

WHY DON'T YOU SIN?

by Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier

For many years, I was a high school rebbe. Part of the role of a rebbe is teaching young men how to learn, and part of his role (maybe the bigger part) is teaching them how to live. These were all religious fellows, from good homes, and at some point, early in the year, I would offer them a little challenge of belief. I would look at them and say, "Gentlemen, why don't you sin? But I don't mean little sins. I mean really big deal stuff: robbery, murder, pillaging..."

Typically, someone would respond, "Rabbi, if I did that, Hashem would be angry with me. I don't want Hashem to be angry with me!"

I would look that fellow in the eye and say, "Listen to me. Throughout history many, many wicked people have flourished. Don't worry about Hashem being angry with you. You just do exactly what you want."

At least one of the fellows would blurt out, "Yeah, that's true now, but when I die, my nishamah will burn. I don't want my nishamah to burn."

"Let me get this straight," I would say. "There are many things that you do even though you don't want to. There are many other things that you want to do, but you won't — and it's all for the sake of your nishamah? Listen to me. Forget about your nishamah. Why should you have to work so hard? You take care of you and let your nishamah burn."

While this may sound facetious, it actually underscores a common misunderstanding. We assume that right now, because I am alive, I think, I feel, I remember. When my time comes and I leave this earth, I die. So gone is the "I" that thinks, feels, and remembers. I will be dead. My soul, my alter ego, some kind of distant cousin or scaled down version of me will stand in front of Hashem. But I will be dead.

According to that assumption, the question I asked those fellows is valid. Why should I work now so that my nishamah should have a good time in the World to Come? Forget about my nishamah. I am going to take care of me.

There is only one flaw with this approach. It is dead wrong.

R' Yisrael Salanter explains that the difference between me when I am alive and me when I am dead is like taking off a coat. When I walk into a room and take off my coat, I emerge. My coat is hung up, but I come into the room. R' Yisrael explains that this is death.

My body — the coat — is buried. I, the one who thinks and feels, emerge. I don't die; my body does. It is put into the ground. But I, the occupant of the body, the one who told the arms and legs to move, live on forever.

Not some scaled down version of me. Not my distant cousin or alter ego. I emerge. The same I who is sitting here right now, the same I that has been thinking and feeling, will live on with all of my memories.

This concept is foreign to us because we tend think of death as a kind of sleep — a state of rest. When we speak about people who have passed on, we say things like, "Henry was a good man. Now he's in his final resting place." If you visit a cemetery, you will see many footstones inscribed with the words, "At Rest" or "Rest in Peace." It seems that common wisdom equates dying with going to sleep. As in, I will be "at rest."

R' Yisrael is teaching us that this is completely inaccurate. Going to sleep means I leave the situation. I am not there. As an example, imagine that you break your arm, and you are in intense pain — the throbbing ache just won't let up. You take Motrin, Tylenol with Codeine, Percocet — anything just to get some relief. But nothing helps. Finally, at 3:00 A.M. you fall asleep. The pain no longer bothers you because you aren't there. You are asleep.

We think of death like going to sleep. I won't be there. My nishamah, my alter ego, that other part of me, may be there. But me? I will be asleep — at rest.

According to that version of things, why should I work hard now so that someone else, my nishamah (whatever that is) should benefit? Forget it. I will take of me and let my nishamah burn.

That is a critical error. When I die, my body is buried, but I live on. The same I that thinks, the same I that feels, will live on long after this body dies. The body is the housing that I fit into. But, much like an astronaut wearing a space suit, it doesn't define me. It is something that I wear. When my time on this earth is up, that outside shell will be put into the ground, and I leave.

This is an excerpt from the new Shmuz on Life book: Stop Surviving and Start Living. It is powerful, thought provoking, and life changing. The book will be in seforim stores beginning April 2011. Pre-releases copies are available now at www.TheShmuz.com.

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