

Hashem Elokim called out to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” (3:9)

At face value, this was not a question. Hashem certainly knew Adam’s whereabouts. Hashem was initiating a dialogue with Adam, so that he would not be afraid to repent. This, obviously, is a lesson for us when approaching someone – a student, a child, a friend who has erred – not to pounce upon him, “Why did you do it? How could you have acted so badly?” but rather, begin a conversation, get the subject relaxed, then ease into the reproof in such a manner that he will open up and be willing to repent.

The word *Ayeca*, “Where are you?” has been interpreted in a number of ways. It has the same letters as *Eichah*, which implies, “How could you?” *Ayeca*, “Where?” also intimates, “Do you know where you are; Do you realize that you sinned in *Gan Eden*?” These expositions each present an understanding of the gravity of sin, its roots, and effect on those in the proximity of the sinner.

From a well-documented incident which occurred concerning the **Baal HaTanya, zl**, we derive a deeper explanation of the word *Ayeca* and its implication to all of us. The *Alter Rebbe (Baal HaTanya)* had been jailed in St. Petersburg, the result of being slandered to the government by insecure people who felt threatened by his success. This occurred during the nascent days of *Chassidus*, when any form of worship that deviated from the tried and true was immediately suspect of involvement with Shabbthai Tzvi messianism. In Russia, *Chabad Chassidus*, established by the *Baal HaTanya*, was most prominent.

While the *Rebbe* was imprisoned, he was visited by a minister, an assimilated Jew, who was in charge of prisoner interrogations. The minister knew a holy man when he saw one, and he understood that the prisoner sitting before him deeply engrossed in thought, was no ordinary prisoner. While he was foolish in abandoning his religion, the minister was no fool. He was astute and well-versed in Torah literature, having attended *yeshivah* prior to apostatizing himself. He turned to the *Rebbe* and said, “I have long been bothered by a question on the Torah for which I have never received a satisfactory answer. When G-d entered the Garden of Eden, He spoke to Adam, asking him, ‘Where are you?’ Is it possible that He did not know the whereabouts of Adam?”

The *Baal HaTanya* listened to the question, and then asked the minister, “Tell me, do you believe that the Torah is eternal and that it will be around for all time?” “Yes,” replied the minister. He might have been an apostate, rejecting the Torah, but he was well aware that the Torah exists and that it is G-d’s communication with man.

“G-d’s question of Adam,” the *Rebbe* began, “was a question that each and every one of his descendants must ask themselves, *Ayeca* – ‘Where are you?’ – Every person is granted a specific amount of time to live. He is mandated to carry out Hashem’s *mitzvos* and perform acts of kindness

to his fellow man. He is asked, *Ayeca* – ‘Where do you stand with your G-d-given mission? How much of your mission have you completed?’” The *Rebbe* then asked the minister, “In the x number of years (the *Rebbe* knew how old the minister was) that you have lived, did you achieve your Heavenly designated goals – or did you fall short? This is what G-d asks each and every one of us: *Ayeca?*”

Perhaps *Ayeca* has a dual interpretation: one which addresses the individual himself; and one which implores the individual to ask concerning others. Each and every one of us has a path of life in which we are the products of our own personal history, a series of events in our background in which we have interacted with people, both very close – such as parents and family – and others, who have played significant roles in our life stories. We should ask ourselves *Ayeca* – How did I get here? What have I gone through to reach this point? What were the factors that have influenced my life – both positive and negative? Now that you realize how it has all led up to this moment, what are you going to do about it? Are you a success, or is your life a mess? How did this happen? What led up to this point? The same piercing questions apply to the way we view other people. Do we judge them according to their present demeanor, or do we ask *Ayeca* – How did you get here? What events and people have catalyzed your success or failure?

Adam *HaRishon* had sinned. The first step toward reconciliation was *teshuvah*, repentance. In order to repent a sin, one should first introspect the root of his behavior, the pathology that led up to that moment. Likewise, a young person, a middle-aged or older individual who has fallen on hard times and distanced himself from Hashem, must first make a self-diagnosis as to how he had plummeted to this low point. We should not judge people according to the here and now, but *Ayeca* – How did they get here?

Allow me to present the following vignettes, one of which saw the pages of *Peninim* a number of years ago, but its message is timeless. First story: *Rebbetzin* Dessler, wife of the *Michtav MeiEliyahu*, was in Lithuania together with her young daughter (the future *Rebbetzin* Geltzeiler) when World War II broke out. They could not return home to England since their host country was at war with Germany. As a result, they were displaced to Australia, which was neutral. This became their home for the duration of the war years.

One day, mother and daughter took a walk and passed a pawn shop which had a number of jewelry pieces displayed in its picture window. When the young girl oohed and aahed over the jewelry, her mother responded that while it was true that each piece was quite beautiful, even captivating, every item in the window had a history. Someone had been forced to sell her jewelry for economic reasons. This might have been a cherished family heirloom, but the family had fallen on hard times and bread had become more important than jewelry. “We should not take pleasure from someone else’s misfortune,” the *Rebbetzin* told her daughter.

The simple lesson to be derived herein is how far one person’s sensitivity for another human being can extend. She saw a necklace in the store window and was immediately aware that it

represented another human being's misfortune. Others saw dazzling jewelry. She saw the history of the jewelry. It represented a person's economic fall. It reflected someone's need. This is how this special woman viewed a piece of jewelry in a pawnshop. *Ayeca?* How did it get here? Everything/everybody has a history. Take it into consideration.

The second story is taken from a tribute rendered by *Horav Aharon Lopiansky, Shlita*, to the memory of his father, a student of *Slabodka Yeshivah*, where they taught *gadlus ha'adam*, the greatness of man, the overriding significance of every individual as being a creation of Hashem. They would *daven* in one of the large old *shuls* that graced New York. These *shuls* were also home to a number of homeless Jews who had fallen on hard times and would use the *shul* as their "base of operations."

A lively group of ten-year-old boys accompanied their fathers to *shul*. Since *davening* took a long time, and the boys were bored, they searched for things to do. One of their favorite pastimes was chasing a wretched, homeless man who used the *shul's* furnace room as an "apartment." Like many others like him, his clothing smelled, he was slightly unhinged, and he survived on the handouts that kind people gave him. The children would delight in rousing his ire and running away as he hurled epithets after them.

One day, *Rav Lopiansky's* father noticed this and called his son over. No angry yelling; no loud rebuke – just soft and gentle words. "You see this man?" his father asked. "He was born a cute little baby whose mother stroked him lovingly. She cooed to him and delighted when he cooed back and smiled at her. His father secretly hoped that he would achieve a position and stature in life, which he regrettably had not. He himself began dreaming and fantasizing about what he would be one day. He had brothers and sisters who played and fought with him, as all siblings do.

"And now look at what has become of him. Is it not a tragedy? Should one not be moved to tears at what happened to him? And you are compounding the tragedy by taking a *tzelem Elokim*, a person who was created in Hashem's image, and making 'dirt' out of him." With these words, his father softly concluded his rebuke.

We have all met the type of person that fits this description. Every community is graced with people who, instead of achieving the aspirations and dreams of their parents, become "glitches" in the system, relegated to living a life of loneliness, supported by the kindness of decent, kind-hearted people, who recognize the significance of *Ayeca?* How did you get here? Sadly, many of us tend to ignore these people, because they make us uncomfortable. I am not sure if the people themselves make us uncomfortable or is it their history, the reason that they are here today under such wretched circumstances, that makes us uncomfortable. Indeed, there, if not for the grace of G-d, go I. We are lucky. They have not been so fortunate. By asking, *Ayeca?* more often, we might prevent the next person from becoming a statistic.