

We were like grasshoppers in our eyes and so were we in their eyes. (13:33)

When the *meraglim*, spies, returned from their mission, the nation debated their negative report. They ruminated back and forth: Could they triumph over the giant Canaanites or would they be defeated? The *meraglim* were emphatic that they had no hope for success. The people listened to them, and they began their *bechayah shel chinam*, unwarranted weeping – a weeping for which we have been punished with a *bechayah l'doros*, weeping for generations. As a consequence, that night, which was the Ninth of Av, became the precursor of our national day of mourning. What did the *meraglim* fear? What was it that compelled them to return with such negativity? The *Kotzker Rebbe, zl*, in what has become a well-known, often repeated explanation, says that our above *pasuk* presents the crux of their problem, the root of the sin which led to their turning their collective backs on Hashem: “We were in our eyes as grasshoppers.” Why? Because the giants referred to them as grasshoppers. In other words, the *meraglim*’s identity was defined by the Canaanite’s opinion of them. Their self-image was predicated on what the giants thought of them.

A negative self-esteem is not a sin, but it invariably leads to – and is at the root of – most sin. One who feels good about himself, who is not filled with despair, cares about himself. Such a person will not easily fall prey to the wiles of the *yetzer hora*. Does negative self-esteem bespeak one who is wicked? No, but one who has a low self-esteem is an enemy of – himself. He is wicked to himself. He will ultimately become wicked to Hashem. The *Baal Shem Tov* once told his *talmid*, student, “You lack *emunah*, faith.” The student was taken aback. “*Rebbe*, I spend hours daily engrossed in faith and in improving my relationship with Hashem.” “You have faith in Hashem,” said the *Baal Shem Tov*, “but you lack faith in yourself. One who has no faith in himself will eventually renege on his faith in Hashem.”

We all encounter situations that create ambiguity in our lives. For some, it is a physical/economic/emotional challenge. For others, it is the demons within, products of depression, which, for the most part, is self-imposed. It is specifically during such moments that it would serve us well to reflect upon Hashem and the role He plays in our lives. This provides us with the comfort of knowing that we are not in this alone. We should, thus, be encouraged and empowered to go forward with confidence, to transform despair into hope.

This is how we should act. How many of us, however, can say that they conform to this line of thinking? How many, instead, defer to depression and fall into despair? When someone does not believe himself capable or suitable for a mission, it will adversely affect his spiritual standing. The *Chiddushei HaRim* implies this concept in an incredible commentary to *Devarim* 25:18 concerning Amalek’s evil attack against our people. The Torah admonishes us to remember Amalek’s ambush of the fledgling Jewish nation following our exodus from Egypt: “That he happened upon you on the way, and he struck those of you who were hindmost” – *necheshalim acharecha* – those who were hindmost, the back of the line, alone, without protection. This is Amalek. He preys on the

weak, the least affiliated, those who do not have the community's protection.

The *Midrash Tanchuma* identifies those who were the *necheshalim*, who traveled at the back of the line: *Shevet Dan*, who were eschewed by the *Anan*, Pillar of Cloud, that protected the nation, because they were *ovdei avodah zarah*, idol worshippers! This statement is mindboggling. To assert that a Jewish tribe was guilty of idol worship so soon after *yetzias Mitzrayim*, exodus from Egypt, is unnerving. Yet, the *Midrash* clearly makes this statement. Furthermore, as the *Chidushei HaRim* points out, we know that the Jewish nation traveled in groups, with one of every four tribes carrying the group's *degel*, banner/flag, of distinction. The chosen tribe was the one which was the most worthy, most distinguished. *Shevet Dan* carried a *degel*! How do we reconcile their *avodah zarah* with being singled out to carry a *degel*?

The *Gerrer Rebbe* explains that the Tribe of *Dan* was very much like its name, which implies judgment – without compromise. Thus, since they felt that they were undeserving of accolades or honor, they refused to accept it. While some people would do anything for the opportunity to receive attention, *Shevet Dan* eschewed the limelight – especially if they perceived themselves to be unworthy of the recognition. Is this such a terrible attribute to have? It depends. If *Hashem Yisborach* selects a *Shevet*, this means that the Almighty considers the *Shevet* worthy of the position. Who is to argue with Hashem? Indeed, this is why Hashem chose them for distinction – specifically because of their inordinate humility. Such a person/*Shevet* shall carry the Banner of the Tribe! Nonetheless, if they felt so low that they would refuse Hashem's Divine mandate, they were taking the issue of self-esteem too far. Even if one feels himself unworthy, he accepts the position if Hashem commands. Likewise, if one's *rebbe* believes in him, he should, in turn, believe in himself. If he does not, if he takes the negative self-image too far, he is a *rasha* – to himself! A *rasha* to himself is still a *rasha*!

I think this idea is behind the concept of the *rasha* of “four sons” fame. I was always bothered by this “errant” son who, despite having issues with the religion in which he was raised and for which his parents and grandparents before him had sacrificed, joins with his family at the *Seder* table. If he is so estranged with the religion that he has no problem deriding it publicly at his family's *Seder* table, why does he bother to attend? If he is a *rasha*, let him stay away. Applying the above thought, we have a new understanding of the *rasha*. The son who comes to the *Seder* is wicked – to himself. His absolute negative self-image has distorted his entire outlook on Judaism. He thinks/believes that if he is inadequate, the entire religion must be failing him. His only way out is to denigrate what others consider holy, because the alternative means focusing on himself and his self-imposed/perceived shortcomings. He is not a bad son in the wicked sense of the word. He is a son whose negative image of himself, and concomitant low self-esteem, have so distorted his perspective on everything around him that is truly positive that he must whittle away at it in order to preserve his own distorted outlook of himself. The harm this *rasha* causes is primarily to himself.

An individual's attitude under difficult circumstances not only often defines his character, but it also portrays his true spiritual commitment. It will determine if said commitment will endure the test of

time. Yosef and Dovid originally met in Auschwitz where they were both interred in the same block and worked together on the same work detail. They both suffered traumatically, losing their entire families to the Nazi murderers. Their relationship was concretized when they spent a year as displaced persons in Bergen Belsen following the war. Having to emigrate to *Eretz Yisrael*, they, like so many others, were forced to suffer the pain of having insult added to injury when the British Mandate, which was then the governing power of Palestine, set a quota on how many Jews were allowed to come “home.” They set their sights on America, as did so many others.

By the time they arrived in America, they had married and started families. Being devout men, they both did everything possible to maintain their religious commitment in a country where Torah Judaism was an anomaly. Their greatest difficulty was on the economic front. Earning a living to support their families was becoming increasingly difficult, since *Shabbos*, our day of rest, was a regular workday. It was not uncommon for an observant Jew to hold down his job all summer, only to lose it the first Friday of the winter, after the clock was changed. To leave work early meant being fired, which was the case for many *frum*, observant Jews – Yosef and David were no different.

On one Friday afternoon, both Yosef and David were fired from their respective jobs. While it came as no surprise, it did not alleviate the fact that neither one even had food for *Shabbos*. Nonetheless, they accepted their lot as a faithful Jew would. It was their individual responses that distinguished one from the other. Yosef went home, informed his wife and children that it was going to be a rough *Shabbos* without food, and they proceeded to celebrate *Tishah B’Av* on *Shabbos*. The entire family sat there depressed, weeping, the pangs of hunger coursing through them. They lamented their sorry lot in life. David also came home and informed his family of their troubles. He, however, took a different attitude. They were going to celebrate *Shabbos Kodesh* with everything but food. His wife set the table, placed the *challah* cover -- sans *challah* -- in its appropriate place. She lit candles and wept through her usual prayer. When the children began to complain about their bitter lot in life, David began to sing *zemiros*, the *Shabbos* songs. Within a few minutes, everyone was singing like never before. Indeed, on that *Shabbos*, when they thought they had nothing – they actually had everything. It was their greatest, most inspiring *Shabbos*, which they would remember for the rest of their lives. In fact, it was that *Shabbos* and how they celebrated it, which determined the spiritual trajectory of the individual children of Yosef and David.

Yosef’s children never forgot the misery and travail, the bitterness and emptiness of the *Shabbos* when they went hungry. Later in life, they decided that a religion that demands that one starve was one which they could do without. They reneged the religion which their father had tried so hard to keep. On the other hand, David’s children never forgot the inspiration they had experienced during that uplifting *Shabbos*, when they learned that religion was not about food, but rather, about one’s relationship with Hashem. The glass is either half full or half empty. A positive outlook on life begins with a positive outlook on oneself. Negativity begets negativity, while positivity breeds positivity.