



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FATHERS

Avos - Perek 4 - Mishna 19

Gravel as a key to growth

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One day a tall, burly kibbutznik stalked over to me with a not very friendly face. He had just lost a large amount of money and time and was looking for someone to blame. Before a word emerged from his mouth I turned to him and said "if you would have put in more gravel those birds would have been kosher!" He looked amazed. The Rabbi knows something...

Amongst the many adventures I have had as a Rav, one of the messiest, yet intriguing, was the time I spent in Eretz Yisroel as a Rav Hamachshir for a chicken production factory. Yes, chickens; you read correctly, and surprisingly, there is much you can learn from those feathered critters. I won't bore you with the vast amount of information that I had to accumulate whilst overseeing the kosher dispatching of these fowl, some thirty thousand a day of them. That's a lot of schnitzel and we were exporting all over the world, including to the UK. Trying to ensure that the chickens were kosher was closely connected with how they were raised. There were times when up to half a flock would be found treif and the farmers would face great losses. The main reason for such treifus was swollen ligaments of the legs. This could be seen if you were well trained and aware of the signs. One of the secrets of raising chickens is that if they don't walk about, their legs never develop and the ligaments swell; hence they become unkosher. Putting gravel into the cages makes them hop about and mature healthily. It is the discomfort that actually makes them grow strong, and by trying to bypass the pain, they just become lazy with swollen legs.

"Hashem's Oneness in the world must be encountered and perceived throughout life"

Humans need some gravel in their life at times. If not, their spiritual muscles never grow strong and flexible. Hashem sends us trials, the stuff of spiritual gravel, and with this we grow.

I no longer check the kashrus of chickens. I have graduated to the human species, our fellow Yieden. I have heard and shared pain from every quarter of our community, and although everyone's pain is

unique to its bearer, that very same challenge carries within it the pathway towards their growth. Connecting to Hashem needs effort, and it is life with all its various challenges that gives us the wherewithal to make this connection possible.

Our Mishnah tells us:

Rabbi Yannai said: It is not in our power to explain either the tranquility of the wicked or the suffering of the righteous.

Man has agonized over this question since the beginning of time. Life's gravel gives us the spiritual grit to withstand and grow through the maze that is life. If we don't see these troublesome times for what they are then we will have suffered in vain. Turning to Hashem in challenging times creates a bridge to His eternal love for us. We experience a deep feeling of closeness through prayer born from such moments which otherwise could become just some mumbled words with no real meaning.

One thing is certain: *Ein Od Milvado*- There is none besides Him (Devarim 4:35). Hashem loves every one of us; His Will is for us to come closer to Him by fixing that which is broken in our lives. Whatever He sends us must be for a reason. The Izhbitzer Rebbe ztl talks about the fact that everything is Hashem, yet we have choices as to how we react in our acceptance of this singular matter. The Rebbe explains that the whole world is filled with paradoxes, and our task in this world is to accept that we will never understand these in their totality. This in itself is Hashem's will, which is another paradox, the understanding of which is beyond the scope of this essay.

Given the complexity but importance of this understanding, I often find myself worrying about our younger generation. I don't see that we are teaching these fundamental tenets. Their relationship with Hashem and what we understand this to be is often muddled. The new generation is exposed to a society that is far from anything that remotely touches the spiritual; Today's weltanschauung is one built on materialistic goals. Our young need to know what we as Yidden are meant to believe in as Torah adherents. This is what should be shaping their lives. Hashem's Oneness in the world must be encountered and perceived throughout life. Such realization can't be formed from one pattern; it must be woven with the threads of each soul's individuality. Instead, we often put everyone into straitjackets and expect them to be able to withstand individual tests for the rest of their lives. The tragic results lead to despair, none of these souls knowing how to reach out to Hashem. These youngsters can sometimes flounder in a sea that roils with filth and darkness, with no lifesaving buoy to hold them up.

A Yiddisher child needs to feel Hashem's presence in the dynamic of daily family life. Yiddishkeit is enveloped with the warmth of Hashem and the knowledge of how He guides our every step. He/she should see their parents coping with life and its challenges with the security of *Ein Od Milvado*, that there is nothing, absolutely nothing that isn't Hashem.