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*With
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ב"ה

Parshas Ki Savo

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The Perpetual Dreamers

The United States Navy Seals, considered by many to be the most elite group of soldiers on Earth, has a quote that they brand on the bottom of all their maps and stationery. It's a quote that entirely encapsulates who they are. "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing." I believe the following quote is equally true: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of mediocrity is humanity's obsession with normalcy."

The difference between a soldier who remains on the bottom rung and one who becomes a Navy Seal is often not one of physical strength or size, but the ability to dream and remain determined to rise in the ranks. He does not allow setbacks, challenges, or failures dull the fire of the dreams burning inside of him.

What separates people who achieve greatness in their lives and those who do not is typically the strength of their desire to achieve. More often than not, success is not achieved by those blessed with unusual talents or abilities, but by regular people who really, really, really want it, and refuse to let the status quo and complacency of the rest of the world prevent them from getting it.

The same is true with spiritual greatness.

Geographically Odd Mountains

The parshah contains the blessings and curses given to the Jewish people on the mountains of Gerizim and Eival. Half of the Jewish people ascended Har Gerizim and the other half ascended Har Eival. One group heard the curses that would be meted out for wayward behavior, while the other heard the blessings that befall us if we act in accordance with Hashem's will.

There is something geographically odd about these two mountains. The two mountains were mere feet away from each other and yet Har Gerizim, the mountain of blessing, was lush and beautiful, while Har Eival, the mountain of curses, was barren and desolate. How did that come to be? These two mountains, which can still be visited today, are less than 200 hundred feet from one another. They share the exact same ecosystem. They receive the exact same amount of rain, have the exact same amount of sunlight, and are exposed to the exact same air quality. Why is one lush and vibrant while the other is hard and dead?

Rav Shmshon Rafael Hirsch explains that the only difference between these two mountains is that one was resistant and one was receptive. Har Gerizim had small holes in it, allowing the nutrients, rain, and sunlight to penetrate, while Har Eival was closed off and impenetrable. Although both mountains were exposed to the exact same climate, only one allowed that climate to seep in.

Rav Hirsch goes on to say that it was not for naught that Hashem chose to issue the blessings and curses on those two mountains, for by doing so He was telling us the recipe for spiritual greatness, forever opening ourselves up to the spiritual bounty that permeates all around us.

Our Innocent Dreams

All of us had dreams once upon a time of being spiritually great. Whether it was in third grade when we learned the story of our foremother Rachel, or when we heard the story of Yosef HaTzaddik; whether it was when we first went off to yeshiva, or when we were hugely inspired in seminary. Perhaps it was when we heard a speech on Tisha B'Av, or when we experienced our first real Rosh Hashana. All of us had those flashing moments in our souls when we told ourselves, "We will be great!"

So, what happened? What went wrong? Why are most of us regular?

The answer is that most of us don't allow the spiritual nutrients that are whizzing all around us to penetrate into our very essence. We stop aspiring for greatness and become more interested in fitting in. We tell ourselves that normalcy is better than standing out, even if normalcy comes at the expense of greatness.

We become so shackled to the status quo that all our dreams, hopes, and aspirations get replaced with an obsession to just fit in. We let the level of spirituality in our homes be dictated by the neighborhood around us, and the

very moment one of our spiritual dreams goes up against what the current definition of “normal” is, we run right back to the safe haven of normalcy.

In no era could this motto be truer; the only thing necessary for the triumph of mediocrity is humanity’s obsession with normalcy.

By giving the berachos on Har Gerizim, a mountain that opened itself up to the nutrients around it, Hashem was telling us that the key to spiritual greatness is to allow the inspiration we have all around us to penetrate our souls, and let those spiritual nutrients blossom inside of us. To allow the spiritual ingredients floating in the air to help bring our dreams and aspirations to fruition, elevating us to greater spiritual heights. Far higher than those in the peanut gallery below us.

The Golden Ticket

One day, 3,000 years ago, a Navi (prophet) got up and gathered the Jewish people into a town square and made an announcement. He declared:

“The next leader of the entire Jewish people will be named Shmuel. He has yet to be born, but his birth is imminent.”

This, unsurprisingly, led to great excitement. A buzz erupted. Who would be the one to give birth to the next leader of the Jewish people? With dreams of being the parents of the future leader, people began naming their sons “Shmuel” in the hope that he would become the one.

Forty years went by and not one of the boys named Shmuel was appointed leader. Not until Chana came along, who, after years of being barren, finally gave birth to a son and named him Shmuel. He was the one who became the leader of the Jewish people. We all know the story.

But the part of the story that lots of people don’t know is what happened to all those other kids. All the hundreds of children whose parents, with hopes and dreams, named them Shmuel. The Chida (Rav Chaim Yosef Dovid Azulai) says that despite not becoming the leader of the Jewish people, each and every one of those children nevertheless became a navi. For each and every one of them grew up with a vivid dream. A dream that they might lead the Jewish people. A dream that they could be the most important man in the spiritual universe. A dream that they could reach the

loftiest spiritual heights. And that dream carried them on its wings and allowed them to soar to the level of prophecy, a level of spirituality attained only by the most elite members of our nation.

If we clutch close to our dreams and never let go, greatness can be attained. If we let ourselves do what most people do because that's what most people do, our dreams of greatness slowly drift away.

Major League

The difference between a Major League baseball player who is making 33 million dollars a year and has his name plastered on every newspaper in America, and a Minor Leaguer who makes 76,000 dollars a year and whom no one's ever heard of, is that the Major Leaguer has a batting average of .280 while the Minor Leaguer has a batting average of .230. Meaning that when the Major Leaguer steps up to the plate, he hits the ball 2.8 times out of 10. The Minor Leaguer only hits the ball 2.3 times. Not a very big difference, yet one is a famous millionaire and the other is a regular guy who shops at the same Walmart you do.

What led to the drastic difference? Both dreamed about becoming a baseball superstar. Both aspired for baseball greatness. The answer is that the Major Leaguer refused to let his dreams go. He woke up a little earlier. He stayed in the gym a little later. He ate a little healthier. He focused a little more. He was in the batting cages when the rest of his friends were eating ice cream. He studied films of his swing while his friends called him a fanatic. He read books and listened to tapes and left no stone unturned in his quest for baseball knowledge, despite being called crazy by his peers. He refused to let the temptation to be regular hold him back from achieving greatness. And sure enough, greatness he achieved.

We should all be the same. We should aspire to live a life with no lashon hara, and never let go of that dream. To dream of a house buzzing with chessed and see to it that it happens. To dream of being really tznius, and doing so despite the sneers and the social pressures. To dream of finishing Shas and to never stop dreaming. To take the dreams we all had when we were young and close our eyes and accomplish them.

No Knives

There is a strange halacha codified by the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 180:5). It states that whenever one is about to say birchas hamazon, one must first remove all the knives from the table. Only after the knives are removed can one begin bentching.

What exactly is wrong with having knives on our table? Why do the spoons and forks get to stay, but the knives must go? The Taz (Rav Dovid Segal, a Polish Rabbi who lived from 1586-1667, and a leading commentator on the Shulchan Aruch) provides the reason for this seemingly strange halacha. He writes that there was once a man who dreamed and thought of the Bais HaMikdash to such an unbelievable extent, that one day while bentching, when he reached the part about Hashem rebuilding the Bais HaMikdash, he got so distraught about its current state of destruction that he took a knife from the table and stabbed himself! Hence the custom to remove the knives from our table while we bentch, in order to prevent that from happening again.

Now, let's ask the obvious question. This person was certainly a very holy man. But such an individual is an extreme outlier. Do the halachic authorities really think that there is a practical need for this halacha? This guy was one in a million. Why institute this halacha for the entire nation?

I heard a beautiful explanation from Rav Dovid Revach, the Rav of Adas Torah in Los Angeles. He said that of course the Rabbis were well aware of the unlikelihood of someone actually stabbing themselves while bentching. The Rabbis never instituted it for that reason. They instituted the requirement to remove the knives as a reminder to us that there once upon a time was a man who dreamed so much about the Bais HaMikdash, that when he read about its destruction, he was so distraught that he stabbed himself to death!! We are instilling in ourselves that there was a time when men dreamed about the Bais HaMikdash to such an extent that its absence caused so much pain and anguish that they couldn't refrain from stabbing themselves. Not that we are on that level, but that we should at the very least know that that level exists and aspire to reach it.

We cover our knives as a small reminder to keep on dreaming. To never let greatness get away from us. To never let the conveniences of normalcy and mediocrity take precedence over the glory of greatness.

The World Cup Underdogs

Every few years, the world becomes transfixed by the World Cup, an event that takes over the global stage. Every country in the world trots out their best soccer team in the hopes of climbing to the top of the soccer world and claiming the coveted trophy. From Russia to China. From Argentina to the United States. From France to Australia. The world shows up.

But what fascinates me the most about the entire event are the smaller countries that manage to succeed. Countries like Costa Rica and Senegal. The Netherlands and Morocco. Croatia and Panama. Tiny little countries that often take down countries five hundred times their size.

When you think about it, it almost makes no sense. America, with a pool of 400 million people from which to select its soccer team, loses to the Netherlands, a country that has a mere 17 million people? Countries with every technological advancement and with access to every form of medical equipment are losing to Senegal, a third-world country in Africa that doesn't have running water? How do you explain this phenomenon?

The answer is that America might like soccer, but these countries live it. These countries breathe soccer. These countries go to sleep thinking about soccer and wake up thinking about soccer. Every thought that crosses their mind is soccer, every dream they dream is soccer. And not only that, but they are children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren of people who were obsessed with soccer. Soccer runs through their blood; it is infused into their very DNA. Hence, despite being 1% of the size, despite having no medical technology, despite living in a third-world, war-ridden, dilapidated country, they often come out victorious, because for them, soccer is everything.

We are a nation obsessed with spiritual greatness. We are a nation obsessed with Godliness. We think and speak and dream about Hashem. Godliness runs through our veins. It is part of our DNA. Our dreams won't be dashed by the people who say we can't. Our dreams won't be dashed by the people who say we are wrong. Our dreams won't be dashed by the people who call us archaic and outdated. The Jewish people clutch close to their dreams stronger and with more passion than any other dreamers out there. That's why we are still here dreaming, while the nations of the world have taken their dreams and vanished long ago. We dream about spiritual greatness, and no one will ever convince us not to.

The difference between the people who achieve greatness and ones who don't has little to do with their talents, upbringing, exposure, or environment. Many great people are brilliant, and many more aren't. Many great people could sit and focus for hours, and many others can't. Many great people are born leaders, thinkers, and orators. Many aren't. The common denominator among all great people is that no matter what and no matter when, they never stop dreaming. They take their hopes, dreams, and aspirations, and never let go as long as they live.

We are a nation of dreamers. We are a nation that got its blessings on Har Gerizim, the mountain forever open to the nutrients around it. Lucky are those people who never let go of their dreams. Lucky are those people who don't let mediocrity, normalcy, and the pressure to be regular rip those dreams of greatness from them. Lucky are the people who — despite being in a class of 36, a grade of 400, and a school of 5,000 — dream for even more and even higher.

We are a nation of dreamers. Lucky are those who know how to keep on dreaming.