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Chizuk - Inspiration

Berele was the orphaned son of the great Tzaddik, Reb Tanchum, the flour sifter. After his parents died, the gifted but restless boy ran away from the orphanage, drifted into the streets of Jerusalem, and became the leader of a gang. When he was sent to the harsh Kishle prison, Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld refused to give up on him. “It is forbidden to leave him there,” the Rav said, and he raised the money to ransom him.

After a heartfelt conversation with Rav Yosef Chaim, Berele promised to change. He married Yehudis, an orphaned maid who dreamed of having a home of her own. Unfortunately, after a few short months, he fell back into his old behavior—shouting, raging, and at times abusing his wife. Even so, one spark remained: like his father, Berele observed the laws of Passover with deep devotion.

In 1899, they celebrated their first Passover Seder as a married couple. Yehudis cleaned the house until it gleamed and prepared a beautiful meal. But as she lifted the chicken to serve it, she froze. Tucked inside the breast, nearly hidden, was a single, puffed, leavened grain of wheat—Chametz—on the night of Passover. She could have concealed it and served the food. Instead, trembling and afraid of how Berele might react, she quietly said, “Berele, look inside.”

Berele looked – instead of getting upset, his voice softened. “You did the right thing,” he said. “We must ask a Rav whether the food is forbidden.” He wrapped the chicken in a towel and brought it to Rav Yosef Chaim, who ruled that it was forbidden and then offered food from his own family’s Seder. Berele refused, “If my food was taken from me because it is forbidden, then that is what Hashem wants,” he said. “I do not want to take yours (likely because Rav Yosef Chaim may have had barely enough food for himself). I am only grateful that Yehudis saved me from eating Chametz.”

Rav Yosef Chaim smiled and said, “It seems that in the merit of your father’s holiness, you were saved from eating Chametz.”

That night, Berele finished the Seder beside Rav Yosef Chaim. “You passed a difficult test this evening,” Rav Yosef Chaim told

him. Indeed he had, and one that had a profound impact on him. In the merit of Berele’s honesty over that single grain of puffed wheat—because he faced the problem, did not lash out at his wife, and chose to ask the Rav—Berele’s wild personality was changed for good. And in its place stood Reb Berel, who became one of the most righteous men of his generation.

On The Parsha

In this week’s Parsha, Moshe Rabbeinu agrees to send spies into Eretz Yisrael (Israel) to scout out the land. These spies were the greatest men among the nation, as Rashi points out. And yet, despite being the righteous people that they were, they still returned from their mission with a very negative report about Eretz Yisrael.

The Midrash Rabbah (16:11) points out that there were two sins that the spies committed when they relayed their negative report to Bnei Yisrael. They declared:

“And there we saw the Nephilim, the giant sons of Anak, who come of the Nephilim; and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes.” (BaMidbar 13:33)

The first sin is contained in the words, “we were in our own sight as grasshoppers”. The first sin was caused by a lack of Bitachon (faith) in Hashem. They were overly fearful. If they had more Bitachon, they would not have looked at themselves as grasshoppers, but rather as conquerors who could readily capture Eretz Yisrael if that was Hashem’s will. Regarding this sin, states the Midrash, Hashem responded, “I will forgive them for this.”

The second sin is reflected in the words, “...and so we were [as grasshoppers] in their eyes”. This was a lie, for how could they have known how they really appeared in the eyes of the Nephilim. The Midrash says that Hashem responded, “And do you really know how I made you appear in their eyes? How do you know that you did not appear in their eyes as [powerful] angels?!” For this sin, Hashem was not as forgiving. This lie that the spies had told had devastating repercussions. Hashem punished Bnei Yisrael with the destruction of Hashem’s Batei Mikdash (both Temples) and the future exiles.

Surely the spies had meant well! As stated above, they were the greatest men among the nation. How did they come to tell such a devastating lie?

The spies saw Eretz Yisrael in an unwarranted, negative light which led them to lie. This negativity was likely born out of two biases that the spies harbored. The first bias was “confirmation bias”.

Confirmation bias is when we have our minds fixed on a personal belief or desire. When we encounter pieces of evidence that support and undermine our belief or desire, we discard the evidence that undermines it and retain the evidence that supports or “confirms” it. These spies held leadership positions among Bnei Yisrael which they would lose upon entering Eretz Israel. Wishing to retain their stature, they discarded all the evidence that they encountered when scouting out the land that would lead them to believe that Eretz Yisrael was special and could readily be conquered. Instead, they focused on the evidence that indicated that conquering the land was impossible which supported their interests of staying in power.

The second bias the spies had was “negativity bias.” We possess a natural bias to at times, have an unwarranted, negative outlook called “Ayin Ra’ah” (See Pirkei Avos 2:11) that needs to be kept in check. The spies did not recognize this bias and this was the second reason that they viewed Eretz Yisrael negatively.

However, we may be able to use these biases to our advantage.

The Gemorah (Brachos 58a) says, “Ben Zoma would say: A good guest, what does he say? ‘How much effort did the host expend on my behalf, how much meat did the host bring before me! How much wine did he bring before me. How many loaves did he bring before me. All the effort that he expended, was only for me.’

A bad guest, what does he say? ‘What effort did the host expend? I ate only one piece of bread, I ate only one piece of meat and I drank only one cup of wine. All the effort that the homeowner expended was [not for me but was] only on behalf of his wife and children! [I just happened to be there at the time they were being fed!]’” The bad guest has this view because of his negative, and cynical outlook.

How can Ben Zoma say that a good guest says, “How much effort did the host expend on my behalf...?” Does a good guest always say this? Surely there must be times when a good guest is matched with a bad host and therefore has a bad experience?

The answer is that we can use our confirmation and negativity to our advantage. Ben Zoma is telling us that a good guest will usually have a good experience even if he is matched with a bad host. He recognizes that he has a negativity bias to overcome and

therefore works on himself to go “the other way” and see things positively. Once he tries to see things positively, his confirmation bias will look for evidence that confirms his positive outlook and he will have a positive experience – even with a bad host.

We can positively apply these biases to our relationships as well. For example, if we tell ourselves that our wife or husband are inherently good, we will find examples of their goodness everywhere.

Halacha – Jewish Law

QUESTION: My friend and I are both Rabbis in a Yeshiva. The whole Yeshiva Davens (prays) together including the principal. After davening, the principal teaches a quick Devar Halacha (Halachic law or practice). Sometimes, he will say a Halacha that my friend and I know is incorrect. My friend says that our obligation of Emes (to tell the truth) dictates that we correct him, but to do so in a way that will not embarrass him. I agree, but caution my friend that I do not think that that we can correct the principal without embarrassing him and therefore I advise my friend not to correct him. Did I correctly advise my friend?

ANSWER: The Gemorah (Brachos 27b) relays the incident of Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Gamliel. A student asked a question to Rabbi Yehoshua about whether one is obligated to recite Ma’ariv (the evening prayer) or whether it is voluntary. Rabbi Yehoshua answered that it was obligatory. Outside of the Beis HaMidrash (study hall), Rabbi Gamliel was asked the same question and he answered that it was voluntary. He then entered the Beis HaMidrash where Rabbi Yehoshua was sitting and asked, “Is there anyone here that disagrees?” Rabbi Yehoshua did not voice his disagreement with Rabbi Gamliel because he did not want to embarrass him and compromise his honor. We see from this Gemorah that maintaining someone else’s honor trumps the obligation to correct him. Therefore, you were correct when you advised your friend not to correct the principal if he could not do so without embarrassing him. [See Niv Sfasayim p. 186]

“May I back out of a school carpool that I have already committed to?”

“Should I report a co-worker who is acting dishonestly?”

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