

MORE POWER TO YOU

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

"Speak to the entire assembly of the Children of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for holy am I, G-d your Lord." (Vayikra/Leviticus 15:2) Ramban (Nachmanides, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman; 1194-1270; native of Gerona, Spain, he was one the leading scholars of the Middle Ages and successfully defended Judaism at the famed debate in Barcelona in 1263) expounds that after the Torah had completed the commandments prohibiting illicit relationships and forbidden consumptions, but allowed marital relationships and consumption of meat and wine, the lustful individual is left to indulge in unbridled pleasure. Whether this pursuit manifests itself in his relationship with his wife or he is gluttonous with wine and meat, such an unrestrained quest simply because these actions were never forbidden by the Torah causes one to become a degenerate within the realm of the Torah. Therefore, the above verse comes and demands restraint and control when those permitted pleasures are enjoyed. We are to approach marital relationships and wine consumption with a sense of holiness and appreciate the sacred roles these endeavors possess, and remember the evils associated with these activities in the Torah with Noah and Lot.

Initially it would appear that Ramban is simply encouraging, within the framework of our pursuit of adding spirituality and holiness - a G-d consciousness - to our lives, the need to avoid excesses in the mundane pleasures of this world. But if the Torah's point here is the positive pursuit of holiness and growth, then why does Ramban need to close with the negative reminder of the sinful drunken episodes of Noah (see Beraishis/Genesis 9:20-23, and Rashi on v. 22) and Lot (see Beraishis/Genesis 19:30-36, and Rashi on v. 31 and 33) and the personal indiscretions that resulted?

Rabbi Alter Henach Leibowitz (Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim of Kew Gardens Hills, New York) elucidates that the Torah's primary message is, indeed, that the quest for physical gratification is empty and loathsome, and should be avoided even without any threat of transgression or sin. But Ramban is reminding us that the pursuit of pleasure DOES lead to sin and that knowledge offers us an extra incentive to shun these indulgences and follow the path of purity. We are, after all, human beings with physical needs and, at times, the goal of holiness is not sufficient to motivate us to put our desires in check. But by looking at the travails of Noah and Lot, by understanding the slippery slope we step onto by engaging in these behaviors, we gain a new perspective and, with it, new fortitude.

Yet a deeper understanding of the actual events surrounding Noah and Lot renews the confusion. They were not simply men who became drunk and sinned in their intoxicated state. In different

ways, each of them was taken advantage of by his children. And both incidents took place after significant miraculous events: the wholesale destruction of civilizations that resulted in the annihilation of thousands of sinners and the alteration of the course of humanity. The circumstances were so unique and strange as to be beyond comparison to anything in our paradigm. From where do we draw inspiration?

Rabbi Leibowitz concludes that as exclusive as were the stressful circumstances surrounding Noah and Lot, equally exclusive is the honor and regard given to the moral standards that Noah and Lot's extremely abhorrent indiscretions violated. The holy and pure neshama (soul) we possess is more elevated than the angels themselves, and we are loath to allow it to become sullied. As such, even the slightest chance of misdeed - as Noah and Lot both actually did, their G-d fearing abhorrence thereof notwithstanding - serves to present us with the fresh perspective and strength to succeed in our quest for holiness.

Our Sages compare the revelation at Sinai, with the Jewish nation's choosing to accept the Torah, to a marriage between G-d and the Children of Israel. The weeks prior to every wedding are occupied with addressing the countless details, with the goal of assuring that everything at the momentous event is perfect. In our quest for perfection prior to our renewal of our acceptance of our Divine commitment on Shavuot, our challenge is great. Fortunately, so, too, is our potential.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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