

SELF-MONITORING



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT CHUKAT
RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

One of the key techniques used in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is self-monitoring. Keeping track of thoughts, emotions, or behaviors is a powerful intervention that affects change. For example, research by Dr. Aaron Beck demonstrates that when people who are depressed are asked to record thoughts that are self-critical, the number of such thoughts tends to decrease over time. The act of tracking itself causes the change. In addition, tracking also provides valuable information that can be analyzed to reveal a deeper understanding of what contributes to the thoughts, emotions, or behaviors and their exact consequences.

As Bnei Yisrael approached the land of Canaan, they requested from Sichon, the King of the Emori, to pass through his land. Not only did Sichon decline the request, but he waged war against Bnei Yisrael. This turned costly for Sichon, as he was defeated and Bnei Yisrael took over the land of the Emori. In what seems like an odd tangent, the Torah dedicates several pesukim explaining the history of Cheshbon, one of the cities taken over by Bnei Yisrael. Cheshbon, we are told, used to belong to Moav, but was conquered by Sichon from Moav before losing it to Bnei Yisrael. "About this" conquest of Sichon over Moav, the pasuk relates, "the poets would say: 'Come to Cheshbon; let it be built and established – the town of Sichon'" (Bemidbar 21:27). Who are these poets and why do we care about what they used to say about the war between Sichon and Moav?

Rashi explains that the poets here are Bilaam and his father Beor, and the Torah is hinting at a backstory to set the stage for the next chapter in the Chumash. Originally, Sichon was unable to defeat Moav. It was only after Sichon hired Bilaam to curse Moav that he was able to conquer the land. When Balak the King of Moav later tells Bilaam that he knows that whomever he blesses will be blessed and whomever he curses shall be cursed, he is speaking from personal experience. Balak knows that he lost to Sichon because Bilaam cursed Moav, so he tries to hire Bilaam to curse Bnei Yisrael.

While Rashi—a self-identified peshat commentator—attempts to expound the pesukim within the context, Rabbi Yochanan, quoted in the Gemara (Bava Batra 78b), seems to make no such attempt. The message of the pasuk is a religious and moral one. The pasuk needs to be read homiletically. The word for poets is “ha-moshlim,” which can also be understood as meaning a ruler or master. Cheshbon, the name of the city, literally means an accounting. Rabbi Yochanan reads the pasuk as telling us that those who are rulers over themselves, meaning those that exhibit self-control, are skilled at monitoring and analyzing their religious decisions. They calculate the loss incurred by fulfilling a mitzvah against the reward of accomplishing it and the pleasure derived from committing an aveirah against the loss suffered in the end. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato in his classic mussar work, Mesillat Yesharim, uses this statement of Rabbi Yochanan as a springboard to discuss how essential self-monitoring is to religious self-improvement.

Yet, even though Rabbi Yochanan’s reading seems to be completely removed from the context of the pesukim, Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschutz argues that this message of self-monitoring is enhanced when understood within the context of Sichon and Moav. Rabbi Eybeschutz suggests that Cheshbon was a border town with a small population that the king of Moav paid little attention to because of its seeming insignificance. Sichon took over Cheshbon with ease and it then served as a strategic location for him to conquer other cities of Moav. The message for self-monitoring, Rabbi Eybeschutz writes, is that we too often ignore the “Cheshbons” of our behavior: those crumbs that don’t count as calories or the one small sin that nobody really cares about anyway. These “unimportant” oversights often lead to worse outcomes over time.

To gain a better mastery of ourselves, we need to improve our self-monitoring skills. Whether improving our mental health by tracking of our thoughts, emotions and behaviors in a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy framework or enhancing our religious commitment through tracking mitzvot and aveirot, we can become moshlim if we take an honest cheshbon.

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