

CLASS 51 - NASO

by Rabbi Heshy Grossman

"...Why is the Parsha of Nazir next to the Parsha of Sotah? To tell you that anyone who sees a Sotah in her degradation should remove himself from wine, which leads to adultery." (Rashi, Bamidbar 6:2)

The Sotah is the adulterous woman, trapped in her own evil. Standing before G-d, she faces her own shame, revealed in all her treachery.

The man who witnesses this debacle is required to take steps to insure that he too will not stumble, and he vows not to partake of wine or grape products, lest he, as well, travel a path of no return.

This is quite puzzling.

Perhaps if we had seen a crime where the perpetrator escapes without a scratch, we might be tempted to imitate his deed. But in this case, the woman is not only caught, but punished by G-d, writhing in pain, and suffering a horrible death, a grotesque scene that should repulse all that were present. Why should those who see this be even more prone to sin, and be required to take protective measures?

In our shiur this week, we will answer this question, demonstrating that man is more vulnerable than he believes.

1

"Said Rebbe Ilayi: With three things a person can be recognized; his cup, his wallet, and his anger." (Eruvin 65b)

Man often masquerades in public, behaving as he must, or however is most appropriate. He can be polite when he needs to be, and honest and considerate of those with whom he interacts. But, these acts of etiquette are not indicative of his true character, for this persona is a mask, a pose that he adopts for social or business reasons.

But, when a man drinks, his guard is down. The normal inhibitions that preclude free behavior are removed, and man's true personality emerges.

Similarly, when financial gain is at stake, when the average individual strives to protect his pocket. In his haste to achieve personal gain, he often forgets to don his protective guise. If he acts with honesty even still, we rest assured that this is a man to be trusted.

And when man loses his temper, his reactions are no longer controlled. Unable to restrain himself within the normal bounds of social graces, his inner self comes to the fore, and he reacts with a fury that he never believed himself capable of.

The common element in these three instances is the character fault that lies just beneath the veneer, a pool of venom, desire, and deceit that man strives to keep in check.

All this should be a rude awakening.

We generally imagine ourselves to be fine, G-d-fearing individuals, certain that our standard of observance has separated us from the evils of society, confident that their iniquities are not ours.

Here, we learn something else: Man must always stand guard.

Why is such protection needed?

Apparently, Chazal understood man's vulnerability, knowing how difficult it is to change character traits imbibed since youth. A child is born as a demanding, wanting, self-centered being, crying and wailing till his pleas are heard. When he grows, he learns that crying is inappropriate, and shouting is often counter-productive, but his inner self remains the same, and he still sees his own needs at the center of the universe.

The honest individual is painfully aware of these inadequacies, and reluctant to put himself to the test. Herein lies the lesson of the varied decrees imposed on Torah-observant Jews. In addition to the protective fence erected around the Torah's law, man learns to approach the Halacha with trepidation, sensing his own predilection towards sin.

For these reasons, the man who sees the Sotah in her shame immediately vows to refrain from all wine - for wine leads to frivolity, and frivolity leads to iniquity. He recognizes that her tragedy did not happen in one day, but began with a slow process of evil that ate away at everything good and pure. He sees in himself a touch of the same inclinations, and he rushes to stamp out the fire before it begins.

It is this sensitivity to detail that marks true holiness. The Nazir makes a conscious perusal of the world around him and the lessons it teaches in his pursuit of perfection. Every aspect of creation resounds with the call of G-d, and in this expanded vision of existence, he hears G-d's voice in his own life, the death of the Sotah relates to him.

Let us now take this idea one step further.

2

Imagine a world where sin was incomprehensible, where the violation of G-d's word would be impossible.

In such a world, man would be part of an ongoing revelation, basking in the glory of G-d that is the

true basis of existence.

This is not a fantasy. On the contrary, it is our own world that lacks true substance.

The will of G-d cannot be denied, and the dream of man to actualize all his desires is itself an illusion that is destined to be shattered. The only state of existence is the creation that G-d brought into existence - Baruch She'Amar V'Hayah HaOlam - and the attempt to bypass G-d's command is not only wrong, but it is a fallacy.

To a certain extent, knowledge of this idea minimizes man's freedom of choice, for the truth is, man really has no other option. In part, this was the motivation of Adam HaRishon in eating from the Eitz HaDa'as. In bringing evil to the world, he created the alternative of actual sin, and in his mind, this possibility would enhance man's reward, and sanctify G-d's name, by maximizing the tests that man would face.

To this day, there are those who claim that the ideal mode of education is to expose our children to every conceivable lifestyle option, explaining along the way our own preference, and hoping they can be encouraged to follow our own example.

But they fail to recognize that it is precisely this idea that defines man's original sin. Exposing ourselves to evil - though far from justifying or rationalizing its advisability - renders it feasible, and that itself is a corruption, a distortion of creation. Sin cannot be part of our world, nor can it be contemplated, and to do so is an inadvisable exposure of our own vulnerabilities.

To even be witness to sin begets the same negative result.

The Nazir is keenly aware of his own private demons, conscious of his foibles and misdeeds. Yearning to rectify his past, and anxious to guarantee his future, he patches up each area of weakness with the vow that assures he will not slide.

When he sees the Sotah, albeit it in her shame, sin enters his world, and the evil inclination gains a foothold in his life. It is this opening that the Nazir strives to close up tight, for his life is defined by struggle, the ongoing battle of man's mortal enemy, the Yetzer HaRa that lies within.

In our own times, we see the Sotah B'Kilkulah every day of our lives. Whether it be the media that knows no bounds, or the prevalent lifestyle that has cast off all sense of restraint, there is no escape from the sin that envelops the air everywhere we turn.

The least we can do is to be more conscious of the damage done, more sensitive to the difficulties of approaching G-d, and more conscientious of the need to faithfully adhere to the subtleties of His command.

In this way, we can close off a corner of existence for G-d to enter, loosening the chain that leads us to sin, and strengthening the bonds that tie us to His word.

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