

Lessons from the Chassidische Parsha

The teachings of the Alter Rebbe in Torah Ohr and Likkutei Torah

The Path to Lasting Happiness

ד"ה ויהי בשלח את העם

פרשה בשלח

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For most people, happiness is one of their top wishes and life pursuits. But happiness seems to be elusive and society seems to struggle to find it. Perhaps it is hard to find because we are looking in the wrong places.

There is a fascinating discourse in Torah Ohr on the opening verses of Parshas Beshalach which gives us an insight into where and how to find true and lasting happiness.

"And it was, when Pharaoh sent out the people, and Hashem did not lead them the way of the land of the Plishtim, even though it was close. Because Hashem said "lest the people reconsider when they will see war, and return to Mitzrayim." And Hashem turned the people around towards the way of the desert, to the Yam Suf."

In Chassidic thought, each of the nations of the world embodies a different mood or personality trait. These traits exist in the side of holiness as G-dly emotions. They also have a corrupted counterpart in the side of impurity and negativity (Kelipah).

So who are the Plishtim? The opening Posuk of Tehillim reads; *"Happy is the man who... has not sat in the seat of the scoffers."* The Gemora explains that these scoffers refer to the Plishtim.

The word Plishtim is related to the word *Mefulash*, referring to an alley that is open on both ends. Like the open alley, the scoffers have a lack of restraint. The scoffer expresses their every desire, saying whatever comes to mind without a sense of right or wrong. Everything is a joke; a subject of mockery. This is not happiness, but rather frivolity (*Hollelus*).

The holy counterpart of the Plishtim is a spiritual excitement or ecstasy in having a connection to Hashem.

"And Hashem did not lead them by the way of the land of the Plishtim even though it was close".

Mitzrayim comes from the terminology of limitations and restraints. When one seeks to leave their Mitzrayim, their personal limitations, which include the state of melancholy and depression, one cannot shortcut their way to true happiness.

We look for quick fixes and instant highs. I'll be happy if I have more money, a new car, a bigger house. Advertising convinces us that if we purchase the latest gadget this will make us happy. Worldly pleasures and in the extreme, drug and alcohol abuse are pursued as the path to happiness.

The same is true of spiritual happiness. Spiritually we seek ecstasy from external sources of inspiration or 'experiences' that will give us an instant and easy high and sense of meaning.

"But Hashem did not lead Bnei Yisroel though the land of the Plishtim... Lest the people reconsider when they will see war, and return to Mitzrayim".

Artificial happiness is short-lived and not real. The buzz may bring a momentary sense of happiness. But happiness which comes 'from without'; from the pursuit of 'things' - even spiritual experiences - cannot be lasting. It is close to reach, but close to fall from as the inspiration eventually wears off and at the first sign of difficulty or life-challenges, we fall back to our Mitzrayim.

"And Hashem turned the people around towards the way of the desert, to the Yam Suf".

The Yam Suf alludes to the Oral law (Yam referring to Chochma and Suf - meaning end - referring to the lowest dimension of Torah) which details the Mitzvos. We keep these details a way of *Kabolas Ol* (surrender). Likewise, the desert represents the quality of humility. The end goal of the journey is to reach Eretz Canaan. The word כנען is connected to the word הכנעה, submission and surrender.

The Torah's message is that true happiness comes through surrendering ourselves to meaningful work; serving our Creator, serving others and working on refining our own character and desires - rather than indulging them. True happiness requires real inner work. It is a longer and harder journey than the quick-fix short-cut. But unlike the Simcha of the "way of the land of the Plishtim", Simcha that comes through Avodah is lasting.

This happiness lasts because it is inner. It is the feeling of accomplishment and contentment that comes from doing what is right and good; not from doing whatever we please. Since our experience of happiness does not come from something external, nothing external can take it away.

It seems counter-intuitive. But think about it; So much of society's pursuit of happiness is searching in "the land of the Plishtim". We spend billions of dollars on experiences and 'things', but are we any happier as a result? All we are creating is a society which is more narcissistic and depressed. Ironically, previous generations who had far less than we do, were happier!

This idea is encapsulated in the words of the Jewish psychotherapist and philosopher, Viktor Frankel; *"...Happiness cannot be pursued, it must ensue. And it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself"*

May we succeed in transcending our Mitzrayim completely and be blessed with true and lasting Simcha.