

A DOSE OF OUR OWN MEDICINE

by Rabbi Label Lam

R' Bana'a used to say; "Whoever studies Torah for with a pure motive, his Torah scholarship becomes an elixir of life as it is said, "It is a Tree of Life to those who fast to it..."(Proverbs 3:18) However whoever studies Torah for an ulterior motive his Torah scholarship becomes a deadly poison to him..." (Tractate Taanis 7A) A person should always be busy with Torah and Mitzvos for ulterior motives, because through the ulterior motive he will come to the pure motive. (Tractate Pesachim 50B)

How do we reconcile these two Talmudic statements? On the one hand it is dangerous to engage in Torah study for some other reason and on the other it seems to be a requirement. Is it always or never good to learn Torah with a foreign- motive? Tosfos offers a distinction that helps to resolves the apparent contradiction. It all depends upon the nature of the motivation.

If the person is being encouraged to learn in order to get some reward like a candy, or to be considered for a worthy marriage partner, or even to gain honor then that's fine and dandy. Is the person to wait to be perfect to begin to do Mitzvos? That day will never come.

We all require regular behavioral modifiers to jumpstart and maintain appropriate behavior. After a while the flavor of virtue is its own reward. Over time a person can be weaned from lesser to higher incentives. When one seeks Torah knowledge for the purpose of argumentation, however, then it is potentially poisonous.

Years ago I was giving a class in prison. We were learning the laws pertaining to proper behavior in a synagogue. At one point we quoted the sagely statement from the Talmud Brochos, "Someone who does not come to synagogue is called a wicked neighbor!"

When I looked up and read their reaction I knew immediately that something was wrong. There was this head dance going on. A group of fellows were exchanging glances and confirming something. I realized that I had inadvertently armed them and I needed to diffuse the bomb.

I told them as we had learned above that the Torah is a "Tree of Life" or alternately "a deadly poison". When is it a healthy medicine? -When we take it for our own improvement. That which we just learned, "Someone who fails to come to Synagogue is called a wicked neighbor" , is for us to know about ourselves when we are flip flopping in our beds and deciding if we should make the minyan today or not. None of us wants to play the role of the bad neighbor, so we might thereby kick ourselves out of bed.

However, when considering why Mo, Larry, or Curly doesn't make it to the prayers in the morning we have another active principle, "Judge your nation to the side of merit" (Vayikra). He has a good reason why he doesn't come. We don't have to know what that reason is. He's tired. He's depressed. He's busy with some other pressing matter. Whatever!

What we learn here is in order to change our own behavior. If we approach it that way and allow it to do so, then it is a life giving force. If, however, the information we gain here is to be used as a weapon to bludgeon others just to feel just and throttle them into submission to gain moral superiority then it is a terrible mixture. A traveling lecturer came to a certain town and was discouraged by the local Rabbi, "These people are too difficult to reach even with the best speech. They're 'Yenemite Jews'!" The visiting speaker corrected him, "You mean Yemenite Jews! What does that have to do with anything?" "No! The Rabbi explained, "YENEMite. (In Yiddish YENEM means 'others') Everything you say they think you're talking about someone else, but just not them."

The preacher understood what had to be done. He delivered a fiery and a clear sermon on the lesson of taking personal responsibility and not pointing fingers at others. When he was done, a group of congregants gathered around and told him, "That was one of the most important and inspiring speeches ever and that fellow over there, he really needed to hear it!" Receiving the Torah as a "Tree of Life" on Shevuot may be a simple or as difficult as agreeing to take a dose of our own medicine.

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