

OUT LIKE A LIGHT

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Teshuva: Out Like a Light

A common misconception: In the olden times, people did not know as much as we do today about the cycles of the heavenly bodies, so they needed eye-witnesses to testify to the first visibility of the new-moon in order to know when Rosh Chodesh should be. Today, with advanced knowledge of astronomy and mathematics, and with computers and all that, we don't need witnesses.

Major misconception.

In the olden times, the heavenly cycles were well studied and known. The position of the moon was known at all times. In fact, the Rambam (Maimonides) says that it is a mitzva incumbent upon the Sanhedrin (High Court) to make the necessary calculations in order to be able to tell if the witnesses actually saw what they claim to have seen. This means that when witnesses came to Yerushalayim to testify to what the Sanhedrin already knew. If the Court determined that the new-moon would not be visible on a certain evening, then they did not even receive witnesses. Hundreds of witnesses can come to testify on that night, each wanting to swear that he saw the new-moon; it won't move the Sanhedrin to do more than to double-check its calculations.

Unlike other kinds of testimony, where witnesses testify to a truth that is unknown to the judges, here we have the opposite: The witness thinks he saw the first visibility of the new moon, yet he really cannot have. The moon at this time of the month is showing a very small chip of light - too small to be called a crescent yet - very low on the horizon where visibility is poorest, shortly after sunset when the sky is not really dark yet, for a short period of time before the moon sets. Clouds, ground haze, pollution, fog, trees, buildings, and other obstructions will block out the new moon. Yet all this time, the Sanhedrin (and anyone else with knowledge of astronomy) will know exactly where the moon is. (Torah Tidbits - 5758)

So, if the Sanhedrin knew when to expect witnesses, why did they need them? Why do we want witnesses when, (a) We know what they are going to say before they do, and, (b) They are less reliable than our calculations? (And to think that, IY"H, when we will once again have a Sanhedrin, we will return to this "primitive" method of doing things!?)

The Midrash describes the onslaught of the plague of frogs: Originally, there was just one big "mother frog." Thinking they would nip things in the bud, the Egyptians began striking the frog with

their sticks in an attempt to kill it. Yet each time they would strike it, instead of dying, the giant frog simply multiplied. (Would this, perhaps, be an alternate method to teach students their "multiplication" tables?)

Now at first, this must have come to them as quite a surprise. But as time wore on, and the novelty wore off, one would have thought the Egyptians might have seen a pattern emerging, and stopped striking the frog, so as to not further increase the plague. Yet they did not.

Foolish? Imbecilic. Yet how often does this happen to us: We have a problem to handle. It's there. It's obvious. It's staring us in the face. Yet instead of dealing with the problem, we actually add it through ill- advised actions. Even as we act, we know that we are doing unwisely, compounding an already difficult situation, and winding the web of our tzuers even tighter. What may have started off as a relatively small and manageable challenge has now grown and multiplied into a gawky, unwieldy monster. Sound familiar?

So teshuva, repentance, is not simply "knowing what to do." It's the conscious decision to make a change for the better, and to take the necessary actions to do so. To stop things from spiralling out of control, preferably before we have a serious plague to deal with.

Chazal, our Sages, put it thus: "Lo ha-midrash hu ha-ikkar, elah ha- ma'aseh, Knowing what to do isn't the main point - the main point is doing it! (Avos 1:17)"

Commentators write that the mitzvah of sanctifying the new-moon is an allusion to teshuva. We rejoice in the emergence of a renewed light, however small, from what had just before been total darkness. Although at first small, that light is destined, in a relatively short time, to develop into a full-fledged moon, which will light up the nighttime sky.

Nothing can hold a person back from teshuva - not his childhood, not his family, his financial standing, his life-history, not even the previous moment just before now. As someone once wrote, "The very first step of change is so powerful; the boundaries of time fall aside. In one bittersweet moment, the sting of the past is dissolved, and its honey salvaged." If your past resembles the spiralling spring, winding and burying itself deeper and deeper, then use the built-up tension to catapult yourself to heights before unreachable. (In fact, in some sense, the further back the spring is pulled, the greater its potential, which is kind of encouraging.) From the darkness, a new light emerges...

Perhaps this is why, for everything Sanhedrin knew, they could not declare the new moon without the testimony of witnesses. When it comes to teshuva, knowledge alone will not suffice. There must be the conscious decision to get up and do something. To abandon the self-defeating ways that seem to have gotten the better of us, and get ourselves moving on the right track again. Making that decision, and taking the first serious steps, are the hardest part. After that, the sailing gets smoother.

Have a good Shabbos.

This week's publication is sponsored in honour of the engagement of Sara Shifra, daughter of Etel Goldenstein and Moshe Zeidel Kaiserman, to Yehoshua Shlomo Wunder. And in gratitude to Hashem Yisborach for sending me my wife, Etel, and for all the kindness He has done with us. From Moshe Mordechai Daniel.

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