

Nature in the Parasha

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Parashat Re'eh – The Shoulder of the Land

Responsibilities, Control and Shoulder Pain

I often feel tension in my shoulders whenever I'm under pressure, like prior to my annual North America tour, before Pesach or when facing challenges within the family. A while ago, as I was getting a massage to alleviate the tension in my shoulders, it occurred to me that perhaps there is too much weight on my shoulders. Perhaps I'm taking too much upon myself. I have never been afraid to go against the grain and do the impossible such as having a child after the doctors pronounced it impossible or to start a women's seminary all alone with only my husband's support. I would never go back on any of these accomplishments, but perhaps I have a lesson to learn about doing my part in the world without it weighing so heavy on my shoulders. I was inspired by a certain Rabbi, who is in charge of a multitude of institutions. The only way he is able to survive all of this responsibility is by approaching the tasks as a worker rather than as the contractor. I'm working on fine tuning my attitude to integrate taking on responsibility while trusting that only Hashem is truly in charge. Although we are responsible to choose the tasks that can benefit others and the world even if they are big and impossible, we must never forget that while we are in charge of our actions, we have no control over the outcome, which is ultimately in Hashem's hands. With this kind of attitude, we can keep serving Hashem with happiness while removing the heavy pressure from our shoulders. In this week's *parasha* the Israelites are charged with entering the land of Israel and the immense responsibility to conquer it. The very first day that they were to cross the Jordan river, their immediately layover was to be the mountains of Gerizim and Eval in the city of Shechem. It is not by chance that the first place the Israelites enter is Shechem – the shoulder of the land. One of the main meanings of the word שֶׁכֶם/*shechem* is shoulder as in "...the government is upon his shoulder – שֶׁכֶם/*shichmo*" (Yesh'a'ayhu 9:5), and "The key to the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder שֶׁכֶם/*shichmo*" (Ibid. 22:22). Without going deeper into the spiritual energy of the place of Shechem it doesn't make sense that it is selected to be the first place that both Avraham, Ya'acov and the Israelites entered when arriving in the Land of Israel. For it is located some 60 mil (a little more than 60 km) from the border of the Land marked by the Jordan River.

A Portion of High Self-Esteem

It turns out that I have much to learn from the nature of the place called Shechem about humility versus self-importance when it comes to taking on responsibilities.

ספר דברים פרק יא

(כט) וְהָיָה כִּי יִבְיָאָה הַשֵּׁם אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָתָּה בָּא שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ וּנְתַתָּה אֶת הַבְּרָכָה עַל הַר גְּרִזִים וְאֶת הַקְּלָלָה עַל הַר עֵיבֵל: (ל) הֲלֹא הִמָּה בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן אַחֲרֵי דָרָה מִבּוֹא הַשָּׁמֶשׁ בְּאָרֶץ הַכְּנַעֲנִי הַיֹּשֵׁב בְּעֵרְבָה מוֹל הַגְּלִיל אֶצֶל אֱלוֹנֵי מֶרֶה:
 (לא) כִּי אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן לְבֹא לְרִשֹׁת אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הַשֵּׁם אֱלֹהֵיכֶם נָתַן לָכֶם וּרְשַׁתֶּם אֹתָהּ וַיִּשְׁבְּתֶם בָּהּ:
 (לב) וַשְׁמַרְתֶּם לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל הַחֻקִּים וְאֶת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם:

“When Hashem your G-d brings you into the land that you are about to enter and possess, you shall pronounce the blessing at Mount Gerizim and the curse at Mount Eval. Both are on the other side of the Jordan, beyond the west road that is in the land of the Canaanites who dwell in the Aravah near Gildgal, by Alon Moreh. For you are about to cross the Jordan to enter and possess the land that Hashem your G-d is assigning to you. You shall possess it and settle it. Take care to observe all the statutes and laws that I set before you this day” (*Devarim* 11:29-32).

On the verge of entering into the Promised Land, the Israelites received a peculiar command: To stand between two mountains situated near each other at Shechem in the Shomron, north of Jerusalem. This place was where Avraham first stopped when he entered Canaan and G-d first promised him, “to your seed will I give this land” (*Bereishit* 12:7). When Ya’acov returned from his 22 year exile from the land it was also the city of Shechem that he entered first, “Ya’acov arrived in peace in the city of Shechem which is in the land of Canaan when he came from Padan-aram; and encamped before the city” (*Bereishit* 33:18). What is so special about the city of Shechem that it was selected to be entry point of the patriarchs and the Israelites? The Shem M’Shemuel explains that the word שֶׁכֶם/*shechem* also means ‘portion’ as when Ya’acov told Yosef, “I assign to you one extra portion (שֶׁכֶם/*shechem*) more than to your brothers...” (*Bereishit* 48:22). This implies a special portion that cannot be nullified, like in the laws of the prohibition to mix meat and milk where one drop is nullified if it is less than one sixties of the mixture unless it’s a special worthy portion which never can be nullified. The place who bears the name Shechem has this nature of importance and causes the people who dwell in it to share the nature of self-importance. This is why Shechem had the nerve to think himself important enough to marry “the daughter of Ya’acov” (*Bereishit* 34:7).

The “Shechem Mindset” for Good or for Evil

Each person in the city of Shechem wanted his own portion in life to be significant in itself, and not just part of a larger entity. It was a place that influenced its dwellers and those who came through it to feel their own self-importance. If we misuse this characteristic, we become completely self-oriented, clinging to our goals, despite the opposition by society and even by G-d. On the other hand, when our high self-esteem leads us to feel that the world is created for me, and I must “be bold as a tiger” (*Pirkei Avot* 5:20) it boosts our drive to achieve good things in the face of adversity. We need to feel strong and independent to begin any activity, and fulfill challenging mitzvot especially if everyone else work against us. I know someone who stands up against her entire family and their plans to force one of her parents into a home for the elderly. She is the only one trying to find an alternative solution with home care in order to keep the mitzvah of honoring her parents and save them from absolute misery. It is only the character trait of the empowerment of “Shechem” that keeps her going in the face of being mocked and put down by the rest of her family. Adopting this attitude of taking ourselves serious strengthen our commitment to keep all the mitzvot meticulously. The “Shechem mindset” reminds us about the importance of each and every mitzvah that we perform, and the effect our words can have on the entire world. Of course, we must control this feeling of personal empowerment and independence to avoid going to the opposite extreme of arrogant self-importance. This is the character trait of the wicked Esav, whose haughtiness has no remedy. This character trait is the husk compared to dark clouds that won’t let in any light (*Zohar* 3:251). We experience this negative trait of self-importance for example through the young neglecting to give a

seat in the bus to an elder or pregnant woman, or through a daughter-in-law who yells at her mother in law. When we act as if we are the only ones in the world that matter without taking others into account then we are smitten by the husk of Shechem. This explains the statement that “Shechem is designated for troubles, there they afflicted Dina, there the tribes sold Yosef and there the kingdom of the house of David was split” (*Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 102a*). We cannot, G-d forbid, say that our Sages spoke derogatively about any city in the Land of Israel, especially not a city that Ya’acov gave as a gift to his favorite son, Yosef. It can’t be that the city of Shechem in itself is evil. Rather, it causes those who pass through it the awareness of being a specially selected, which can either lead to the greatest accomplishments or become the worst of the worst, depending on our attitude.

Balanced Boosting of Our Self-image

If we are not careful and use the energy of Shechem in a good way, it turns against us to our detriment, as it did to all those who attributed too much importance to themselves. Shechem thought he was on the same level as Ya’acov, the tribes refused to nullify themselves to Yosef – the *Tzaddik* and many generations later they refused to nullify themselves to the kingdom of David with the Temple in its midst. We learn from these instances to balance our great self-image with the greatest humility, letting go of control. Each of the three events, which occurred in Shechem were cases of one group trying to control or gain influence over another. By understanding this nature of Shechem, we can appreciate why Avraham, Ya’acov, and eventually the Israelites needed to begin their dwelling in the land of Canaan at precisely this location. It was in order to balance the pride of Shechem with their modesty, as both exemplified the greatest humility. Avraham said about himself, “I am dust and ashes” (*Bereishit 18:27*), whereas the word Ya’acov derives from *ekev*, which refers to the heel – the lowest part of the body. Both were masters at using the Shechem element when necessary while mitigating it with the utmost humility, retaining a proper prospective on life and their own worth without going overboard. They passed on this ability to their descendants, the Israelites as a whole, who were able to derive inspiration from Shechem as they entered the land while walking on the tightrope of balance between self-confidence and arrogance. In the youth of our life we need to feel empowered and believe in ourselves, since the *yetzer hara* weakens us when a holy task is before us, as in the case of the spies that became afraid to conquer the land. Coming from the desert, the entry to the land and the capture of the cities was the greatest venture the Israelites would ever undertake. Although G-d was with them at every step, it must have been terrifying to take over such a new and unfamiliar land. They needed a tremendous boost of strength and confidence to launch their task in the correct frame of mind. This, of course, was the power of Shechem. As they began their conquest of Canaan, they stopped there, which gave them the boost of confidence they surely needed at that historic moment (*Shem M’Shemuel, Parashat Vayishlach, year 5672*).

The Mountains of Blessings and Curses

The land of Israel is unlike other countries, a place of holiness where Israel enters into a covenant with Hashem. Therefore, upon entering the land of Israel, they needed to consciously confirm and take upon themselves the responsibility of keeping all the mitzvot of the Torah. This was accomplished in Shechem – the shoulder of the land that carries Israel’s responsibilities. While turning their faces to Mount Gerizim the Israelites were to pronounce blessings like for example,

“Blessed is the person who doesn’t make a molten idol.” Then they would need to turn their faces toward Mount Eval and pronounce the corresponding curse, “Cursed is the person who makes a molten idol.” According to this procedure, they would continue with the rest of the blessings and the curses. First they would pronounce the blessing, then the corresponding curse (Rashi, *Devarim* 11:29). Why was Mt. Gerizim chosen for blessing and Mt. Eval for curses? It seems like it could just as easily have been the reverse. The Torah doesn’t give a reason why one mountain should be chosen for blessings, and the other for curses. Ramban suggests that Mt. Gerizim is to the south and Mt. Eval to the north and in biblical geography the north is often identified with evil as in, “From the North shall evil break loose” (*Yirmiyahu* 1:14). Furthermore, throughout Tanach directions are given relative to the east, making south the right and north the left; and again, the right is seen as the side of goodness and the left as the opposite, as for example in *Kohelet* 10:2. Tiferet Yehonatan expounds this concept and explains that a long life is attributed to the right, whereas wealth and honor to the left (*Mishley* 3:16). Pursuing wealth and honor is not the Torah way. This explains why evil is attributed to the north (left). “He who wants to become wise should turn south (*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra* 25b). This is because the south of Israel is uncultivated desert. “He who wants to become rich should turn north,” toward the lush green fruitful pastures. The name for Mt. Gerizim is connected with the Hebrew word גזרה/*gezera*, which means, “cut” for the blessed mountain is cut off from the material. The name for Mt. Eval is connected with the Hebrew word עב/*av*, which means dense, for pursuing the material causes us to become denser, coarser and desensitized to spirituality. However, Mt. Gerizim was located on the south side of Shechem. It had stunning landscaping, beautifully grown grass and many types of foods grew on it; it was full and prosperous with an abundance of flora. On the other hand, Mt. Eval was located to the northern side of Ephraim’s portion. It was empty and barren. Nothing grew on this mountain and it seemed to be void of any plant life. These two mountains, which stood side by side, presented the most striking visual contrast of blessing and curse. They are both being nourished by the same soil, the same water and the same wind. Yet, Mt. Eval was barren of all shrubbery while Mt. Gerizim was full of lush vegetation, all the way up the mountain. We see that blessing and curse are not dependent on external appearances; they lie within a person’s heart (Rav Shimshon Refael Hirsh). Indeed, based on Wikipedia, we can see that Mt. Gerizim is lush with grass (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Gerizim). In contrast, Wikipedia says that Mt. Eval is composed primarily of limestone. Another possibility for why the blessing was on Mt. Gerizim is that when you’re standing in the valley between the two mountains, looking towards Mt. Gerizim you are facing Jerusalem, while looking towards Mt. Eval places your back towards Jerusalem. Perhaps, then, it was also meant as a veiled message that Hashem’s blessings come when we make Jerusalem and the *Beit Hamikdash* the center of our aspirations, and the opposite when we abandon them.