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The Good Eye and The Evil Eye

["Be-Ahavah U-Be-Emunah" – Beha'alotecha 5769 – translated by R. Blumberg]

In 1848 a cholera epidemic struck Vilna. People began to dig up sins and to look for guilty parties. One person, a charter member of the "committee for looking for blemishes in others", approached Rabbi Yisrael Salanter and told him that there was someone who was acting improperly. Rav Salanter responded, "The Torah didn't punish the gossip because he spoke falsehood but because he criticized his fellow man. G-d says to such a person, "If you're such an expert in looking for blemishes, sit outside the camp and look for your own."

Indeed, take a look at any prayer book. The confessional "Vidui" prayer is always written in the first person. "We have been guilty. We have betrayed" – and not in the second or third person. G-d doesn't like those who accuse their fellow man. In his letter, "Kiddush Hashem," Rambam harshly castigates a Torah scholar who criticized Jews, and he reminds him that when Moses said of the Jewish People, "They will not believe me" (Exodus 4:1), G-d blamed him, saying, "They are believers and the sons of believers, but ultimately you will not believe," and Moses was immediately punished. "His hand was leprous, as white as snow" (verse 6). The same thing happened to Elijah the Prophet, who accused Israel: "The People of Israel have abandoned Your covenant" (I Kings 19:10). G-d responded, "Before you make accusations against Israel, go make accusations against the nations." Likewise, the Prophet Isaiah, who said, "I am living amidst a people with impure lips" (Isaiah 6:10), was punished, that his lips were burnt. Indeed, G-d hates those who accuse His children, even if the accuser is holy. The Vilna Gaon writes similarly in his commentary on Tikunei Zohar (57:) regarding the verse, "I hate Esau" (Malachi 1:3).

One time I met someone from that same sect of people who look for blemishes in others, and he spilled his endless bile of hackneyed claims against the State of Israel and against parts of the Jewish People. I answered him, "You see this. I see other things. I see so many good things that G-d does for us in this country, so many good-hearted, idealistic boys, so many Jews who keep Torah and mitzvot, so many wonderful youths. Everyone sees something else. You see the bad and I see the good." He cut me off. "All right! I see the good too, but you have to see the bad." I responded, "Calm down! I am well aware of the reality, and I toil within my humble abilities to increase the light." And then he smiled victoriously and said, "So! You do admit that this isn't redemption!" (Until this day I don't understand why he got such pleasure out of saying that this is not redemption...). I answered, "Indeed, everything you say just proves that the redemption is not complete. It isn't all black and white. It isn't either total exile or total redemption. There are way-stations as well."

And in conclusion, the words of our master, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook: "Generalized accusations against the other side, even when made with sincere intent, are associated with the well-known trait of group egocentrism that tends to views oneself and one's intimates as possessing all the good, truth and justice, and that tends to view one's antagonist as harboring all the evil, falsehood and wickedness" (LiNetivot Olam 2:227). Let us therefore make an effort to see our own blemishes and our fellow man's virtues, and let us all work, shoulder to shoulder, for the sake of G-d's glory.



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