

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

There are moments that never leave you, moments that once lived are imbedded in your heart and soul forever. One such experience was the few minutes before the Bobover Rebbe, zt"l, entered the beis medrash before Shabbos. It was the Rav's custom to savor those moments in solitude. His white-clothed desk was strewn with sefarim. At a given time, the doors would open, and a small crowd would be permitted to enter. Guests would use the opportunity to "give shalom"; others would stand in silence. An electric current passed through the room. The Rav would greet the guests with his unforgettable smile, one that reached into the core of its recipient.

There was a radiance about his regal appearance that gave you the feeling you were sharing the place with someone from a different realm, someone from a different, kinder world. The Rav would eat a small piece of Shabbos fish and then drink some tea. In the deep silence, you felt Shabbos itself awaiting his every move. Then the Rav would stand up and wrap his gartel around his waist. For the uninitiated, a gartel is a sash worn by chassidim during prayer. It creates a symbolic barrier separating heart and mind from a person's baser elements. The Rav quietly hummed a niggun as he did this, his eyes searching the heavens, his body swaying gently.

Then he would take his tallis and place it on his shoulder. Many chassidic Rebbes have the custom of wearing a tallis when greeting the Shabbos Queen. The Rav would check the tzitzis and then start intoning the special prayer that is said before doing any specific mitzva. "I am hereby readying and preparing myself to fulfill the mitzva as it is written in the Torah." In short, the words declare our intent to do a specific mitzva and ask Hashem to find it worthy and bring us closer to Him. Only after this did the Rav say aloud the blessing and wrap himself in the tallis. Anyone present at that moment felt Shabbos sweep in as the Rav placed the tallis over his face. In that sanctified moment, the heavens seemed to sigh, "Gut Shabbos, Yiddelach. Gut Shabbos."

I was reminded of all this while learning a vort written by the Rav's nephew, Harav Avraham Twerski. He notes that on Yom Kippur eve, we cite the verse, "The entire congregation shall be forgiven...for all their sins were unintentional." He continues by quoting Reb Tzvi Hirsh of Ziditchov, who asks, "How can we say that all sins are unintentional? Many people are fully aware that what they are doing is wrong." The Ziditchover answered, "A mitzva must be done with proper conscious intent. We therefore precede performance of a mitzva with the phrase, I am hereby readying and preparing myself to fulfill the mitzva as it is written in the Torah." Full intent to commit a sin would therefore require a similar statement. "I am hereby readying and preparing myself to commit the transgression

that is forbidden by the Torah."

At this point, Reb Tzvi Hirsh arose and exclaimed, "Master of the Universe! I swear to You that no Jew has ever uttered such a preparatory phrase prior to committing a sin. All sins are therefore lacking in full intent."

The saintly Rebbe was pleading for divine mercy. But, as Rav Twerski points out, "He was also informing us that when we do wrong, it is because we are misled by temptation. We do not commit sins intentionally. Rather we are duped by the wily and crafty yetzer hara, which blinds us to the gravity of a sinful act."

There is a thin line drawn in our minds, one we never mean to cross. A small shrill inner voice talks us into sliding over it.

There are so many ways this can happen, as many ways as there are people in the world. Each person's urges fit his unique mental landscape. I have seen Jews who have seemingly sunk below all recognition ask questions that point to a past cluttered with lost opportunities and missed signals. They never meant things to go as far as they did. They really had no idea where it would all lead. It was one minor action that led to something more significant, which in turn led to I need go no further.

In our kapitel, we read of this dynamic: *A speech to the wicked about transgression is within me. There is no fear of God before his eyes.* So many different voices rattle about in our minds! The Piaseczna Rebbe, ztz"l, frequently wrote about this, how hard it is to divorce oneself from both the outer and inner voices of evil. It can reach a point where even you, the wonderful frumme Yid, who davens every day and tries to keep every chumra that comes his way, will be blinded as badly as the worst sinner, to such a level where your fear of Hashem will be set aside.

For it made the way appear smooth to him, causing Him to discover his iniquity, for which He will hate him. The sins that one would never do slide in and out of a person's mind until they become partner to his thought process. There are places where no one sees but Hashem, but see He does, and our loss is the closeness that could have been ours.

The words of his mouth are iniquity and deceit. He has stopped using his intellect to do good. When one begins to slide, he starts by lying to himself and then to others. We become overwhelmed by the urges that drive us further away and can no longer focus on good.

He devises iniquity on his bed; he sets himself on a path of no good; evil he does not abhor. The Baal Shem Tov paraphrased this passage as follows: "He who has placed himself on a path that is not good, will surely not despise evil." The heart is a muscle; it needs spiritual flexing. If we let it grow cold or allow the whims of evil to set in, then ultimately what we know to be evil will become permissible. It is all so easy to fall into this scenario, because it happens so smoothly.

You may well ask, "What hope, then, is there for me?" The kapitel rings out its wonderful answer:

Hashem, in the heavens is Your kindness, Your faithfulness till the skies. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, Your judgments like the great deep. Man and beast You deliver, Hashem. There are things that go beyond human thought or understanding. Hashem's love for us is beyond all rationalization. It's the stuff of heavens. There is no measure to Hashem's goodness; the sky is not the limit, only the beginning. Man and the beast that can dwell within him can be delivered by Hashem. It takes only our plea to open the floodgates of His deep sea of compassion.

How precious is Your kindness, God. Mankind takes refuge in the shadow of Your wings. Childlike we can find safety under the soft, precious wings of Hashem. An eagle covers its young with wings that are strong yet feathered. Hashem beckons us with such refuge.

They will be filled from the abundance of Your house, and the stream of Your delights will satisfy their thirst. For with You is the source of life. In Your light, we will see light. Real light is only through the light of Hashem. The darkness that is evil drags us down. We feel spiritually thirsty, wondering why all the joys of this world cannot quench our thirst. The only life that gives us insight is found in Hashem's light, and it is this truth that Hashem seeks to delight us with.

Extend Your kindness to those who know You and Your justice to those of integrity. Every Yid "knows" Hashem, for this knowledge is imbedded in every Jewish soul. We can find Hashem's kindness even through the falseness that whispers in our minds, if we are people of integrity who openly admit that this is what we seek. Yes, intent to sin is the furthest thing from our storm-battered hearts. We really want to watch as a tzaddik dons his tallis, and wholeheartedly identify with him as he gives expression to our own profoundest wish the intent to do that which is very good, really good.

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