

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub:

Protecting Ourselves

Shabbat Sh'lach L'cha | June 19 - 20, 2009

In this week's Parsha, G-d and Moses send 12 spies "N'si'im", distinguished men, to spy the land of Israel. Although they see the same objective conditions, two are optimistic, encouraging advance, but ten are thoroughly discouraging: "We cannot go up against those people, for they are stronger than us...We saw the Nephilim, the sons of the giants from among the Nephilim, we were like grasshoppers in our eyes, and so we appeared to them". (Numbers 13:31 and 33)

Last week, I stressed how intolerable self-deception is, as an ethical matter, for if we are blind to ourselves we can't change ourselves. So, here. The Kotzker Rebbe felt that the ten spies' report of the Nephilim proved their self-deception. After all, how could they really know what the Nephilim thought of them?

In Greek myths, as in popular culture today, the hero is one who subdues others. In Rabbinic thought, the hero is one who subdues himself. "Who is mighty? One who can control his impulses" (Pirke Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, 4:1)

One helpful self-improvement exercise is to sit down and do a written inventory of your flaws and weaknesses: When I overact, do I say things that hurt others? If people point out how upset I am, do I deny it and treat them with coldness? Do I speak curtly, so that others feel unworthy of my time? Am I moody? Do I make others around me feel like they are responsible for my moods?

After you've made this catalogue, don't become depressed. Rather, see how can you limit the undesirable manifestations. There is a helpful guideline in Pirke Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, 1:1., "Make a fence around the Torah". We not only follow the prohibitions of Torah, but also avoid actions that might lead to trespass. Usually we understand this with respect to ritual law. For example, since we can't light a fire on Shabbat, later Rabbinic Halacha forbade even holding a match on Shabbat. We can use the same concept, the same self-regulation, in inter-personal relationships.

If you have to interact with someone you know you envy, be especially mindful of your body language, your manner, your tone. If you have a lustful appetite, limit situations of privacy with those who awaken your lust. If you have a gambling problem, get off mail lists which invite risk. As we enter summer, the season of wildness, what fences do you need to erect?