

WE STAND ON GUARD FOR THEE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

You shall safeguard the matzos; for on this very day I will have taken your legions out of the land of Egypt. (12:17)

The simple meaning of this verse is that we must be scrupulous in guarding the matzos when baking them from becoming leavened. Even the slightest delay, heat, or moisture, can cause the grain, flour, or dough to become chametz. Rashi quotes Rabbi Yohaya (Mechilta), who introduces a novel interpretation of the verse: The word 'matzos' is written in Hebrew identically to the word 'mitzvos' (commandments). What is the connection between matzos and mitzvos? Just like matzos can become disqualified and unacceptable through delay - so it is with mitzvos; in his words, "If a mitzvah comes to your hand, do not let it become chametz - do it right away!"

Although this is a beautiful homiletical explanation of the verse, K'sav Sofer notes that we are left wondering how this interpretation works itself into the verse's conclusion: "Because on this very day, I will have taken your legions out of the land of Egypt." What is the relationship between the Exodus from Egypt and speedy mitzvah performance?

Chazal (our Sages) refer symbolically to our evil side (the yetzer hara) as "S'or she-b'issa - the yeast in the dough. (Berachos 17a)" When kneading the dough for the matzos, halacha (Jewish law) requires that the mixture receive constant movement. If one allows the dough to sit for any length of time without kneading, there is concern it could begin to leaven immediately. The same is true, he says, with the "dough" of our personalities. A person may strive long and hard to conquer a certain aspect of his personality, yet if he lets up his guard and ceases to "work the dough" for even the shortest duration, he risks falling right back into the abyss.

"Never say, 'When I will be free, I will learn,' - perhaps you will not become free. (Avos 2:4)" Be'er Mayim Chaim writes that when one "goes to battle" with the yetzer hara, the road to success is long and bumpy and fraught with potholes. Nevertheless, the purpose of our existence is to travel that ever-winding road in search of sh'leimas ha- middos; character perfection. How sad it is, he laments, that one may work for weeks, months, or even years to conquer a problematic aspect of his personality, and yet when he's finally at the breakthrough point, the yetzer hara throws at him "one last trick" from his rueful bag, and he is tempted, and succumbs to that temptation, and squanders everything he has worked for over a pittance.

Let us say, for example (this is his example) one has a problem with fiscal honesty. He cheated on his

taxes, took office supplies without permission, overcharged for his merchandise, etc. One day, this person decides to change his life for the better. He puts his finances in order, and decides that from now on, he will earn an honest living by the sweat of his brow, rather than to live in the lap of luxury at the expense of his integrity. It is not easy. Money that he was used to having is no longer there; he finds himself making do with less. Better an honest pauper, he repeats to himself, than a prosperous fraud! He forges on - and he feels Hashem urging him to keep it up.

(Honesty is just one example. For each of us it's something different; perhaps many different things. Anger, lust, laziness, fear, arrogance - we all (hopefully) do battle with the lesser side of our characters on a constant basis. Overcoming even the most trifling weakness is no simple task!)

There comes a time, says the Be'er Mayim Chaim, when he reaches a breakthrough barrier. What had once seemed difficult is about to become part of his "new" personality. He is about to receive from Above a refurbished - honest - second nature. But there is one last test. Perhaps something seemingly so insignificant that it fails to trigger his internal alarm. Pass this test, and you will have taken your life to a new sphere. Fail it, and you will be back at square one. The window of opportunity has been opened; Hashem beckons from the other side - jump through, and you will be a better person! But the window will not stay open for long. Let down your guard, and it will be slammed in your face; opportunity lost.

How many times has this scenario played itself out in our lives? We'll never know. The window of opportunity for growth and shleimus does not announce its arrival. It doesn't say, "I'm here - now's the time!" It leaves us as silently as it comes; only the most sensitive discern its presence.

Chazal (see Sh'la Hagadah shel Pesach, Chessed L'Avraham) teach that had the Jews remained in Egypt even one second longer, they would have descended to levels of impurity and impropriety that would have precluded their redemption. For on this very day - at this very moment, I will have taken your legions out of the land of Egypt - but a moment later, I could not have.

The Exodus from Mitzrayim, explains the K'Sav Sofer, teaches us the importance of not letting our guard down for even a moment. We never know when the window of opportunity is open, and when it's about to close. You shall safeguard the mitzvos - with the same degree of caution and alacrity as you guard the matzos. For on this very day I will have taken your legions out of Egypt - take heed, and remember that a time will come when one second makes all the difference in the world.

Have a good Shabbos.

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