

OF BLANDISHMENTS AND SEDUCTIONS

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

There would be no tomorrow for Moses. He knows this is the last day of his life, and as he stands before the people, he strives to leave them with a message that would carry them forward to success in the Promised Land. What concerns occupy his mind at this auspicious moment?

He is concerned about the influence of the idolatrous peoples among whom the Jewish people find themselves. "You have seen their abominations," he declares, "their idols forged from wood and stone, from silver and gold." Should anyone embrace these gods, Hashem will respond with fuming anger and the most horrific curses.

Why was Moses so concerned about this? For forty years, he had conditioned the people against idolatry, teaching them the numerous commandments in the Torah which prohibit anything remotely resembling idolatrous practices. Surely, a deep antipathy to idolatry had become ingrained in the national psyche, a strong aversion to the pagan abominations and their degenerate lifestyles. Why was he afraid that they would backslide into idolatry - as indeed they did?

Before we explore this intriguing question, let us focus for a moment on Moses' somewhat curious choice of words. Why does he find it necessary to specify that the abominations are made of "wood and stone, silver and gold"? Why dwell on the range of materials from which idols are made?

Here in this very phrase, explain the commentators, lies the crux of the matter. Moses knew without question that the Jewish people emerging from a forty-year-long divine encounter in the desert, from the daily miracles of the manna and the cloud and fire pillars, from intensive study of the Torah under the tutelage of the greatest prophet of all time, were on a very high spiritual level. Without question, they would find the idols thoroughly abominable, vulgar contrivances of wood and stone.

But human nature is a fickle thing. As time goes on, people have a tendency to come to terms with their surroundings, to legitimize the illegitimate. Before long, Moses feared, those execrable idols of wood and stone might begin to take on a different aspect in their perception, undergoing a transformation to silver and gold. This was where the danger lurked.

In this light, we can understand a rather puzzling comment in the Talmud. In the Torah, the laws of the Nazirite vows and the laws of the suspected adulteress appear next to each other. What is the significance of this juxtaposition? The Talmud explains that when a person witnesses the public degradation of the adulteress, he should take the Nazirite vow of abstinence from wine in order to protect himself from promiscuity.

But why would the sight of an adulteress in disgrace threaten a man's virtue? Shouldn't it have quite the opposite effect? Here again we come face to face with the vagaries of human nature. Although his first reaction might have been profound disapproval, the image of the adulteress may linger on in his mind and becomes legitimized and sanitized with time. Therefore, he should turn to the Nazirite vows for protection.

An old man developed a propensity for alcohol in his old age. During his binges, he would stagger drunkenly through the marketplace and often fall asleep in the gutter. His son, a respected member of the community, was mortified. Something had to be done.

The son decided to take his father to the marketplace on one of his sober days. Together, they walked past the stalls until they found a drunk lying in the gutter in a state of stupefaction.

"Look at him," said the son. "Do you see what drinking does?"

The old man stared intently at the snoring drunk.

"Indeed, I do," he said. "I wonder what kind of wine he is drinking. It seems to be wonderful stuff."

In our own lives, we need to recognize the seductive power of forbidden fruit. "Never trust yourself," the Talmud advises. Just because we frown on the deprivations and abominations of modern society does not mean that we are impervious to moral subversion. What seems disgusting to us today may seem interesting tomorrow. Only by insulating our families from unnecessary exposure to the degeneracy of the street can we preserve the purity and holiness that are inherently ours.

Parshas Vayeilech

The Secrets Of Longevity

Only two mitzvahs in the Torah come with the promise of a long life: Kibud Av V'em - Honoring our parents and Shliach Hakan - sending off the mother bird before taking the fledgling children.

These mitzvahs seem totally dissimilar and unrelated. In fact, the Midrash tells us that the two mitzvahs are the easiest of the easy, and the most difficult of the difficult, yet they should have the same reward. Honoring our parents is extremely difficult. Sending away the mother bird and taking the children is so easy. Why does the Torah designate the exact same reward? And why did the Torah designate these particular two mitzvahs? For the reward of a long life?

The commentaries explain that these two mitzvahs span the spectrum of human nature. The Torah wants us to perform the merciful act of sending away the mother bird before taking the children. Mercy is a common, human emotion. We instinctively feel a search of mercy and compassion when we see an animal in distress. This is because the animal poses no threat to us. Our base goodness emerges when there are no complications and prejudice that come into play. The Torah tells us

to reinforce our mercy and compassion through the mitzvah of Shliach Hakan.

Honoring our parents, however, is one of the most difficult of all mitzvahs. It requires us to acknowledge what they have done for us, and forces us to admit how much we need them, and we could not have done it ourselves. It tests our egocentricity to the limit. We would like to be independent, self sufficient, and invincible. Recognizing our parents forces us to say "I owe it all to you" This then is the most difficult of the mitzvahs.

The Torah, however, does not designate the reward simply on the basis of what is easy and what is not. The infinite reward of mitzvahs is dependant on the spirit in which they were performed, and the love with which they were dispensed. Long life in the world to come can be secured by good deeds regardless of whether our body propels us to do it or creates obstacles. It's how much in a fuel we are contributing to the act that determines its true value. Thus the Torah designates the identical reward for when we are following our base instinct in the easiest of all mitzvahs, or we are countering it in the most difficult. It is the spirit that truly counts.

A king was being paraded along the highway. Jubilant cheers accompanied the row pageantry pomp and splendor. Nearby a fellow was swimming in the river when he heard news of the king's imminent passage. Jumping out the water he saw the king's chariot from the far. In a surge of passion and excitement, he ran up the riverbank and wildly waved and cheered the king in his bathing gear. People were taken aback at his lack of basic. The king noticed him from the far and to the sheer dismay and aghast crowds he welcomed him into his plush carriage. This fellow truly loves him. "He is not thinking of his honor, he is only thinking of mine."

In our own lives let us be conscious of emphasizing the spirit of the mitzvah as much as the details. The details of the rituals are important, but it is the spirit that enables us to lift off the ground and connect to the heavenly spheres ensuring a life of infinite bliss. Text Copyright © 2010 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and **Torah.org**.

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