

Mussar HaTorah

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

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Parashas Beshalach

“FOR IT WAS CLOSE...” (SHMOS 13:17)

A member of the tribe of Ephraim claimed that he had received a prophecy

AFTER HASHEM TOOK B'nei Yisrael out of Egypt, He did not want to take them to the Land of Israel using the most direct route because, “it was too close.” The Yalkut Shimoni (Beshalach 227) explains this cryptic phrase: It was too close to an earlier war that took place between some descendants of Ephraim and the Egyptians. Thirty years before the Exodus, a member of the tribe of Ephraim claimed that he had received a prophecy that the time to leave Egypt had arrived. The Yalkut Shimoni continues to tell us that the descendants of Ephraim had excessive pride because of their royal lineage (Yosef, the royal viceroy, was their ancestor) and because they were great warriors. This hubris caused them to take their families and attempt to leave Egypt. The Egyptians gathered their troops, went to battle and killed the warriors of Ephraim and their families.

The Yalkut Shimoni tells us that there was a claim of prophecy by one of their tribesmen. The rationale of this prophecy: Hashem had promised Avraham that his children would suffer four hundred years of exile before being redeemed. According to the claimed prophecy, the four hundred years started when Hashem made the pact with Avraham. (In truth, however, it actually started 30 years later with the birth of Yitzchak.) If the Ephraimites erred by following the false prophecy and therefore miscalculated the end of the exile, what did their tribe's arrogance have to do with it? Either they believed the prophecy or they did not. It was a logical decision, not an emotional choice. Pride in their tribe's lineage or strength should not have any bearing on this issue.

Their arrogance worked on a subconscious level

We must answer that their arrogance worked on a subconscious level. Had they been clear-minded, they would have scrutinized the validity of this “prophet.” Under strong critical examination, he would have been exposed as a fraud. However they were subconsciously blinded by a false sense of security. “We are royalty – the Egyptians wouldn't dare to try and stop us; and even if they do, we're strong enough to defeat them!” Their arrogance created a subliminal feeling of invincibility which caused them to accept the illusion of false prophecy. But how could they feel secure? It should have been obvious to them that the Egyptians would not give them any special treatment. They were enslaved and tortured along with the rest of the tribes. Their sons had been killed along with all the other Jewish boys. Why hadn't the Ephraimites walked out years earlier? Obviously, they were powerless to do so. Why did they think they would be allowed to escape? How could they endanger their families in such folly?

Pride has the ability to twist and distort the human mind

Pride has the ability to twist and distort the human mind. It can mislead even intelligent and great people into accepting completely baseless ideas. Even as the Ephraimites were being enslaved in total subjugation, their arrogance created the delusion that it was safe to escape. Lulled by this sense of invincibility, they fooled themselves into believing a false prophet they normally would have rejected, who led them and their families on a path of total destruction.

Let us realize the dangers of arrogance, and protect ourselves against its insidious and pervasive influence, through the powerful and essential tool of daily mussar study. If we constantly work on our humility, we will not merely become better spouses, parents, neighbors or friends; we will also gain the clarity of vision and judgement to know that our decisions will be based on reality, sound reasoning and the eternal values of our Torah.