

“IF ONLY (LIT. WHO WOULD GRANT) THEIR HEARTS WOULD BE LIKE THIS ... FOREVER.” (DEVARIM 5:26)

AT THE TIME OF THE GIVING of the Torah, the Jewish people reached the pinnacle of spirituality, a closeness to Hashem never equaled thereafter. Hashem declared, “I wish their hearts would be this way forever.” Forty years later, as B’nei Yisroel stood at the threshold of *Eretz Yisroel*, Moshe Rabbeinu criticized them for not responding properly to Hashem’s statement. The Gemara (Avodah Zarah 5a) explains that they should have answered with a request and *tefila* to Hashem: “You, Hashem, please grant us the purity of heart to serve You in this manner forever!” The reason they didn’t reply appropriately, the Gemara says, was because, on some infinitesimal level, they were reluctant to feel gratitude to Hashem, to recognize His kindness in allowing them to ever reach this plateau. Interestingly, Moshe himself only realized their mistake forty years later – at the time it happened he did not discern any shortcoming. From this fact, the Gemara proves the rule that a person only comes to a full understanding of his *rebbe* after forty years. It took Moshe forty years to develop the clear insight of what his *rebbe*, Hashem, expected from the Jewish people.

Moshe himself only realized their mistake forty years later

Tosfos (ibid.) asks on the Gemara: If the greatest prophet in history, Moshe Rabbeinu, failed to detect any shortcoming until forty years had passed, how could he take the Jews to task for not realizing that they should have responded? Were they greater than Moshe? The answer, Tosfos explains, is that B’nei Yisroel should have had a deeper awareness – even more than Moshe had. Moshe didn’t need the *tefila*, “You grant us, Hashem...,” He hadn’t yet sinned. But the Jews had sinned at the Golden Calf and at the episode of the spies. They needed this prayer for their spiritual welfare. They should have given thought to the matter and realized that their lack of a response was an error.

Were they greater than Moshe?

Amazingly, one who has sinned may feel the need for closeness to Hashem more strongly than a much saintlier and holier person. Precisely because the divine spark of his *neshomah* cries out from the abyss of filth and sin, gasping for the purity and *kedushah* from which it is being deprived, the sinner feels a deep seated need to move closer to Hashem, to ask for His help in *teshuvah* and self purification – perhaps even more intensely than a genuine *tzadik*. This is the impact of sin – and only because the sinner, on some inner level, knows his true greatness and potential for sanctity. And that is why Moshe only realized B’nei Yisroel’s error after forty years, and yet criticized them for not realizing it themselves much earlier.

We should not underestimate our own thirst for holiness

As we leave Tisha B’Av and the three weeks of misfortune and mourning behind us, and we begin the seven weeks of consolation that lead to the Days of Judgment, we should not underestimate our own thirst for holiness and spiritual improvement. When we start to examine our deeds in preparation for the days of Elul, Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, let us keep in mind that we have been provided with a unique homing device that no matter how far we stray, directs us back to the right path. This Divinely implanted device is our *neshomah*. The further we stray, the more urgently it prods us to return home to our Father who waits with open arms for our *teshuvah*.