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a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Transition Period

PARSHAS YISRO 5778

In last year’s article on this *parshah*, we explored the matter of the names Moshe conferred upon his children. The *passuk* states: שֵׁם הָאֶחָד גֶּרְשֹׁם כִּי אָמַר גַּר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם, וְשֵׁם הָאֶחָד – “The name of the one of them was Gershom, for (Moshe) said: ‘I was a stranger (*ger*) in a foreign land.’ And the name of the other was Eliezer – ‘For the G-d (*Keil*) of my father provided my help (*ezri*) and saved me from Pharaoh’s sword’” (*Shemos 18:3,4*).

Strangers in a “Foreign Land”

The name Moshe granted to his second son – “Eliezer” – seems quite understandable; it marks the most significant event of the preservation of Moshe’s life. It is regarding the other name that there appears to be an issue; why would Moshe deem that being a “stranger in a foreign land” was worthy of eternalizing through the naming of his child? And it is especially perplexing that he even chose to do so with his firstborn son; one would have imagined that he would first want to commemorate the monumental event of his rescue before emphasizing the notion of being a stranger.

As noted then, the Chafetz Chayim (*Toras Habayis, ch. 4*) offers a most poignant explanation to address these issues. It is true that, at the time of their birth, Moshe had been living in the foreign land of Midian, in which he had taken refuge upon escaping from Egypt. However, this is not the “foreign land” to which he was referring by choosing the name “Gershom.” Rather, Moshe was aiming to preserve his spiritual status. He was living amongst people who did not serve Hashem and was concerned about the potential influence. And so, to shore up his own spiritual mettle and ward off evil influence, he felt the need to remind himself that the true purpose in life is to remain loyal to Hashem. To this end, and to fight against the instinctive pull toward the materialistic world, he named his son “Gershom” – to remember that he was only a *stranger in This World* and that the ultimate goal is Olam Haba – the World to Come. Establishing this reminder was a top priority, taking precedence even over the commemoration of his rescue “from the sword of Pharaoh.”

The above represents, as stated, the essential points from the treatment of this subject in last year’s article. Yet there remains a pertinent issue worthy of further clarification. Granted that Moshe wished to establish a much-needed reminder in the environment in which he resided. But why did he choose this particular venue? Seemingly, he could have found some other form of marker to reinforce this principle; why did he do so specifically with the involvement of his children? As we shall see, the Chafetz Chayim himself is quoted elsewhere as providing insight into this very matter.

Overlapping Administrations

On the topic of “reminders,” Rabbeinu Yonah (*Sha’arei Teshuvah, ch. 2*) discusses certain factors that should awaken and remind a person to engage in *teshuvah* (repentance) and rectify his ways. One prime example Rabbeinu Yonah elaborates on is the onset of old age. To this end, he points to the Mishnah in Avos (5:21), which lists the various milestones of a person’s life, including the following:

בן ששים לזקנה, בן שבעים לשיבה, בן שמונים לגבורה, בן תשעים לשוה, בן מאה כאילו מת ועבר ובטל מן העולם.

“At sixty, one attains old age; at seventy – ‘hoary’ old age; at eighty – might; at ninety, one becomes bent over; at one hundred, he is as if he has died, passed on, and been negated from the world.”

This passage may reflect certain grim undertones, but that, explains Rabbeinu Yonah, is precisely the point. Chazal here were urging a person to utilize the signs of deterioration as indicators and reminders of the temporary nature of This World as well as the imminent entry into the next and true phase of existence – life in the World to Come. This realization should spur a person who has reached this point to make the necessary preparations through repentance and improvement of his ways.

The truth is, however, that there are stark reminders that surface even sooner. The Chafetz Chayim illustrates this idea by pointing to the system of governance prevalent in many countries. A given country will hold periodic elections, whereby a new president or prime minister is chosen. But even when the results are tabulated and the winner is declared, the incumbent president’s job is not over. Rather, there is a transition period, whereby the president continues to fill out his term; only now, he begins aiding the president-elect in setting up his new administration and transmitting to him pertinent information and state secrets he will need for the new term. It is only after this interim period comes to a close that the former president formally steps down and the incoming one assumes full control.

What relates to our topic, the Chafetz Chayim explains, is the attitude of the incumbent president during this transition period. That is, he is still the official leader of the country until his term comes to its full completion. But even during this time, the handwriting is on the wall, so to speak; for as soon as the new candidate has won the election, the incumbent president becomes fully aware that the “clock is ticking” and his administration is now in its waning moments.

The same thing, asserts the Chafetz Chayim, happens in our lives – with the birth of children. This actually begins the “transition period,” as the “new administration” is brought into the world. This should indeed serve as a wake-up call to the parents that a new generation is emerging; and so it is time to prepare the arrivals for the time when they will “take over” and successfully continue the vital mission of serving Hashem. Likewise, it is the time for the “incumbents” to look inward; they must realize that the transition period has begun and that the day of the termination of their administration is rapidly approaching.

In other words, the arrival of children is of course a tremendous blessing, but it is also a stark reminder to a person that his time in This World is quite limited. Moshe Rabbeinu obviously took this lesson to heart; and so it was that already with the birth of his first child, he demonstrated his full awareness that he was only a “stranger in a foreign land” (*Chafetz Chayim Hachadash Al Hatorah*, p. 478).

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