

AIMING FOR THE "GOOD LIFE?"

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

The Talmud (Shabbos 147b) recommends that people avoid two places (Progaia and Dyomeses by name), because they surround the visitor with opportunities for physical pleasures (fine wine, luxurious baths) which the locals use at every opportunity. Thus one can sit back and have a good time - such a good time that he loses himself in the physical world.

We are further told that this actually happened to one of the great Talmudic sages, Rabbi Elazar ben Arach. He went to these places and "was drawn after them," and as a result, he forgot the Torah he had learned! So complete was his downfall that when they called him up to the Torah to read from our parsha, he attempted to read "HaChodesh Hazeh Lachem" - this month is for you (the first of months) [12:2], and instead read "HaCheresh Hayah Libam" - their heart had become deaf and mute. This was a self-description - he had lost himself in enjoying this world, and forgotten his priorities. His heart had "tuned in" on worldly pleasures, and thus had tuned out (become deaf to) the spiritual realms. As a result, he found himself bereft of the Torah he had learned in better times. Only when the Rabbis prayed for him did his Torah learning return.

It's a scary thought, given that our lives are so comfortable today. Are we using the time our modern comforts provide to seek something more than another vacation, or are we simply aiming for the "good life?" Are we tuning in, or tuning out?

Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Kotzk has a cryptic comment about this Talmudic passage. He says, "even though 'their heart had become deaf and mute,' even so 'this month is for you (the first of months).'"

A possible explanation of this statement occurred to me as I read it. We know that this is a commandment - the Jewish courts had a process by which they declared the appearance of the new moon, for Nissan and all the months that follow. We also know that this commandment is the first given to the Jewish people, given to them before the Torah itself. They received it while they were still slaves to the Egyptians, and while they were in their worst spiritual state.

The ability to declare the months, to specify by ruling of the Jewish courts when the months begin, testifies to the ability of the Jewish people to have an impact in the spiritual realms. We declare when Nissan begins, and thus we declare when Passover (the fifteenth of Nissan) will come to the world.

"Even though 'their heart had become deaf and mute,' even so 'this month is for you (the first of months).'" Even if we are in the worst spiritual state, this does not mean that we are worthless or ignored by G-d. **We** may have tuned out, but nonetheless we have an impact. G-d still sees us and cares for us, and waits for us to tune back in.

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The author is the Director of Project Genesis.