



PESACH



BOOMERANG

Whatever we do...comes back to us **BY ROBERT SUSSMAN**



REGARDING THE *SOTAH*, A MARRIED WOMAN who behaved in a way that gave rise to a suspicion of her having committed adultery, the gemara teaches a fundamental lesson: “*B’middah sh’adam modeid, bah modi’déen lo* – With the measure that a man measures, with it, he is measured.”²

In other words, we are judged according to how we judge – and we are rewarded, or in the case of the *sotah*, punished – for the way that we behave. But more than that, Hashem does so in accordance with our very own behaviour. And this is the source for the principle of *middah keneged middah* (measure for measure), what we often describe as “what goes around, comes around”.

So, what does this concept have to do with the *sotah*, this woman who was suspected of adultery? Our Sages

understand that everything that befalls her is a direct consequence of the way that she herself behaved. For example, she got all dressed up and adorned herself for the sake of committing a transgression, so Hashem commands that she now be made repulsive. How is this accomplished? They uncover her hair; they dress her in ugly clothing; they remove her jewellery; etc. Moreover, just as she uncovered herself in an immodest way for the purpose of attracting inappropriate attention, so Hashem commands that she be stood at one of the gates to the Beis HaMikdash (the Temple) and exposed so that everyone can come and see her shame, in order that people will learn a lesson from her humiliation. Moreover, because she fed delicacies to this man with whom she is suspected of having committed adultery,

her korban (offering) consists of food fit for an animal. And because she gave this man fine wine to drink in ornate vessels, so she’s given bitter water to drink and in a lowly earthenware vessel. And the list goes on and on.

The gemara then brings other examples of this principle: Shimshon, the famous Samson, followed inappropriately after his eyes, so he wound up being blinded by the *Plishtim* (Philistines); and Avshalom, one of King David’s sons, was haughty about his hair, so he wound up being hanged by it.

EARNING DIVIDENDS

The gemara then explains that this principle of being judged *middah keneged middah* also applies with regard to good actions as well – with one significant difference – that the measure when it

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comes to rewarding is considerably greater than that of the measure when it comes to punishing. And the gemara again provides examples.

When Moshe was three months old, as a result of Pharaoh's decree that baby boys be killed, his mother, Yocheved, put him in a box and placed him in the Nile. His sister, Miriam, stood and watched for a moment – she paused for one moment to see what would happen to him. And for this simple act done by Miriam of waiting a mere moment, many years later, when she became stricken with *tzara'as*, the spiritual illness that results chiefly from speaking *loshen horah* (in this case about her own brother Moshe), Hashem rewarded her by having the entire Jewish nation wait for her for seven days until she could return to the camp and was able to travel once again.

The great Yosef HaTzaddik (Joseph) who rose to become the Viceroy of Egypt, second in command to only Pharaoh himself, went and buried his father Yaakov (Jacob) with tremendous honour. In return, Hashem rewarded him by having Moshe Rabbeinu bury him. And in return for this, who did Moshe merit to have bury him? None other than Hashem Himself.

So, we see that whatever we do comes back to us. If we do something bad, it comes back to us in kind. And if we do something good, it not only comes back to us, but it does so with significant interest added onto it.

PHARAOH'S HEART

Many years ago, before I became Torah observant, when I was in graduate school studying Political Philosophy, I once took a class called "The Bible and Political Order". The objective of the class was to see what political teachings could be gleaned from the Bible. In order to assist him, the professor had asked an acquaintance, who happened to be quite well-versed in Biblical Hebrew, to sit in on the class and to offer commentary where appropriate.

When it came to the Exodus from Egypt, this man pointed out a couple of very interesting observations regarding what

was happening to Pharaoh's heart³, as Pharaoh stubbornly remained steadfast in the face of the many plagues with which Hashem struck him and the entire Egyptian people. As a preface to his observations, I need to explain that there are two Hebrew roots that are used to describe what happens to Pharaoh's heart: *chazak* – which is generally translated as "to strengthen" – as in "Hashem strengthened Pharaoh's heart"⁴; and *kaveid* – which is generally translated as "to harden" or "to become stubborn" – as in "Pharaoh's heart is hard (ie. stubborn)"⁵.

This man had noticed that the Hebrew root *kaveid*, rather than being translated as "to harden", could also be accurately translated as "to heavy". In other words, this wasn't just a case of Pharaoh's heart becoming hard – some sort of ancient coronary artery disease if you will – but of Pharaoh⁶, and then later Hashem⁷, making his heart "heavy". And this man noted that the weight of Pharaoh's heart was particularly interesting when considered in light of Pharaoh's own religion⁸, which he then proceeded to explain.

The ancient Egyptians believed that after a person died, he would be subjected to a test to determine whether his soul was deserving of an afterlife. At the entrance to the afterworld, a god named Anubis, who had a humanoid body and the head of a jackal, would stand holding a set of scales in his hand. The heart of the deceased would be placed by Anubis on one side of the scales and then weighed against a single ostrich feather, which belonged to Ma'at, the goddess of truth. If the heart was as light as the feather that sat opposite

it on the scales, then the soul of the deceased would be granted immortality and escorted to Osiris, the god of the afterlife. If, however, the heart was heavier than the ostrich feather, then the soul of the deceased would be utterly destroyed. Eagerly awaiting the outcome of this weigh-in was a demon named Ammit, whose body was composed of parts from a lion, a hippopotamus, and a crocodile (three of the most dangerous animals known to the ancient Egyptians), who would gladly devour the unworthy hearts.

PHARAOH'S JUDGMENT

Those were his observations and they obviously made quite an impression on me. When I eventually learned about the concept of *middah keneged middah*, I remembered what this acquaintance of the professor had noticed, and his observations served as the basis for an entirely different understanding of what was actually happening between Hashem and Pharaoh throughout the story of the exodus.

So, let's envision what happens when Pharaoh gets up to *shamayim* (Heaven) and has his day of judgment before the King of Kings, Hashem. What kind of argument can he make? I think that he could easily contend: "Hashem! You do exist! Wow, it's really nice to meet you. I honestly thought that Moshe and Aaron were just making You up. You see, You never appeared to me personally, as You did with Moshe. You never spoke directly to me, like You did to Moshe. And since this was the very first time that You sought to make Yourself known to the world in such a public way, You'll excuse

me if I found the whole thing a little hard to swallow. So, You can't possibly hold what happened against me, right?"

And what could Hashem respond?

"Pharaoh, you make a good argument. But, there's one small problem. Regardless of the fact that you didn't realise that I existed, according to your own belief system, a person who has a heart that's heavier than the feather of Ma'at doesn't get an afterlife. And You chose to make your own heart heavy! So, even if I were to judge you only according to your own value system, according to the false religion by which you yourself chose to live, then you should have known at the time that you were doing these things that you were doing something wrong; you should have felt that your heart was heavy because you weren't living a life of truth. And not only did you make your own heart heavy, but I also made your heart heavy as well. In other words, I communicated with you in your own language – according to a system that you did understand and even subscribed to and embraced! So, your argument is a good one, but Mine's a better one. According to your own religion, your own judgment of things, you don't deserve an afterlife."

SERVING AS OUR OWN JUDGE

For many years, I gave over the above idea based on *sevarah* (logic). Recently, however, my dear friend Aron Ziegler shared with me a wonderful Torah insight⁹ into the reason our Sages instructed us regarding things like "not judging others" and "judging others favourably" that gives support to this interpretation. There is a famous episode in Tanach¹⁰ where Nosson HaNavi (Nathan the Prophet) comes to Dovid HaMelech (King David) to rebuke him for his behaviour in the terribly misunderstood episode with Batsheva. So misunderstood is this incident, in fact, that our Sages teach, "Anyone who says that [King] David sinned [with Batsheva], that person errs!"¹¹ Contrary to popular misconceptions, King David was guilty

neither of the murder of Batsheva's husband, Uriah, because he, in fact, deserved the death penalty for treason, nor of adultery with Batsheva, because she wasn't married at the time she and King David were together. In fact, Jewish law prohibits a woman from marrying a man with whom she committed adultery¹², and King David and Batsheva not only married, but one of their children, Shlomo¹³ (Solomon), ascended to the throne after David and even went on to build¹⁴ the first Beis HaMikdash (Temple)!

What precisely King David did do wrong is a complicated discussion beyond the scope of this article, but his response to Nosson HaNavi does give some indication: "Chatasi Lashem – I have sinned against Hashem."¹⁵ In other words, whatever King David did wrong was something that he'd done against Hashem, not against another person.

Nosson hid his rebuke of Dovid in a moshel (a parable), describing for Dovid the case of a wealthy man with large flocks and herds who, when a traveller came to him, chose unjustly to take the single sheep belonging to a poor man to prepare for this traveller rather than take anything from his own flocks and herds. Dovid became angry and said that the wealthy man deserved to die for what he did. It was then that Nosson informed Dovid that he was, in fact, the man being described in the moshel!

The Ba'al Shem Tov explains that we can learn from this that the way we see the world – the scale that we use to judge others and the resulting judgments that we make about them – winds up being the very same scale and the very same judgments that we render for ourselves and which will ultimately be used against us. And this is why our Sages instruct us with teachings such as, "Don't judge your fellow until you reach his place"¹⁶, and, "Judge the whole person on the side of merit"¹⁷ – because, when we manage to behave in such a manner, refraining from judging others or going out of our way to find a meritorious way to view their actions and excuse their seemingly

negative behaviour, we actually wind up benefitting ourselves most of all.

Hashem knows our thoughts. He sees our actions. Even if we have a warped value system – even if it's based on utter falsehood and distortion, as was the case with Pharaoh and the impact his actions had on his heart according to his own beliefs – Hashem speaks to each of us in a way that we can understand, regardless of whatever attempts we make to hide from Him. As frightening as it may be to recognise, we very much determine our own destiny and create our own reality – and we have no one to blame but ourselves. Hashem has blessed each of us with a godlike power – and most incredible of all is that when, after 120 years, we finally get up to *shamayim* and receive our own final judgment, we'll find our own signature at the bottom of it, having established not only the very parameters and guidelines by which we were judged, but even the sentence that we will receive. **LU**

¹See Bamidbar 5:12-31

²Sotah 8b

³There are two different expressions used for what happens to Pharaoh's heart, both as a result of his own doing and as a result, l'havdil, of what Hashem does to him: (1) *chazak* – to strengthen – see e.g., Shemos 4:21; 8:15; 9:12, 35; 10:20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17; (2) *kaveid* – to harden; to heavy; and with regard to the heart, to be stubborn – see e.g., Shemos 7:14; 8:11, 28; 9:7, 34; 10:1.

⁴See e.g., Id. 9:12

⁵See e.g., Id. 7:14

⁶See e.g., Id. 8:11

⁷See e.g., Id. 10:1

⁸The details which follow above regarding the ancient Egyptian religion are based upon the following sources: www.pantheon.org/articles/a/anubis.html; www.britishmuseum.org/explore/young_explorers/discover/museum_explorer/ancient_egypt/death/weighing_the_heart.aspx; www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anubis;

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ammit;

⁹Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov, Parshas Kedoshim (Vayikra 19:15, point 5)

¹⁰Shmuel Beis Chapter 12

¹¹Shabbos 56a

¹²See e.g., Sotah 26b; Kesuvos 9a-b

¹³See Shmuel Beis 12:24

¹⁴See Melachim Aleph 6:1

¹⁵Shmuel Beis 12:13; Tehillim 51:6

¹⁶Pirkei Avos 2:4

¹⁷Pirkei Avos 1:6