Celebrity? Stardom?

Glory

by

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*“In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes.”*

 - Andy Warhol

We are bombarded with images of politicians, starlets and posers; those who would be famous – or infamous. We all know who they are. The list goes on and on with those who believe the adage that “any publicity is better than no publicity.” How easy it is to condemn the behavior of those whose names are writ large in tabloids and gossip columns. However, perhaps we shouldn’t be so quick to judge. After all, who wouldn’t want to see their name in lights, even for a few minutes?

*L’havdil*.

Imagine now if the name in lights is eternalized in Torah!

When Yosef’s brothers, driven by jealousy, determine to murder him it is Reuven who speaks up to counter their intrigues and wicked calculations. But why would Reuven have even bothered? As the eldest brother, certainly Yosef’s dreams were most cutting and hurtful to him. Abarbanel suggests that the reason that Reuven opposed his brothers’ plan was because deep down, he believed that Yosef’s dreams might very well have been true. And, if true, how could they have punished him. As he argues to his brothers, “If the dreams are true, why are you willing to subvert the will of Hashem? You will certainly not succeed.”

Believing the dreams might be true, Reuven tells them, “Lo nakeinu nefesh - we will not strike him mortally.” But when the brothers ignore him and hold to their original plan, Reuven further implores them not to shed blood - al tishpechu dam.

Begging them, he pleads, “Don’t kill him with your own hands. Throw him into the pit.” By his strategy, Reuven convinced them that if Yosef’s dreams were indeed true, then God would surely miraculously save him. And, if not true, then the brothers’ intention would be realized; Yosef would certainly die in the pit, surrounded by snakes and scorpions.

Seeing the logic and good sense in Reuven’s thinking, the brothers did as their oldest brother suggested and threw Yosef into the pit.  Yosef’s ultimate salvation is a direct result of Reuven’s impassioned intervention. Indeed, the Torah is clear about this. “Reuven heard, and he rescued him from their hand; he said, we will not strike him mortally.” (37:21)

Did Reuven argue his case to his brothers to gain credit and fame for his actions? Of course not. However, what if he *had* known that henceforth the Torah would credit him with a heroic action that ultimately led to our redemption from Egypt and the revelation at Sinai? The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 34:9) suggests that *had* Reuven known that the Torah was going to record that “Reuven heard, and he rescued him from their hand” (Vayishma Reuven va’yatzileiu miyadam) he would have personally carried Yosef back to their father on his shoulders.

Would he not have done as much if it would have been reported on the evening news? How much more would he have done it if he had known that his action would live eternally in the words of Torah?

How much more would we all do if we had the incentive of knowing how our actions would be recorded!

Rav Aaron Kotler explains the Midrash as meaning that even though the great men of yesteryear including Reuven fully understood the value and merit of every mitzvah and righteous deed, it was beyond their comprehension that an eternal Torah would record their actions, and that this Torah would serve as our guide forever.  Had they realized the absolute value and consequence of their choices and actions, they would have been ever so much more meticulous with every facet of their actions.

Reuven was right to argue with his brothers. But imagine what he would have said and done if he *knew* that the narrative was to be recorded in the eternal Torah – how much more would he have done.

Likewise, consider the daily acts of kindness we can perform. With each opportunity, we have a choice – to behave as if our actions were recorded in Torah, or to turn away.

A few years ago, Isaac Theil, a sixty-five-year-old man, confronted just such an opportunity. As he did at the end of every workday, he was riding the Brooklyn-bound Q train home from work. But this evening, sitting beside a young, Black man in a hoodie, something was different. As he sat, he felt his neighbor’s head rest against his shoulder as the young man nodded off.

“Shall I wake him up?” someone asked.

Theil shook his head. “Let him sleep. He’s probably very tired.” And so, the young man had Theil’s shoulder as a comfortable pillow for the better part of an hour.

Another rider took a picture of the yarmulke-wearing Theil and the hoodie-wearing fellow passenger and posted the photograph online. It went viral and quickly garnered over one million “likes.”

Did Theil do this small act of kindness for the attention? Of course not. With his “fifteen minutes of fame” almost up, Theil hopes his “going viral” teaches others to just be good to one another.

A simple ride. On a subway. Nothing out of the ordinary and yet it turns into an act of goodness that is transmitted to the world.

Rav Aaron notes that we are mere mortals. We have so little understanding of much that we do – or its consequence. How much more would we rid ourselves of the pettiness, weariness and simplicity of our thoughts and actions - and more fully focus on the endless merit that we earn with each small and big mitzvah we do, how our good deeds and actions can have endless positive implications.

Reuven believed he was saving his brother. But he was not merely saving Yosef, as worthy of merit as that was. He was saving the world. Through Yosef the entire world was saved during the years of famine, not just Yaakov’s household. Ultimately, Yosef’s descendants overpower Eisav’s descendants, as Ovadiah prophesized, “The house of Yaakov will be fire, the house of Yosef a flame, and the house of Eisav for straw, and they will ignite them and devour them!”

Because Reuven saved Yosef.

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