection. The murderer, however, does not care about washing his hands; he does not mind if the blade he uses to take the life of his victim is rusting, or even if it is sharp, as long as it does the job.

This is what Hashem showed Yosef. The adversity with which he was challenged, the pain infused upon him, was not derived from a filthy murderous knife, but from a sterile scalpel. Yosef's troubles would eventually catalyze his ascension to being the Egyptian viceroy – just as the surgeon's scalpel brings about the patients' recovery. Thus, Hashem manipulated it that Yosef's accompanying cargo should consist of fragrant perfumes. Yosef should be aware that he was being sent down to Egypt compliments of the Great Physician – not by murdering Arabs.

Last, we cite **Horav Yitzchak zl, m'Varka**, one of the early illustrious *Chassidic* leaders, who explains that the decree against Yosef affected him physically – not spiritually. Hashem does not want to impose one iota on the *neshamah*, soul. Smell gives the *neshamah* enjoyment. Thus, to accompany Yosef with a pungent smell would mean infringing on the *neshamah*, which Hashem did not want to do.