

A COSTLY YUD

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

A Tiyere Yid (A Costly Yud)

Parshas Shoftim contains many mitzvos relevant to a Jewish king. Among them: He must be of Jewish descent; he may not have many horses, many wives, nor excessive gold and silver; he must write himself a Torah scroll and read from it all the days of his life (17:14-20). Regarding the stipulation that he not take many wives, there is a fascinating Midrash (Shemos Rabbah 6:1):

When Shlomo Ha-melech (King Solomon) "outsmarted" the Heavenly decree that a Jewish king may not marry more than 18 wives (he took more), saying, "Why did Hashem say, 'He shall not take many wives (Lo yarbeh lo nashim)?' Only in order that, 'his heart may not be swayed (from the Torah)! I can handle more wives without being swayed!' At that moment, our Sages say, the letter Yud from the word "lo yarbeh" came and threw itself before the Almighty. "Master of the Universe," she said, "did You not decree that not even one letter of the holy Torah will ever be erased? Behold, Shlomo has come and nullified me!" Replied the Almighty, "Shlomo and a thousand like him may be nullified before even the tip of a Yud will ever be erased from the Torah!"

Why, ask the mefarshim, was it specifically the letter Yud that came to voice her concerns, and not the entire word yarbeh or perhaps even the entire verse?

R' Shimon Schwab (Mayan Beis Ha-shoeivah) explains as follows: Certainly we can't entertain the thought that King Shlomo blatantly ignored one of the Torah's mitzvos simply because he felt he was above it. Since when do we have the right to pick-and-choose our mitzvos, presuming to know better than the Giver of the Torah Himself - Who made no such distinction? Shlomo's error was in his interpretation of the mitzvah: Since the Torah reveals the reason behind this mitzvah, "... in order that his heart not be swayed," it follows that if one were able to guarantee that his heart would not be swayed by his harem, he should presumably - by dint of the Torah's own statement - be exempt from the prohibition.

"How could it be that I," said Shlomo, "who has written Song of Songs, which is 'Holy of Holies' (Yadayim 3:5), a poem overflowing with love and devotion to the Holy One Blessed is He, that my heart be swayed by mere women? Impossible!" When Shlomo would read this verse from the Torah, he would stress the letter Yud of the word lo yarbeh - for in the conjugation of the verb, it is the letter Yud which is added to the root to determine the verb's subject, in this case rendering it third-person ("He shall not take many wives"). It is as if to say, "Of course I acknowledge there exists such a

mitzvah - but it's meant for yenem (other kings) - not for me!" It was thus, explains R' Schwab, the letter Yud who felt she had been abused and misused that came before Hashem to complain.

The following question comes to mind: What if Shlomo would have in fact succeeded in doing what he did? What if he would have married a thousand wives, yet continued to serve Hashem with all his heart and soul, perhaps even attaining new heights of kedusha and righteousness? Is it only because things didn't work out that he is criticized, or would he have been reprimanded regardless? If so, why do Chazal stress the point that in the end he only outsmarted himself - it shouldn't really matter.

A similar question can apparently be asked with regard to the Gemara's famous story (Shabbos 10b) of R' Yishmael ben Elisha, who disregarded the Sages' warning not to learn on Shabbos by the light of a candle lest he come to adjust the flame, and ultimately made the mistake of adjusting the flame. What if he hadn't? If it's irrelevant, then why make the point?

There is neither wisdom, nor understanding, nor counsel against Hashem. The horse is prepared for the day of war, yet salvation is to Hashem. (Mishlei/Proverbs 21:30-31)

Ibn Ezra explains the connection between the above two verses (see Malbim who elaborates): One who takes a microscopic view of existence can readily come to the conclusion that man is in complete control of his destiny. At this moment, I can choose to breathe, or to hold my breath; to cause pain to others or to help them; to travel or to stay put. In a limited sense this is true. The broader the view one takes, however, the more apparent it becomes that there are forces (read Forces) in play (i.e. Hasgacha pratis - G-d's design) that are pulling strings as pervasive as they are subtle.

In a military battle, it is also true that one side can momentarily gain the edge by preparing a "horse," or any other weapon/means of attack/defence, etc. which surprises or overwhelms one's foe. At the end of the day, though, it is not the isolated event that decides the outcome. Modern history bears witness to the fact that it is not necessarily the side with the newest technology nor the most powerful bombs that emerges victorious: Salvation is to Hashem.

This, he explains, is what the above verses stress: There is neither wisdom, nor understanding, nor counsel against Hashem - no one can outsmart the Almighty, Who's will ultimately prevails despite all man may do to establish his own destiny. Just like: The horse is prepared for the day of war - yet salvation is to Hashem.

What this means to us is this: It is possible for one to "outsmart" the Torah or the advice of the Sages, in a very limited sense. We have the choice (though not the authorization) to ignore their advice and do as we please, and we may even feel vindicated after having done so and apparently suffered no ill-effects from our escapades. This is all the "micro" view; what we see in the very short term.

The macro picture is not so pretty. If the Torah, or our Sages whose advice the Torah commands us to heed, have stated that x will lead to y, then rest assured that ultimately it will be so, against all our

attempts to prove the contrary. We may not recognize it right away - it may take days, months, years, or even a lifetime - but rest assured that at some point down the road a crystal-clear picture will start to emerge that where we thought we'd outsmarted the Torah, all we've really done is duped ourselves. It's inevitable, as much as we like to convince ourselves it's not so.

The letter Yud, aside from identifying subject, also identifies a verb's tense. In the case of lo yarbeh, the Yud tells us that the root should be read in the future tense. It is the letter Yud, representing the future repercussions of present actions, that came to voice her concerns. What the Torah is telling us is that although one may in some sense be able to predict, as did Shlomo, that "I can increase (my wives) yet suffer no ill effect," as humans we at best have some sense of the present. How our decisions will pan out over time - over a lifetime of countless interrelated and intertwined events and chance meetings and happenings - is something we not only don't control, but can't even perceive with any accuracy. We may wish to imagine, as did Shlomo and R' Yishmael, that "I am different." What the Midrash is telling us is it just isn't so.

Have a good Shabbos.

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