



BAMIDBAR

Shelach / 23 Sivan

Gnats and Giants: How To Develop A Winning Attitude

June 17, 2017

GNATS AND GIANTS: HOW TO DEVELOP A WINNING ATTITUDE

ABSTRACT

What poses the greatest hurdle in achieving our goals – is it the difficulty of the mission, the height of the mountain, or our own internal resistance and fear? How much of our success is dependent on attitude and self-confidence as opposed to skills? And can we even know how many skills we actually have? How high can we reach and what is our greatest impediment in reaching there?

The answers are contained in this week's Torah reading, which relates the reconnaissance mission of the spies to scout out the Promised Land, and their report that it is impossible to settle it – for its inhabitants are giants. “We were like tiny grasshoppers in our own eyes, as well as in their eyes.”

This may well be the first recorded instance of what psychologists call “projection” – the act of ascribing to other people feelings you have about yourself, that is, imagining, or *projecting* onto others, feelings that originate with you.

When the spies saw themselves as weak and tiny, then everyone around them also saw them that way. Their reaction teaches us the nature of our greatest enemy (ourselves), as well as the secret to success (ditto): The only thing that can prevent us from accessing our enormous inner potential is our own self-defeating attitude and low self-esteem.

This sermon examines the common phenomenon of the “self-fulfilling prophecy” and explains what we can do to prevent it from taking us down the path of insecurity and fear ... as well, what it takes to find that courage to have a winning attitude to reach the greatest heights.

As we approach the 23rd anniversary of Gimmel Tammuz and we look to renew our connection to the Rebbe and his teachings, this is one of the revolutionary principles that the Rebbe imbued in us: Nothing is impossible. When you believe and have confidence in your Divine mission, you can achieve anything that you set your mind to do. Take the initiative, and you will be surprised by the results.

1. The Chief Samurai (Joke)

There once was a powerful Asian emperor who needed a new chief samurai.

So he sent out a declaration throughout the entire known world that a suitable candidate should present himself in his palace on a given date.

When that date arrived, only three men had applied for that very demanding position: a Japanese samurai, a Chinese samurai, and a Jewish samurai.

The emperor asked the Japanese samurai to demonstrate why he should be the chief samurai. The Japanese samurai opened a matchbox, and out popped a bumblebee. The samurai's sword flashed and the bumblebee dropped dead, surgically sliced in half.

The emperor exclaimed, "That is very impressive!"

The emperor then asked the Chinese samurai to demonstrate why he should be the chief samurai. The Chinese samurai also opened a matchbox and out buzzed a fly, half the size of the bumblebee. The samurai's sword flashed and the fly dropped dead, surgically sliced into four pieces.

The emperor exclaimed, "That is very impressive!"

Now the emperor turned to the Jewish samurai, and asked him to demonstrate why he should be the chief samurai. The Jewish samurai opened a matchbox, and out flew a gnat, quarter the size of the fly. The samurai's sword flashed and ... nothing. The gnat was still alive and flying around.

The emperor, obviously disappointed, said, "Very ambitious, but why is that gnat not dead?"

The Jewish samurai just smiled and said, "Circumcision is not meant to kill."

That will introduce our topic for today – insects ... which figure prominently in this week's Torah reading

2. Like Tiny Insects

This week's Torah relates the reconnaissance mission of the spies who were sent by the Israelites to scout out the Promised Land. They return reporting the glories of the land – its beauty and amazing fertility. As proof, they bring back a branch with a cluster of grapes, which is so huge that two men have to carry it. And they testify:

We came to the land where you sent us, and it is indeed flowing with milk and honey, as you can see from its fruit. However, the people living in the land are aggressive, and the cities are large and heavily fortified¹.

When one of the spies, Caleb, declares that this is not a barrier to moving forward, the others insist that it cannot be. Frantically, they argue:

¹ Numbers 13:27-28.

The land that we crossed to explore is a land that consumes its inhabitants. All the men we saw there were huge. While we were there, we saw giants. They were sons of the giants who descended from the titans.

We were like tiny grasshoppers in our own eyes, as well as in their eyes.”²

3. Strange Construction

Did you notice the strange construction?

“We were like tiny grasshoppers in our own eyes, as well as in their eyes.”

If the scouts objectively were like midgets compared to the huge giants they encountered, why did they just simply say, “we were like tiny insects compared to them”?

Well, there is a reason. This may well be the first recorded instance of what psychologists call “projection.”³

What is projection?

First named by Freud, projection is the act of ascribing to other people feelings you have about yourself. Thus, projection involves imagining, or *projecting* onto others, feelings that originate with you.

But thousands of years before Freud, our verse identified this phenomenon, teaching us that because the spies projected weakness, they created weakness. They wrote their own script, and this was why they failed in their mission.

4. The Mission of the Spies

What exactly was that mission?

Moses sent out the spies on a mission to explore the Promised Land and determine *how* best to conquer it. Not *if*, but *how*. And yes, the spies did explore the land. But they never did come up with a plan for conquest.

The spies' own feelings of inadequacy got in the way, and instead of devising a military strategy, they abdicated their mission. They simply concluded that it could not be done at all.

² Numbers 13:32-33. The Hebrew for these insects is *chagavim*. According to scholars, this is the “smallest species of locust,” alternatively translated as “tiny grasshoppers.”

³ *Psychology* by Wade Tavis, New York: Prentice Hall, 2000

In so doing, they violated the trust Moses and the people had in their leadership and undermined the confidence of their constituency. And above all, they failed to trust in G-d's promise that the Jewish people would enter the Promised Land. They did not even consider G-d's role and His constant, unwavering protection. G-d had demonstrated until now – through the plagues, the exodus, the splitting of the sea, the manna, the protective cloud through their travels through the desert – that He was there to help them reach the Land of Israel.

But they concluded that they were too weak to conquer G-d's Promised Land!

5. Not If, How

Of course they knew – what we all know – that life is difficult and challenging. Yet, they should also have known that belief in G-d and His promises means that we have the power to face and overcome those challenges. G-d has repeatedly demonstrated it to them ... and to us.

Therefore, we ought never ask “if” we can overcome life's travails. We must always ask “how.”

But, when our inner confidence erodes (or is lacking), and we forget about G-d's constant presence among us, then the forces around us begin to look formidable.

When the spies saw *themselves* as tiny insects, then the giants around them also saw them that way. Thus the spies exposed their own weakness. They revealed – not that they truly could not conquer the land – but that they believed they couldn't do it. And as we well know, when we think we cannot do something, then that becomes the reality. When we see ourselves as small and inadequate, others begin seeing us that way as well.

And then, sadly, even G-d cannot help us. Because even as He gives us strength, we choose to ignore it and determine that we cannot do the job. What can G-d then do?

This is what is known as a “self-fulfilling prophecy.”

6. Jack Story (Humor)

You might have heard the story about a man who gets a flat tire driving on a dark country road late at night. He must change the tire, but when he opens his trunk, the spare is there, but the jack is missing. What to do?

Off in the distance, he sees a small light burning in a farmhouse, and he decides to hike through the fields and ask the farmer if he could borrow his jack. He starts to trudge through the mud, all the while imagining what will happen when he arrives at the farmhouse. Why would a farmer lend a stranger one of his tools? How will he convince the farmer that he will bring it back once he has changed his tire? And worse still, he will probably have woken the farmer up. After all, farmers are known to go to sleep with the chickens. The farmer is bound

to be irritated, if not down-right angry. He will probably be nasty. The man can just imagine how the farmer will start shouting as soon as he opens the door.

With all this playing through his mind, the man arrives at the farmhouse. He knocks and the farmer promptly opens the door. But before the farmer has a chance to say one word, the man erupts: “You can go to hell and keep your lousy jack!”

The story ends there. We don’t need to be told what the farmer said back. We know. And that’s what happens when one assumes the worst.

As the poet Paula Cole wrote:
 It’s me who is my enemy
 Me who beats me up
 Me who makes the monsters
 Me who strips my confidence

But it doesn’t have to be that way ...

7. The Converse

[Conversely,] when you are confident that you can face the challenge no matter how formidable, that sense empowers you to actually accomplish the task.

Oliver Wendell Holmes once attended a meeting in which he was the shortest man present. “Dr. Holmes,” quipped a friend, “I should think you’d feel rather small among us big fellows.” “I do,” retorted Holmes, “I feel like a dime among a lot of pennies.”

Or as Eleanor Roosevelt put it: “Nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent.” Which reminds me of another famous saying: “If you really put a small value upon yourself, rest assured that the world will not raise your price.”

But the question of the hour is: How do you gain such absolute, unwavering confidence, how do you acquire the strength to face every challenge?

By connecting to G-d.

Our absolute faith in this connection instills in us the complete certainty that we have all the abilities and resources that we need to fulfill our mission, the divine calling which each of us has been charged with. Our absolute faith in G-d and His promises to us infuses us with the firm confidence that we can face every challenge before us.

8. The Power of Prayer

Of the twelve scouts that went out to reconnaissance the Promised Land, only two – Caleb and Joshua – returned and said, “We can do it, we can enter the land as G-d promised us.” Why were they different than the others?

They connected their mission with special prayers to G-d for success⁴.

Only through prayer and through our connection to our Torah tradition do we have the power to overcome the challenges of the present. When we are stuck in a pit, overwhelmed by difficulties, we cannot solve the problem alone. We need a hand up, we cannot climb out alone. As the Talmud teaches, “One in chains cannot release himself⁵.”

By praying to G-d – we attach ourselves to a force beyond ourselves and beyond the difficulties of here and now. And this connection gives us the ability to transcend the immediate hardships and overcome the present challenges. This is true, as well, when we connect to our Torah tradition and holiness of our ancestors.

As chassidim say, “When you are bound above, you do not fall below.”

We may be small, but a midget who stands on the shoulders of a giant can see farther than the giant ... as we do when we stand on the shoulders of the generations who came before us.

With this attitude we project confidence and courage. When we see ourselves as powerful – armed with faith in G-d, empowered by standing on the shoulders of giants – then everyone around us will also see us as powerful.

9. Message for Today

No message is more appropriate today, when we confront such troubling questions as: What does the future hold? Do we have the power to face the challenges ahead of us?

Looking toward an uncertain future – with unrest in the Middle East, economic uncertainty in America and the world, and wars on several fronts – we wonder if we have the absolute confidence and certainty to overcome anything that will come our way.

This week’s Torah reading teaches us that we do. The question is not *if*, but *how*.

⁴ See *Rashi* 13:16 (regarding *Joshua*) and 13:22 (regarding *Caleb*).

⁵ *Berochet* 5b.

10. Rabbi Lau Story

Rabbi Yisrael Lau, the former chief Rabbi of Israel, relates what happened to him the first time he visited the USA in 1974, shortly after the Yom Kippur War had demoralized Israel. He was then a rabbi in a small synagogue in Netanya, outside of Tel Aviv, and he came to Brooklyn to see the Lubavitcher Rebbe. In middle of their conversation, the Rebbe asked him about the mood in Israel during this hard time. Rabbi Lau replied that Jews were asking each other: *Vos vet zeyn?* “What will be?”

The Rebbe grasped Rabbi Lau’s arm and vehemently declared: *Yiden fregen nit vos vet zeyn. Zei fregen: Vos geit men ton!* “Jews don’t ask what will be. They ask: What are we going to do!”

“What will be” is the question of a victim. “What are we going to do” is the question of a proactive person. When you are at war, the last thing you want to see is your commander-in-chief wringing his hands. You want to hear that he has a plan, a direction, a strategy, and above all that he has courage and confidence that emboldens his army to forge ahead!

11. Honoring Gimmel Tammuz Nothing is Impossible

Today is Shabbos Mevorcim Tammuz, the Shabbos that blesses the new month of Tammuz, including Gimmel Tammuz, when we honor the 23rd yearzeit of the Rebbe. It is also a few days before the 76th anniversary of the Rebbe’s arrival to these American shores (28 Sivan 5701-5777). It is therefore befitting that we honor these days with focusing a moment on some of the central themes that the Rebbe inspired us with. What better way to prepare for these special days than renewing our commitment to the Rebbe’s teachings, and resolving to act on them.

We owe a great tribute to the Rebbe. Especially considering that I would not be standing here today, I (and my wife) would not have gotten to know all you wonderful people, had it not been for the Rebbe

I will therefore use the opportunity and in the next few weeks address several of the Rebbe’s key initiatives – each week taking on of these ideas and suggesting ways that we can apply and implement them in our lives.

12. Nothing is Impossible

The message I shared earlier was one of the Rebbe’s strongest messages to us. Simply put:

Nothing is impossible. Nothing.

When you believe and have confidence in your Divine mission, you can achieve anything that you set your mind to do.

Your greatest enemy, the Rebbe taught, is yourself and your own self-imposed doubts. Especially in our free times – when we do not have an external enemy pursuing us, thank G-d – our only impediment is our own complacency. Our inner – often imaginary – fears and insecurities. Our gravitating back to our comfort zones of the status quo.

Always know, the Rebbe reminds us, that you have all the power you need to fulfill your mission in life. G-d would never give you a challenge that could not overcome.

Rebbetzin Bassie Garelik, who was sent, together with her husband Reb Gershon Mendel, on shlichus by the Rebbe to Milan Italy, once expressed her doubts in her own abilities to fulfill her shlichus. The Rebbe replied to her in a letter (dated 15th of Adar 2 5725): “It is surprising to me that you would have any doubts about your ability, or the success of your efforts, etc. It would appear as if you have doubts as to whether the one that gave you the assignment had made a wise choice. Surely you do not entertain such a thought, though in any case I would not consider it in any personal way, as far as I am concerned. However, if you are certain that the one who gave you the assignment has not made a mistake, then you should continue your work with certainty and confidence, and with G-d’s help you will succeed.”

So when faced with difficulty, remember that you were sent on a mission and given all the necessary strengths to fulfill your mission. How you look at yourself – what you project – defines your reality. If you doubt yourself your doubts become your undoing; they project weakness and then end up becoming self-fulfilled prophecies, creating weakness in you and in all those around you. Be confident in your mission, project strength and certainty and that will generate confidence all around you.

13. Take the Initiative

As this week’s portion emphasizes: “Shelach *lecho*,” send unto *you*, G-d commands Moses. G-d insists that we – you – take the initiative. G-d offers us all His promises and blessings, but only we can actualize them. Your attitude – your confidence and courage, your faith and trust – is key to the success of your mission. When you believe in G-d’s promises and you believe in yourself, and the strengths that G-d imbued you with, you surely will succeed.

This is the first of several themes of the Rebbe – that I intend to address in the coming weeks – that I ask you all to think about and connect to today:

The power of your initiative.

Each of us has been blessed with many skills and gifts. But what is expected of each of us is our self-generated initiative. Not to wait until someone asks you. Not to wait to respond to the call. But to make the call.

Not to be overcome by fears and doubts. But to project and exude confidence and surety in your abilities to succeed.

In honor of Gimmel Tammuz, I ask each of you: Think about an area where you can take the initiative, and resolve to do so. Initiate a new Torah class in your community – at work or at home. Host an event. Take on a new mitzvah. Reach out to someone in need. Inspire a new soul you meet.

14. Up to Us

We have a choice to be overwhelmed or confused by the difficulties around us, or to overcome them and grow through them – to see ourselves either as gnats or as messengers/shluchim of G-d. This is up to us alone. You and only you can determine how you will see yourself – and, in effect, how others will see you. As Karen Raven wrote:

Only as high as I reach can I grow,
 Only as far as I seek can I go,
 Only as deep as I look can I see,
 Only as much as I dream can I be.

As we continue our journey toward the Promised Land – both collectively and personally, as we move forward in reaching our ultimate goals – we must know, that no matter how daunting the challenge, by connecting to G-d we have the power to succeed.

In short, this is the message that G-d sends each of us today:

Know that you control the process. How you see yourself is how the world will see you.

Travel with confidence and strength of purpose, and the world will support and join your cause. Amen.

© Copyright 2017 The Meaningful Life Center. By downloading this PDF file from Meaningful Sermons, you agree to respect the copyright of this written material. You understand that your right to this material is limited to using it to deliver sermons, classes or other oral presentations to your community. You agree not to publish this material or any part thereof, nor to email, fax, copy, scan, mail, etc. or otherwise share this material with others, nor to verbally share these ideas with others.