

Corona Diary #3 Size Matters

Moshe Taragin

There are rare and dramatic moments in history in which it becomes clear to humanity that we have reached the upper limits of technology and can proceed no further. G-d desires that we decipher our world, as well as improve it and thereby advance the human condition. However, periodically He reasserts the limits of human achievement. When religious people live through these moments, we more deeply appreciate the superiority of G-d and we more readily submit to His authority. The Corona crisis is such a moment in history; for religious-minded people it should evoke awe and 'surrender' the combination of which yields yirat shamayim.

Typically, we reach our upper limits because we encounter a phenomenon which we can't interpret or understand. Bowing to the limits of human intelligence, we acknowledge the difference between G-d and man. As Yeshaya (55) stresses, "Ki lo machshevotai machsevoteychem" - My thoughts aren't even similar to your thoughts. The difference between human knowledge and Divine wisdom isn't quantitative; the process of our thinking is completely dissimilar to Divine Wisdom. We aren't even on the same playing field!

Perhaps the phrase which best captures this type of submission appears in Tehillim (92)— which according to Chazal was first

recited by Adam when viewing Nature. He was so overwhelmed by the infinite wisdom on display that he exclaimed “ Mah gadlu ma’asecha Hashem’ - how magnificent are Your creations. Marveling at the splendor of creation, this exclamation conveys inadequacy of human intellect. Subsequently, in this very chapter, a very different issue is broached: the reality of evil in G-d’s world– another matter which defies human comprehension. Whether viewing a natural world we can’t grasp or a moral system which disturbs our sense of right and wrong, we reach the same conclusion: the ways of G-d are beyond the mind of man; humbled by our limits we submit to a Higher Being.

Interestingly, our struggle with the current pandemic has a very different feel to it. Medieval people, suffering through the black plague had no clue about the origins of their pandemic, the manner of contagion, nor possessed any scientific strategy for medical response. Likewise, it took humanity close to twenty years to trace the cholera outbreak of the 19th century to rancid water. These pandemics remained elusive to the human imagination and created a sense of “mah Gadlu”- G-d’s world resided beyond human comprehension.

Our current corona situation is very different. We know exactly what causes Covid-19, we can dissect this virus down to its DNA makeup and, most importantly we know exactly how to treat this flu-like epidemic. We are limited not by our inability to understand this phenomenon but by the sheer volume of contagion and the sheer volume of resources necessary to simultaneously combat this illness for the volumes of patients who are infected. Society would be fully capable of mounting an effective response if an average number of people had

contracted this virus. However, the numbers are overwhelming, and we don't possess the resources to adequately combat this epidemic.

This is a very different encounter with the superior wisdom of G-d. We understand His workings but stand amazed at the vastness of His creation and the manner in which that vastness is managed and balanced. It is the "size" of this epidemic which lies beyond human reach and we are humbled by G-d's sweep and His ability to balance the overwhelming mass and size of creation. Perhaps the verse which best captures this moment of awe isn't 'Mah gadlu ma'asecha Hashem' but instead 'Mah rabu ma'asecha Hashem'- how vast are Your creations, This latter verse appears in Tehilim chapter 104 (known as Barchi Nafshi)- a chapter which details the vastness of creation and the manner in which they interlock and are harmonized. Corona virus feels more like a moment of Mah Rabu and not just Mah Gadlu!

This moment comes on the heels of prodigious human efforts to 'manage volume'. The past 150 years has witnessed ambitious urbanization- developing concentrated population centers. We thought that the science of statistics would enable our management of these urban sprawls of humanity. Statistics predict trends to help determine the allocation and distribution of limited human resources. How much money should be spent on medical preparedness as opposed to sanitation, transportation or culture? Our statistics worked well-until they didn't; our statistics didn't predict these levels of medical needs! G -d reminded us that though we may have cracked some of the code of science we haven't fully achieved the ability to manage vast volumes. We thought we had those tools, but we have now discovered that we didn't. A religious person steps away and marvels at G-d not just

when he fails to comprehend our world but also when he senses the vastness of creation and the manner in which G-d manages and balances the entire sweep of His world.

Prayers for refu'ah for all ill people across the globe.