

The Torah's Take on the Significance of Hope

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The Torah commands (Bamidbar 35:9-28) the Jews to establish six cities of refuge - three across the Jordan and three in Canaan - to serve as a refuge for an unintentional murder from the hands of the go'el hadam - a zealous relative of the victim. There is a very obvious question: why did God give an unintentional murderer an opportunity for liberation that is contingent on the death of the High Priest? Why not just confine him to the city of refuge indefinitely?

The answer reveals a fundamental principle behind human psychology. God made this person's freedom contingent on the death of the High Priest in order to give him hope. He will wake up every morning with hope that the High Priest has possibly passed. Hope is such a powerful incentive for life that the Mishna (Makot 2:6) relates that the mothers of the High Priests would provide food and clothing for the unintentional murderers to appease them so that they should not pray for the demise of their sons. The Talmud explains (Makot 11a) that the High Priest bears some guilt because he should have pleaded mercy for his generation that no murder, even unintentional, should transpire. God gives hope to even those that have done wrong because as long as there is hope there is always room for change and growth. A person that gives others hope is in essence giving them life.

The story in Kings I (ch 2) reveals the consequences of a situation absent of hope.

Before his demise, King David commands Solomon to tactfully kill Shimmi ben Gera, who was deserving of death for cursing him on the day he went to Mahanaim.

Solomon was not to kill Shimmi outright, but to cause Shimmi to be the source of his own demise.

Knowing the psychology of human nature, Solomon confined Shimmi to the walls of Jerusalem devoid of any hope for liberation. The day he left the walls of Jerusalem would be his death sentence. After three years, two of Shimmi's servants fled to Achish son of Maacah, king of Gat. Upon hearing, Shimmi saddled his donkey and retook possession of his two servants, simultaneously sealing his fate.

Despite being in the most holy city in the world and being able to live a practically normal life, Shimmi left the walls of Jerusalem for a seemingly foolish reason. Why?

Because a life without hope for growth or change in the future is not a life worth living.

A person that feels confined by reality with no hope for the future will feel depressed and will not have a powerful incentive to live any more.

We learn two critical lessons from the above:

1) The Torah teaches us the secrets of human psychology and how to properly relate with others and it similarly teaches us the secrets of living a life full of meaning, happiness and purpose. One of the very foundations of Judaism is Emuna - hope in God - which through the hardships of life is found to be the most powerful antidote God has endowed man.

Let us use the Torah for the purpose it was given - to guide us in this world - as King Solomon writes, (Proverbs 6:22) "As you walk it shall lead you, when you lie down it shall guard over you, and when you arise it shall be your talk." As you walk - in this world. As you sleep - in the grave.

When you awake - in the world to come. (Piekei Avot 6:9).

2) One that gives hope to others is giving them life.

One should also remember to give hope to one's self.

Giving hope to others and one's self is one of the greatest forms of kindnesses that could be done in this world.

The goal of the satan is to make us mityaesh - lose hope - because once we lose hope we go downhill and we confine ourselves to the reality we create for ourselves. Do not fall for his trap. There is always hope for change and growth!

Every day is a renewal of life full of opportunity and potential.

May Hashem give us the strength to conquer the yetser hara and live lives full of clarity and maximized potential!

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