

CLASS 48 - TAZRIA

by Rabbi Heshy Grossman

A number of years ago, I was in a barber shop on Pico Blvd. in Los Angeles, patiently waiting my turn. It was the type of place that has since gone out of style; a dingy sign that said 'Joe's' out front, with a slowly revolving candy-stripe display, the smell of fresh shaving cream, old newspapers strewn everywhere, and gruff middle-aged men shooting the breeze.

Like all such establishments, stashed under the counter was a pile of indecent magazines. On this particular day, one loud customer sat gabbing in his chair, flipping through the pages of one such journal with relish, and I sat quietly, muttering angrily under my breath that I'll never come here again.

This particular store had a somewhat 'Jewish' air to it, 'Kosher-style', if you will. The immigrant proprietor had a heavy Yiddish accent, and most of the locals who frequented the store were 'landsmen' from the Old Country.

While I sat gnashing my teeth, promising myself that I wouldn't make a scene, the conversation continued, in Yiddish yet, and our anonymous gentleman was right in the thick of things.

Finally, I couldn't control myself:

"Aren't you embarrassed, a man your age sitting here in front of everybody, reading a dirty magazine?!", I said.

The store was dead silent.

"No, I'm not embarrassed at all", he responded, obviously embarrassed. He continued turning the pages, but this time, I noticed, it was without the same enthusiasm. He waited a few minutes, just enough to save face, and when the subject changed, he quietly put the magazine aside, when no one else would notice.

After he left, one of the other customers turned to me, admonishingly:

"You know, you just did a terrible sin."

I waited to be accused of shaming someone in public, a charge I knew to be true.

Instead, he paused for dramatic effect, and with the others nodding in solemn agreement, he said:

"You stopped a person from having pleasure!"

I had never heard that one before.

Since that time, I have discovered that this approach to life is indeed quite common. Under different guise, it sounds something like this:

"Hashem has created this world for man to enjoy its delights. If He truly meant for these varied pleasures to be forbidden, then why do they exist?"

"Isn't it important for man to be natural?"

Actually, the answer is no.

Let us explain.

1

In every generation, the same arguments are trotted out once more, issues that our Sages countered long ago:

"The wicked Tarnus Rufus asked Rebbe Akiva: Whose deeds are more pleasing, those of man, or G-d?"

"The deeds of man."

"...Why do you circumcise yourselves?"

"I knew that this was your question, and therefore I told you that the deeds of man are more pleasing than those of G-d."

"Rebbe Akiva brought before him whole grains and fine cakes....'These are the handiwork of man, and these are G-d's... aren't these more pleasing than the grain?"

Tarnus Rufus continues:

"If G-d wants you to be circumcised, why isn't a child born circumcised from his mother's womb?"

"Rebbe Akiva responds: And why does the umbilical cord come out with him, attached to his stomach, and his mother must cut it?"

"And in regards to your question: Why is he not born circumcised? G-d gave the Mitzvos for man to be refined through them, as David HaMelech said: 'All the words of G-d are refining.' " (Midrash Tanchuma, Tazria 5)

When man was created, he first could see from one end of the earth to the other. His stature reached towards the heavens and his vision was pure and unsullied.

Adam HaRishon was 'Nolad Mahul' - he was born circumcised.

The Orlah appears only after man sins, and simultaneous with the onset of evil, his height diminishes,

along with his sight. It is a barrier that blocks man's ascent, cutting off the free access to heaven, blurring the world of the spirit.

This is the meaning of the word 'Tumah'. Similar to the word 'TumTum', it connotes being stuffed up, or impenetrable. Death, therefore, is the ultimate 'Tumah', for it is this barrier that prevents mortal man from glancing at eternity.

Taharah, on the other hand, relates to 'Tihara' - the Talmudic term for 'window', for a pure soul has uncluttered vision. It is polished and refined, and the human soul reflects the pristine perfection of the Divine plan, a window to the world above.

Olam HaZeh was once a giant Garden of Eden, every aspect of life a ladder to heaven. But, when man rebelled against G-d's word, and opted for a lower dimension, he corrupted the world and stunted his own growth. No longer would nature be a paradigm of truth and light, for the dark side of existence expresses an alternative vision of its own.

In this new world, man now produces offspring similar to himself, children who are torn in two directions, struggling that their spirit prevail against a material existence that threatens to darken every horizon.

It is this Orlah that he endeavors to remove. On the eighth day of a child's life, elevated above the seven day cycle of the physical world, man is connected to the dimension he left behind. Peeling away the outer shell of existence, he reveals the inner purpose that sustains all life, the goal that all men strive for.

For this reason, a Bris Milah over rides the laws of Shabbos. While Shabbos is the pinnacle of our natural existence, the Bris reminds us that we yearn for more; a return to man's original state, and restoration of a different sort of world.

2

"...Rebbe Gamliel taught: In the future, women are destined to bear children daily....trees will give forth their fruit each day.... the land of Israel will produce fine cakes [rather than grain]...." (Shabbos 30b)

These are the same cakes that Rebbe Akiva shows his wicked friend. They are the sign of the future; a world that once was, and will be once more.

He tells Tarnus Rufus this: In your refusal to toil in self-improvement, to circumscribe your pleasures, you have reduced man to a midget, abandoning his lofty potential. G-d created a perfect world, but you have sullied it.

Whereas once man towered above the earth, today you are content with the physical world that you traverse. Conscious only of what can be seen and touched, you cheapen man's life and deny his true identity.

It is man that is the glory of existence, and the righteous Jew can reach the heavens once more.

3

"What does a good guest say: 'How much effort has the host extended on my behalf! How much meat has been brought before me! How much wine! How many fine cakes! And all of his effort was solely for my benefit!'"

"But, what does a bad guest say? What has this host done for me? I ate merely one piece of bread, and drank one cup of wine. Any efforts he extended were not for my sake, but for his own wife and children!" (Berachos 58a)

The guest is man, and G-d is his host, providing for all his needs. The appreciative visitor happily acknowledges the benefits he receives, indebted to G-d for brightening his life. But, a selfish man denies any gift, unaware that the world was created for him.

This idea seems to conflict with the argument of Rebbe Akiva, who claims that man must toil, disciplining himself and taming his desires before indulging in worldly pleasures. Instead, it presents this world as one huge party, waiting to be devoured.

The answer is this: Yes, the world is a celebration, created for our benefit, but it belongs to G-d, not man.

Imagine being invited to a wedding feast, replete with full repast; buffet tables and sumptuous deserts. Would a guest approach his host with a request that he be served something else, or a demand to change the menu, or venue?

"All that Hashem created in His world, He created for His honor, as it says: 'All that is called by My name, for My honor I have created it, formed it, and made it'...." (Avos 5:11)

The world was created as an act of Chesed, a kindness bestowed upon mankind, but it exists for G-d's purpose, not ours.

Man has the opportunity to grasp a piece of existence, but only in a manner that would attach himself to the Divine purpose, not the other way around. If, instead, he misappropriates the pleasures of this world for his own gain, he subverts the design of creation and condemns himself to oblivion.

While the bad guest struggles to turn simple grain into fancy foods, dissatisfied with a world that will not fulfill his dreams, the good guest sees the world of the future, life as it was meant to be, where fine cakes grow from the ground, and sweet fruits are ready each day.

So, to return to the barber shop: pleasure and happiness are a function of creation, not its aim. We dare not strive for a life of pleasure, but, rather, a world of dedication and devotion, where enjoyment is the fruit of our labors.

Life is an eternal expression of the Divine, who indeed desires to bless the Jewish people, but we are not invited to crash the party, nor may we disobey the rules.

"U'BaYom HaShmini YiMol Besar Orlaso"

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