

OUR NEXT BIG MOVE!

by Rabbi Label Lam

Live as if you were already living for the second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now. (Victor Frankel)

A person should see himself as if he is ½ guilty and ½ meritorious.... Because the world is judged by a majority (of merits or demerits) and the individual is determined by a majority, one who does a Mitzvah tips himself and the whole world to the side of merit while if one makes a single violation, woe to him who inclines himself and the whole world to the side of guilt! (Tractate Kiddushin 40)

It is admittedly hard to see the grand consequences of our actions and attitudes as prescribed by our sages. It requires either deep trust in their words or a gymnastic imagination. Maybe the following two stories will help illustrate how far, even in a local sense, our pedestrian decisions reach.

A young man asked a Rabbi a simple question. "How do I do teshuvah (repent) for not bentching (saying the blessings after eating a meal)?" The Rabbi looked at him quizzically. The Rabbi asked him if he put on tefillin or ate kosher. The young man shook his head "no" and insisted on knowing how to do teshuvah for not bentching.

The Rabbi asked a number of other pointed questions that led him to understand just how far away this young man lived from Torah and Mitzvos. Eventually he asked him the question that had troubled him from the beginning of the conversation. "It seems there are hundreds of other items that need fixing first! Why bentching?"

The young man answered the Rabbi, "That's where I started! I had just finished eating a meal and my friends honked impatiently outside. I ran out the door without bentching. My mother asked if I had bentched. I said "yes" and as I passed the Mezuzah I thought lightning would strike me but it didn't. That Shabbos I went some place with my friends and we arrived a little late. No lightning. After that I allowed myself to indulge in non-kosher food. Soon the yarmulke came off, other more serious things followed, and here I am years later looking like I look and I need to know, 'How do I do teshuvah for not bentching?'"

My wife and I were walking around our modest block and we noticed that the neighbors around the corner had made extraordinary changes in the appearance of their house. There was this lovely bay window filled with ornaments and a Chinese garden with lollipop trees and a well manicured lawn

that the husband was cutting with mustache scissors.

My wife asked his wife who was standing out front surveying the progress, "Arlene, lovely improvements! What inspired all this?" She answered shyly, "Well, actually I just needed to replace a few tiles in the bathroom. We couldn't find a matching color so we redid all of them. Then the wallpaper looked ugly and old in contrast so we did that too. The medicine cabinet seemed decrepit in comparison and we replaced that. The bathroom became the nicest room in the house but when we walked out the rug seemed old and so we pulled it up and polished the floors. Then the front window seemed a dull match for the floors. We decided to install a bay window. When we looked out from the bay window we noticed how unkempt the lawn had been so we called a gardener and he created this lovely designer garden with sculptured trees!"

It's worth considering, especially around this time of the year before we take another step, just how far that step might carry us. In reflecting backwards we might want to first investigate what decisions we made got us to where we are and what we discover might greatly impact our next big move.

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