

FALLING OFF THE HORSE

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

One of the greatest challenges we face in life is being trapped in the rut of our personal shortcomings. As time progresses, we become more alert to those flaws that despite our efforts, have resisted change. It may be a propensity to anger or a lack of organizational skills. It may be a tendency to be self-centered or jealous of others. These mindsets tend to lock us in a viselike grip; as much as we try we simply cannot escape.

One of the underlying principles of both the mussar and the Chassidic schools of thought is that we must never despair of improving our character, even regarding traits that are so stubborn they seem to be genetically embedded.

The saintly Yesod Hoavoda once told his disciples that he asked a professional horse jockey if his horse ever threw him to the ground. "Of course," said the jockey. "Everyone, even the most professional rider, gets thrown from time to time."

"What do you do when you get thrown?" asked the Yesod Hoavodah. "I hold on to the reins and jump back on to the saddle as fast as I can. If not, the horse will run away and I will be left with nothing," the horse jockey replied.

"Our body too, pulls in different directions. While we try to harness its instincts, they are often times more powerful than we are, but that does not mean that we must despair of ever changing. Admitting defeat should be unthinkable-since striving for self-improvement and self-elevation is what our task in this world is all about.

King Solomon says in Koheles, "Sheva yipol tzadik vekam," seven times the righteous fall, but they will stand. Simply put, a righteous person will fall seven times but will continuously struggle back to his feet and get back in the running.

There is a classical homiletical interpretation of this verse that provides an avenue to assist us in getting back on our feet after a fall. A great Chassidic sage said we may fall seven times but if we know that deep down, our most fundamental desire is to be virtuous, to cleanse ourselves of unsavory instincts and elevate ourselves to be moral moral, giving and unselfish, we will persevere.

Just as a child when severely criticized will tend to internalize the judgment and feel he or she is incurably bad, we adults may also become harshly self-critical and "throw in the towel" on trying to improve. Instead of giving more power to our nature's darker side, however, our job is to reinforce

the belief that a human being can reach for-and attain-the stars. We must stand erect and jump back in to the lifelong challenge of self-improvement, relying on assistance from Above to help us in the struggle.

This theme is echoed in a verse in this week's Parsha. The Torah tells us, Vehaya, im lo sishmiun bekoli," and it will come to pass, if you do not obey my voice and you stray after idols, I warn you today that you will be utterly destroyed and decimated, if you do not heed my voice. The word "vehaya" always precedes joyous tidings, the Sages say. Why then in so tragic a situation as the Jewish people straying from hearkening to G-d's word should the Torah use the word "vehaya?"

Furthermore, the commentaries ask, why does this piece conclude with the verse that all these terrible punishments will befall you since "you do not listen to Hashem's voice" (present tense)? Would it not be more apropos to write "since you have not listened to Hashem's voice" (past tense)?

The saintly Bnei Yisaschar explains that the Torah is alluding to the very concept we have discussed above. Sometimes we stray very far from where we are supposed to be. A little voice inside of us tells us that we are doomed and we might as well come to terms with our personal failure and embrace our diminished and compromised status. We will never be able to regain our footing and climb back up to spiritual heights.

It is that self-critical voice that is constantly buzzing inside of us, declaring we are doomed. Yet "vehaya," -the joyous tidings associated with this word teaches that the way to arouse Hashem's joy, so to speak, even as our inner voice condemns us, is to resist that voice with all our energy, and to choose self-affirmation instead. Bolstered by faith in Hashem's helping power, we can boost our self-confidence and courage in tackling life's ever-present challenges, and thereby succeed in realizing our inner spiritual aspirations.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos.

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