

Mussar HaTorah

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Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Bamidbar

“AN AZ PANIM – BRAZEN-FACED ONE – [IS DESTINED FOR] GEHINNOM...” (AVOS 5:20)

Both facts were true

RABBEINU YONAH (ibid.) explains that an “*az panim*” is one who sees the flaws in others and proclaims them aloud. He compares it to the story of the men who walk past a dead dog. One says, “It’s smelly” one says, “It has white teeth.” Both facts were true about the dog, but the proper way to think and speak is to focus on the positive not the negative.

Let us examine the punishment for this misplaced focus: *Gehinnom*. Is this habit worthy of the fiery punishments of *Gehinnom*? Perhaps we could accuse this person of having a lack of refinement, of not possessing sterling *midos*, of falling short of greatness. But he’s not a criminal. He didn’t harm anyone and didn’t even insult someone! He just noticed the true, yet negative, aspect of an inanimate object!

Our perspective shapes our actions, even our lives

How we view the world, and the people and objects in it, is not a minor or insignificant detail of our personality. Our perspective shapes our actions, even our lives, because how we choose to look at others will define them in our minds. One person can witness an event and see nothing but selfish, nasty behavior, while a positive person can view the same scene through a different set of lenses and notice only generous and sensitive conduct. The participants in the scene have now been typecast as evil in the first person’s mind, and kind in the second’s. The first person will now interact with others based on the evil label he has stamped upon them. It doesn’t take much imagination to see what kind of relationships this person will develop with others. He sees faults in everyone and will even ascribe negative motivations to Hashem, *chas v’shalom*.

In *Majesty of Man*, Shavuos, the *gemara* (Shabbos 88a) is quoted where the great sage Rava attributes the Jewish people’s trust in Hashem, and their acceptance of the Torah, to their own qualities of sincerity and truthfulness. They were truthful and therefore were able to see the truthfulness and the incredibly positive benefit in Hashem’s offer. The nations of the world rejected the Torah because they suspected Hashem of deceit and trickery in offering them a set of laws which would be burdensome and harmful. A negative person even suspects Hashem, and will refuse the greatest gift in Creation – the Torah.

Seeing the bad, even in a dog carcass, can spell the difference between a person who is kosher, and one who is destined for *Gehinnom*. He focuses on the ugliness, and this is the opposite of the “*boshes panim*” who sees the beauty and positive. Entry in *Gehinnom* doesn’t require one to be an obnoxious individual, a terrible or hurtful person who insults others and acts in such a brazen manner. It can be even this seemingly harmless level.

Let us see the good in others, not just people but even objects – even the weather!

Let us see the good in others, not just people but even objects – even the weather! We can choose to be upset at the rain and the dark cloudy sky, or to be happy and thankful that Hashem is bestowing life-giving water on the people, animals and plants of His Creation. When things don’t go according to our plans, we can choose to see reasons why it’s all for the best. May we recognize the positive aspects of our fellow man and even notice the shiny white teeth of an otherwise unpleasant dog carcass. Our lives will be blessed by a happy and upbeat approach to serving Hashem, and be filled with the joy of seeing the beauty and goodness in others, in ourselves and in the world around us.

Based on the talks of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l, Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim – RSA

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