

The Big Picture

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In the middle of the 19th century, south-central Poland suffered from a wheat shortage. A group of Radomsker chassidim invested heavily in grain, even borrowing money against their homes for the opportunity. But after they were fully invested, large shipments of grain arrived. The price sank; they were impoverished.

The group approached Rabbi Shlomo haKohen, Rebbe of Radomsk, and pleaded, “Have mercy on us! Daven to Hashem for the price of wheat to recover, or we’ll lose everything!”

The Rebbe of Radomsk replied, “I’m sorry, but we don’t daven for Hashem to raise the price of food. We don’t ask Hashem to stop sending His kindness!”

To which the chassidim complained, “But we’ll have nothing, what will happen to us?”

And the Rebbe responded, “Don’t worry. The One who took care of the poor when grain was expensive, will take care of you now when grain is cheap.” (Otzar Chaim, Parshat Behar)

The message of the Rebbe of Radomsk is clear: Look at the big picture; evaluate good and bad by the experience of the community as a whole.

The complaint of these chassidim appears in our parshah, as part of the challenge of observing the laws of Shemitah. The Torah instructs us: Refrain from planting in the seventh year, and abandon the wild produce for the needy rather than fence it in and harvest it. The Torah then plays mindreader, entering the mind of the landowner and giving voice to two questions: “But what will I eat in the seventh year? I won’t be able to plant, I won’t be able to harvest!” (Vayikra 25:20)

“I won’t be able to plant” is an obvious challenge; if we cannot plant, what can grow? But then “I won’t be able to harvest” highlights a second challenge: not only must we risk privation, but we must also throw open our gates and invite in the hungry community, and this is hard for a farmer to absorb.

The Torah responds to the farmer as the Radomsker Rebbe responded to his chassidim: By what right do you focus on your personal state? All of the paupers are cheering! In shemitah, they have access to every field! In yovel, the families receive their ancestral land and the slave goes free! This is wonderful for them! Look not upon your own misfortune; be happy that others will receive.

This broad perspective is a necessity for a successful State. Governing a State means sharing the polity with citizens of every stripe, and no group will win every time. How can a modern Jewish State view itself as one society? How does one argue forcefully in the Knesset, demonstrate raucously in the public square, publish articles and lobby politicians – and then daven to Hashem to help people on the other side of the aisle to win not the debate, but the lottery? And to calculate a budget which will distribute our tax dollars to feed the opposition?

Perhaps the Radomsker’s words offer an answer. The Rebbe noted that the change in the price of grain came from Hashem; the loss of the wealthy chassidim, and the profit for the needy, came from Hashem. When our rivals prosper, it’s because Hashem has sent prosperity their way. Perhaps that

perspective, recognizing that not only are we one nation, but that the growth of our foes comes from Hashem, will help us to rejoice, regardless of who profits. May we learn to see our nation in this Shemitah way.

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