

Va Yehi 2017

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 1/14/17

The story is told of Mr. Goldman who was supposed to be a character witness in a trial, and the judge said to him, "Mr. Goldman, first we have to establish a few facts. First of all, what's your name?" He says, "Shmuel Goldman." The judge says, "And how old are you?" And Mr. Goldman says, "I'm 83, Kinneh Hurah." And the judge says, "No, no Mr. Goldman, just your age, please." And he says, "83, Kinneh Hurha." And the judge says, "You don't understand Mr. Goldman, this is a court of law. You have to say ONLY what I ask you. Don't say anything else- just the number!" He says, "83, Kinneh Hurha." The judge says, "Mr. Goldman, if you don't answer properly I am going to have to hold you in contempt of court, and that is a crime!" And the lawyer says, "Your honor, if you don't mind, may I ask Mr. Goldman?" He says, "OK, you ask him." The lawyer says, "Mr. Goldman, how old are you Kinneh Hura?" He says, "83."

I want to speak briefly this morning about that familiar phrase "Kinneh Hura." The phrase is actually, "Kein A-yin Hora" in Yiddish, or "Bli Ayin Ha-ra" in Hebrew. Both expressions translate as, "without the evil eye" or "there should be no evil eye." When it's said quickly it can sometimes sound like "Kinneh Hura." And I share this because one of the oldest sources of this expression actually comes from the Torah portion we read this week. Towards the beginning of Parashat Vayechi, Joseph hears that his father has taken seriously ill, and he brings his two sons - Efrayim and Menashe - to receive a blessing from their grandfather. Jacob bestows upon his grandsons a blessing, which concludes with "Ve-yidgu La-rov Be-kerev Ha-aretz," "May they grow into a great multitude throughout the land."

Rashi comments that the word "ve-yidgu," "may they grow," comes from the familiar word "dag" which means "fish." Jacob thus blesses his grandchildren that they should reproduce (and live) like fish. That's an odd blessing, for sure! Why did Jacob bless Joseph's sons that they should be like fish? Why not like brave lions, or cunning like snakes, or industrious like bees? Why does Jacob choose specifically fish as the model? Rashi explains (based on the Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot 20a), that fish spend their lives concealed underwater, and are thus free from the effects of the "ayin ha-ra" ("evil eye"). In other words, "Fish, Kinneh Hura, live a good life beneath the sea...." Yaakov thus wishes Efrayim and Menashe that they, too, should be fertile but remain out of the harmful grasp of the ayin ha'ra...But how does that work?

Rav Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Israel, has an interesting explanation for the powers of the Evil Eye and why fish are less susceptible to them. Of course there is the explanation that you don't want to brag and make yourself or others a target for bad luck, but I like Rav Kook's explanation for the power of the Evil Eye because it is less based on superstition. So what exactly is the Ayin Ha-Rah? His explanation is psychological. He says that people are generally very sensitive and attuned to what others feel about them. For many of us, how we are perceived by those around us (even by people we don't know) has a profound effect on the way we conduct our lives. So when someone harbors feelings of envy or resentment towards you, you will very likely detect that and feel, in some measure, uncomfortable. This discomfort, Rav Kook explains, is what The Sages call the "Ayin Ha-ra." Ayin Ha-Rah, says Rav Kook, is the tension and uneasiness we experience when we feel that somebody looks upon us resentfully. When we are always looking over our shoulders, constantly thinking about what others think of us, we focus more on THEM than we do on what's inside of US, and that's a problem.

So how do you avoid this "Ayin Ha-ra"? How do you avoid giving yourself a "Kinneh Hura?" As Rav Kook explains, we can make ourselves immune to the "ayin ha-ra" by concentrating more on the propriety of our own actions than on how others perceive us. It's the people who are overly concerned with how others feel towards them that are most subjected to the harmful effects of the Ayin Ha-Ra. But

people who focus their attention on doing the right thing for its own sake find peace within themselves and can escape the grip of the ayin ha-ra. This explains what the Gemara means by its remark that fish are not subject to the Ayin Ha-Ra. Fish spend their entire lives undersea, and thus have no interest, so-to-speak, in what transpires on dry land. They enjoy their own, separate realm and thus remain detached and disinterested in the affairs of the rest of the world that undermine their core integrity. It's not so much that such a person should isolate himself from society, but to some extent, he needs to remain within his own world of values and ideals. Like the fish's attitude to what occurs on land, people who live this way are undisturbed, or at least less disturbed, by feelings of resentment harbored by other people towards them. They just try their best.

Rav Kook teaches that this particular blessing was one that Joseph could understand. Though young and impressionable when he suddenly found himself in a foreign land, Yosef retained his independent identity and held to his ideals. Had he been like most people, who inordinately concern themselves with how they are viewed by others, he could not have possibly remained loyal to his father's teachings during his twenty-two years of isolation from his family. He never lost his own, individual "ocean," where he could live according to his own ideals and ignore the reactions of those around him.

And that is, in a sense what we Jews do as well. We cannot always be looking over our shoulders. We need to understand that being a Jew often means being part of a counter culture, swimming in our own ocean. In a materialistic world that can glorify bombastic behavior, we Jews walk with quiet strength. And that's what we need to teach our kids - the values and virtues of the Jewish People that will add dignity to their lives. Deep down we know that we don't want our kids to "just be like everyone else." And as Jews we are not "just like everyone else." The decisions we make, the way we live our lives should be a reflection of what we learn from our Jewish tradition. It is precisely because we live in our own ocean that we have been able to transcend popular culture and be a uniquely eternal People.