

Mussar HaTorah

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

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Parashas Yisro

“AND HASHEM SAID TO MOSHE, ‘GO DOWN AND WARN THE NATION ...’” (SHMOS 19:21)

Why is this second warning needed?

THE RALBAG EXPLAINS the unusual sequence of events listed in these *pasukim*: Originally, Hashem charged Moshe with the responsibility to warn the Jews not to ascend or even touch Har Sinai. A few days later, on the morning of *matan Torah* – the giving of the Torah – Hashem tells Moshe to warn the nation again. Moshe then asks Hashem regarding this additional warning: Why is this second warning needed, Moshe inquires, if they have already been warned and a boundary has been established around the mountain to stop their entrance? Hashem answers that another warning is needed because *B’nei Yisrael* have a great desire to go up the mountain. In addition, Hashem continues to explain, they will see you and Aharon climbing up the mountain and they may assume it is permissible for them to ascend as well. A second warning is therefore required. Moshe follows Hashem’s command and warns the Jews again.

Moshe did not see the need for a second warning until Hashem enlightened him. We can assume that *B’nei Yisrael* would likewise view this warning as being unnecessary. If so, wouldn’t this second warning be insulting to *B’nei Yisrael*? They were great individuals who had seen many astounding miracles. Shouldn’t they react negatively to yet another admonition, feeling that they are being treated like children who need to be constantly reminded? Furthermore, beyond the potential insult, wouldn’t this reiteration damage their self-respect and diminish their sense of *gadlus ha’adam* – the essential feeling of greatness vested in every human being through the Divine spark of his *neschama*?

Self-respect does not require one to be blind to his weaknesses

Self-respect does not require one to be blind to his weaknesses. Quite to the contrary, for an individual to truly feel his own self-worth, he needs to correctly understand both his strengths and his weaknesses. Human beings are just that – human. We can forget, we can rationalize, and we can get confused about basic truths and concepts that should be clear to us. Deep down, we are keenly aware of these shortcomings, but they are not a contradiction to our inherent greatness, despite the apparent paradox. Our greatness stems precisely from the fact that we can overcome our flesh and blood limitations and strive towards perfection, to emulate our Creator. The only way to accomplish this goal, our entire purpose of existence, is if we have a sober and realistic grasp of our faults, so that we can properly attempt to overcome them. A reminder of one’s frailty, properly delivered and accepted, can only bolster one’s appreciation of the lofty task he is engaged in, and enhance his ability to succeed in his spiritual struggle. Hashem, in his infinite wisdom, understood that it would not be insulting to *B’nei Yisrael* to be reminded of a point that truly needed repetition.

Adam HaRishon chose his name to reflect the reality that he came from the earth

The Alter of Slabodka pointed out that Adam HaRishon chose his own name to reflect the reality that he came from the earth (*adamah*). It was not a blow to his self-esteem, but rather a pep talk, an encouraging boost that empowered and energized him: I, with my physical, material nature, am able to achieve greatness by overcoming these limitations – as long as I am aware of the dangers, and the opportunities, of this challenge. May we realize our true greatness, through an honest appraisal of our flaws, and the appreciation that Hashem has given us the incredible tools to elevate ourselves from the lowly earth and reach angelic heights of spiritual perfection.