

'MOMENT'ARY BLUNDERS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

One hundred and twenty years is a fairly long time - even in the days before the flood when people lived six or seven hundred years. This is how long Noach spent constructing the Ark. Hashem wanted to give the earth's populace time to reconsider their corrupt ways. So for 120 years, whoever saw Noach hammering away at his ship and asked what he was doing was warned that a calamity was coming - unless they repented. R' Shalom Schwadron zt"l points out that it's possible the excessive length of time was to some extent an excuse for their apathy. Imagine someone who was born well into Noach's project. "Daddy, what's Noach doing?" "My son, don't even ask! Nebuch, that man and his mabul - he's gone completely off the deep end! For eighty years he's been building that boat and warning people that 'a flood is coming!' Give us a break!"

Even if it's not difficult to understand how for the first 120 years they failed to take Noach seriously, when the rain started to fall, things got a bit more antsy. After Noach and family boarded the Ark, his contemporaries surrounded it in order to destroy it. "If we're going to drown, so are you!" Hashem encircled the Ark with lions and bears in order to protect its occupants. One might have hoped that at this point, some of them might have been just a tad nervous that perhaps there was something to Noach's message of repentance and reconciliation. After all, it's not everyday that wild animals come to protect a man from his aggressors (when's the last time it happened to you?!). Were they to have repented at this point, they would have had a nice earth-soaking rainfall. Yet they remained unwavering in their corruption. Why was Noach's generation so obstinate? How could they have been oblivious to the obvious warning signs of their impending destruction?

The Gemara (Avoda Zara 17a) tells the story of a certain Jew, Elazer ben Durdaya, who "left no stone unturned" in his quest to experience every type of sin he possibly could. At some point late in his life, an incident occurred which filled his heart with sudden and severe remorse, so much so that he began to cry uncontrollable tears of regret, until his very soul could no longer tolerate his bitter remorse, and departed him. A Heavenly voice rang out: "Fortunate are you, R' Elazer! You have received your portion in the World to Come!" Rebbe - Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi - cried: "Some people work many years to merit their portion in the World to Come, and some do it in a moment!"

Why did Rebbe cry? Did it bother him that while he and others spent a lifetime immersed in Torah study and mitzvah performance in order to receive their portion in the World to Come, others managed to do so in a short yet sincere moment of remorse and repentance? Did Rebbe wish, G-d forbid, that he and others could likewise live a lifestyle of corruption and depravity, and fix it all at the

last moment?

The Belzer Rebbe zt"l did not as a rule allow his followers to leave the bitter life of pre-War Europe in order to find their fortunes in America, Land of Golden Sidewalks. "America," he would say, "is a tumene land - a country full of corruption and impurity. You will go there and you will shave off your beards, and cast off your Jewish clothing, and forsake your heritage (which is indeed what happened to the vast majority of frum Jews who came to America before the post-war exodus from Europe). Rather a poor and persecuted Jew in Poland, than a rich 'gentile' in America!"

Once, an audacious chassid travelled to America despite his Rebbe's warnings. Years later, he returned to Poland a wealthy businessman. His long beard was still intact, as was his Jewish attire and his faith. His dedication to Yiddishkeit had not waned. He went to see the Rebbe. The Rebbe asked for a razor. "Here - shave off your beard." The chassid was dumbfounded. He had kept his beard unshaven through years of tremendous sacrifice and dedication, and now the Rebbe was telling him to shave it off?! "If you will return from America looking like you do, others will look at you and say, 'See - it can be done! America's not so bad after all.' Shave off your beard, so that everyone knows this is what happens in America!"

Perhaps this was why Rebbe cried "Some receive their share in the World to Come in a moment!" He was concerned that others would hear the story of R' Elazer ben Durdaya and think to themselves, "If he can do it, so can I!" They would allow themselves to be lulled into a lifestyle of sin and self-serving pleasure-seeking, thinking all the while that all was not lost. "After all, all I need is a moment!"

Rebbe cried. R' Elazer ben Durdayas are few and far between. Most people, once entrenched in materialism and sin, become so blind and desensitized to anything spiritual that the chances of them suddenly being overcome by remorse are close to nil. The more we distance ourselves, the slimmer our chances get. "Just one more drink," thinks the alcoholic, "then I'll really quit. I mean it."

The Gemara (Eiruvim 19a) says that even as the wicked approach the Gates of Gehinom, they still refuse to repent. Don't think, says R' Shalom, that it's because they don't want to. They simply can't. They are so severely shackled to the chains of pleasure-seeking and sin that they are simply incapable of detaching themselves. Like the mosquito, who, unable to stop, will continue drawing its victims blood until its tiny body explodes, the pleasure-seeker blindly continues in his ways, even as he finds them leading him to the Gates of Hell. He is powerless to stop.

The people of Noach's generation were so degenerate that even the strongest and most obvious messages could not deter them from their depravity. They would go to their graves in the drunken stupor of their greed and obsession rather than to a "moment" to reconsider their ways.

What does this mean to us? What if we too have allowed ourselves to become numb to the spiritual messages of our souls, meandering in the darkness like the blind animal, unable to find our way out?

To expect that in one powerful "moment" we will suddenly be overcome by an unstoppable wave of

remorse is not realistic. The repentance of the person "drowning" in the waters of pleasure-seeking and sin must be one based on action, not on thought. "One who has witnessed the downfall of a sinner," says the Gemara (Berachos 63a), "should refrain from drinking wine." R' Shalom quotes the Mabit (Beis Elokim) who explains that one who has been awakened by thoughts of teshuva (repentance) must do something concrete, even if small, to solidify his feelings. Otherwise, he will soon find himself once again drowning in the tidal wave of materialism and confusion that got him where he is in the first place. Only by adapting small yet concrete changes in our lives can we realistically hope to overcome our weaknesses and pitfalls.

Have a good Shabbos.

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