

# MESHECH CHOCHMAH

## Parshas Devarim

### Chazon Yeshayahu

לֹא תוֹסִיפוּ הִבִּיא מִנְחַת שָׁוְא קְטֹרֶת תּוֹעֵבָה הִיא לִי... לֹא אוֹכֵל אֲנִי וְעִצְרָה

*Do not continue to bring Me your worthless meal-offerings, it is an incense of abomination to Me... I cannot abide iniquity with assembly (Yeshayahu 1:13)*

The Shabbos of Parshas Devarim marks the week in which Tisha b'Av falls. The haftarah is taken from the first perek of Sefer Yeshayahu, where the Navi decries the appallingly low spiritual and moral state to which the Jewish People have sunk, and exhorts them toward teshuvah and redemption.

With regards to our pasuk, it is worthwhile observing that specifically the minchah meal-offering) and ketores (incense) are paired together, although they receive different designations, with the minchah being termed “worthless,” while the ketores is an “abomination.” What is behind these two descriptions and, moreover, how does all this relate to the pasuk’s concluding reference to “iniquity with assembly”?

#### **GETTING TOGETHER: IS IT GOOD FOR THE JEWS?**

The Meshech Chochmah draws our attention to what appear to be conflicting messages from Chazal with the regards to wicked people coming together with others.

On the one hand the Gemara<sup>1</sup> states that any communal fast day which does not also include the wicked among Israel is not a meaningful fast day. The Gemara adduces as a basis for this statement the fact that one of the ingredients of the ketores, known as *chelbenah*, had a foul smell, and yet the Torah includes it with the other ingredients and, moreover, its absence invalidates the ketores!

The message emerging from this statement is clearly that the presence of *reshaim* in an assembly is a good thing.

Elsewhere, however, the Gemara<sup>2</sup> states categorically that “Dispersion of the wicked is good for them and good for the world.” There, the message seems to be that *reshaim*

1 Kerisos 6b.

2 Sanhedrin 71b.

should be isolated wherever possible.

How can these two statements be reconciled?

The Meshech Chochmah explains. The reason why including *reshaim* in an assembly is a positive thing is two-tiered:

- ▶ Firstly, their encounter with the others in the group will hopefully serve to mollify their negative tendencies. This can happen even if the others in the group have negative tendencies of their own. If one is selfish, the other lazy and a third prone to jealousy and so on, each individual is confronted with all the others in the group who do not suffer from his particular deficiency, and thus they can all help influence each other for the better, even if they are all deficient!
- ▶ Additionally, once the person's negative tendency is mollified by the group, it can even serve as an enhancing factor from which the rest of the group can benefit. For example, if one is prone to anger, the negative side can be mitigated while the energy and intensity which would otherwise have led to anger can find expression as a galvanizing and focusing force for the group.

Both of these points can be seen in the ketores.

- ▶ The foul smell of the *chelbenah* is absorbed and neutralized by the other ingredients.
- ▶ The *chelbenah* adds pungency to the other ingredients which enhances their aroma.

However, if the assembly should serve only to reinforce the negative tendencies of those present, the assembly itself is a negative thing. This could happen in one of two ways:

- ▶ All those in the group possess the same negative tendency.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ None of those present are interested in absorbing the positive characteristics of the others in the group.

It is concerning such assemblies that Chazal stated "dispersion is good for the wicked and good for the world."

### **THE FRAGRANCE OF A FIELD WHICH HASHEM HAS BLESSED**

The ultimate expression of the positive unification of the entire Jewish people is the Beis Hamikdash, which functions as a national centralizing and unifying force. This is what lies behind the halachah that wherever one is praying, he faces towards the Beis Hamikdash, which then become the channel of the collective feelings and aspirations of each and every Jew.

This, says the Meshech Chochmah, is what lies behind the miracles which existed in the

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<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the Meshech Chochmah brings an analogy from the halachah of kashrus which states that the presumption that an animal is not a *treifah* can remain intact in the face of one sign which suggests the contrary (חדא לריעותא) – but not two (תרתי לריעותא). Concerning this, the poskim state (see Pri Megadim, Yoreh Deah, Mishbetzos Zahav, Introduction to *siman* 37) that a "double suspicion" only compromises the presumption of kosherness if both signs point toward the same type of problem. However, if the two signs relate to different types of tereifah, they do not combine, rather, the presumption of kosherness overrides each one individually.

Beis Hamikdash on a daily basis. Not every individual Jew is worthy of such manifest Divine Providence, but the totality of the Jewish people certainly are, and they are represented in that place.

With this in mind, he explains a very enigmatic statement of the Midrash. When Yaakov approaches Yitzchak dressed as Esav in order to receive the berachos, the pasuk states:

וַיְרַח אֶת רִיחַ בְּגָדָיו וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר רִיחַ רַיחַ בְּנֵי כְרִיחַ שְׂדֵה אֲשֶׁר בֵּרַכּוּ ה'

*He smelled the fragrance of his garments and blessed him, and said, "See, the fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field which Hashem has blessed."*

Commenting on the phrase "ריח בגדיו," the Midrash<sup>4</sup> says, "אל תקרי בגדיו אלא בוגדיו" – Read not 'his garments,' but rather, 'his traitors.'" The Midrash proceeds to describe certain individual who were initially wicked ("traitors"), but who subsequently did teshuvah with great sacrifice.

What inspired these individuals to better their ways? It was their exposure to people or locations which influenced the aspect of them which had not been corrupted.

The "Field which Hashem has Blessed" refers to the Beis Hamikdash. The pleasant fragrance which comes from that field is *the product of the entire field*, with each individual component contributing to that combined effect, even if that component itself does not have a pleasant fragrance!

### **MINCHAH AND KETORES**

The concept of unity finds particular expression with regards to two specific korbanos :the minchah and the *ketores*:

- ▶ *Minchah*: Unlike other korbanos, a *minchah* cannot be offered on behalf of two or more people, only on behalf of an individual. Having said that, there are communal *minchah* offerings. This indicates that the entire community is considered as "one large soul!"
- ▶ *Ketores*: As we mentioned, the inclusion of the *chelbenah* spice within the *ketores* is only considered to be of benefit due to it blending in with the other ingredients.

One of the primary problems afflicting the people during Yeshayahu's time was chronic lack of unity, as expressed in the shocking words of his prophecy which refer to them as "קְצִינֵי סֹדֹם – officers of Sodom" and "עַם עֲמֹרָה – A people of Amorah,"<sup>5</sup> two cities infamously known for their callousness and antipathy. This fractious state meant that the people being together did not produce any positive results. None of them absorbed any of the others' positive qualities since, due to their negative view of each other, they only focused on each other's negative traits!

In this vein, the Meshech Chochmah explains two statements which appear together in the Gemara<sup>6</sup> regarding the cause of the destruction of Jerusalem:

- ▶ One statement says it was because they mocked talmidei chachamim.
- ▶ The second statement says it was because they did not rebuke one another. The

4 Bereishis Rabbah 65:18.

5 Pasuk 10.

6 Shabbos 119b.

Gemara adduces in this regard the pasuk in Eichah<sup>7</sup> which says, “הִיו שְׂרֵיָהּ כְּאַיִלִים – *Their nobles were as gazelles.*” The Gemara expounds on the analogy: Just as gazelles place their heads each one by the other’s tail, so, too, the nobles kept their heads down.

The Meshech Chochmah explains that these two statements are actually addressing the same issue – rebuke. There are two ways a person can receive rebuke:

- ▶ He can hear words of *mussar* from someone else. This will tend to be effective if the person perceives the one who is delivering the *mussar* as being on a higher level than him to the degree that he is entitled to chastise others.
- ▶ He can be inspired by someone else’s example. This type of rebuke will specifically come from someone who he considers to be his peer or equal, for only then will he say “Our situations are so similar; if he can act correctly, then so can I.”

The Gemara is relating that in the period leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem, neither of these forms of rebuke were effective.

- ▶ No one listened to words of rebuke from Torah scholars or sages, for these personalities were denigrated so that no one considered them qualified to administer words of rebuke. Concerning this issue, the Gemara says that “they mocked talmidei chachamim.”
- ▶ No one took a positive example from their peers, since, when observing others, they only noticed their faults. This is expressed in the statement that each one’s head was by the other one’s tail. The head represents one’s highest qualities, while the tail represents his weaknesses and shortcomings. By each person “putting his head by the other one’s tail,” i.e., focusing on their shortcomings, no one found any positive trait to emulate. If anything, with such negative vision prevailing, they only noticed each other’s fault, which served to reinforce their own!

This deplorable situation is summed up in the words of our pasuk, where the Navi says in Hashem’s name, “*Do not continue to bring Me your worthless meal-offerings, it is an incense of abomination to Me.*” Given the chronic lack of unity, the minchah offerings are referred to as “worthless.” Since the community was fragmented, it was no longer considered “one soul,” and their minchah offerings were all but invalid. Moreover, with the lesson of the *chelbenah* in the *ketores* having gone unheeded, i.e. of absorbing each other’s positive qualities and moderating their negative traits, the presence of that foul-smelling ingredient in the *ketores* made it “an abomination.” As the pasuk states in its concluding words: “*I cannot abide iniquity with assembly.*” The presence of iniquity negated any positive quality that would have otherwise come from the assembly.

Sadly, the Navi’s words were not heeded in his time, leaving later generations with the task of taking them to heart and reversing the situation that they decried. There isn’t much to do on Tisha b’Av, which places us in an unusual situation, since it gives us time to think. The Meshech Chochmah has given us something to think about.

May we soon merit the redemption and consolation  
of which Yeshayahu foretells in the Haftarah’s of the next seven weeks!

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7 1:6.