

DOUBLE STANDARDS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Comfort My nation, comfort them—your G-d will say. Speak to the heart of Yerushalayim, and call out to it! For her armed battles have ended, and her sins have been accepted, for she has received from Hashem's hand double for all her sins. (Yeshaya/Isaiah 40:1-2)

Having completed the Three Weeks of mourning, this Shabbos we begin a cycle of seven Haftorahs (the Haftorah is a section from the Prophets recited after the weekly parsha) known as the Shiv'a De-nechemta—the Seven Haftorahs of Consolation. Israel is reassured that its sins will ultimately be forgiven, its exile will end, and the entire nation will be returned to their Land, where they will enjoy the glory of Hashem's presence to an extent that exceeds even the most glorious days of our past.

This Shabbos is known as Shabbos Nachamu, the Shabbos of Comfort or Consolation. The first words of its Haftorah are, "Comfort My nation, comfort them." Indeed, Isaiah's words of consolation carry the promise of comfort and security we currently lack and pray for—"for her armed battles have ended." The assurance of our sins being accepted/forgiven is also very comforting. But after reading the verse's conclusion, "for she has received from Hashem's hand double for all her sins," one questions whether it's such a comforting thought after all. Double portions are fine if we're dealing with desert or a pay bonus, but who wants a double serving of retribution and recompense? Besides which, how is it just for anyone to receive "double for his sins?" Sin results in punishment; this is an unfortunate but unavoidable tenet of our faith which the Rambam counts among his 13 Principles of Faith (of course reward for our good is the fortunate flip-side of this coin). But where does the novel concept of getting double fit in?

"Jerusalem has sinned a sin. (Eicha/Lamentations 1:8)" The Midrash (1:57) comments:

They sinned doubly ('sinned a sin'); they were punished doubly; and they will be consoled doubly, as it says, 'Console My nation, console them.'

It appears our 'double portion' is a result of some double sin we've committed, for which we are eventually to be doubly comforted. We can sin twice, but how does one commit a double sin? And in what way will our consolation likewise be double?

R' Shlomo Kluger zt"l (Imrei Shafer, Nitzavim, 3) explains why the Torah contains two distinct sections of Tochacha/Admonishment and Rebuke, one in parshas Bechokosai and one in Ki Savo. We all know the famous line, before the father/rebbe gives his son 'what he's got coming to him'—"this hurts me more than it hurts you." While children may not really believe this to be the case—after all

they've got the red mark and you don't—it really is hard for parents and teachers to punish. A parent loves their child. The greater the love, the more difficult it is to see them hurting—all the more so if we see ourselves as the source of that pain. Many a bratty child has used this time-tested truth to avoid punishment with a last-minute sincere, or not-so-sincere, apology.

More than the love of a parent to his cherished child, Hashem loves us. He set things up such that sins must be punished. He did so, we are taught, for our good. Without the element of fear, we would stand little chance of fulfilling the difficult commitment to a Torah life. And without follow-through, there is no fear. So ultimately, to His great chagrin (to the extent we can express it), Hashem must at times punish His beloved children.

Inadvertently, then, by sinning and causing Hashem to punish us (if we fail to do teshuvah/repentance in a timely fashion), we are causing further pain to Hashem. And for that pain, says Imrei Shafer, we will also be held accountable. For every sin we commit we are in a sense doing a double wrong; we are ignoring G-d's will by doing something He told us not to, and we are flaunting the pain and disappointment He feels at having to see us thus, and the punishment we force Him to administer. This, he explains, is the hidden meaning of (Avos 4:2), "One sin leads to another; the result of a sin is another sin."

The first rebuke in parshas Bechukosai warns us that if we sin we will be punished. The second rebuke, in parshas Ki Savo, warns that we will be punished as well for making Hashem punish us.

Haunting. Therein, though, lies a pleasant thought. If there would only have been one rebuke, we would simply have said Hashem punishes sinners. The second rebuke—the punishment for punishment—inadvertently speaks volumes about Hashem's immeasurable love for us. His pain in having to reprimand His children is so great that it warrants a separate accounting! [Minchas Ze'ev]

This, says R' Shlomo Kluger, explains the famous Midrash at the beginning of parshas Nitzavim, immediately following the Tochacha of parshas Ki Savo (see Rashi there). "After hearing the Admonishment, the people turned green with fear. Moshe told them, 'These curses stand you on your feet (Nitzavim)!'" Because through the curses of parshas Ki Savo, which warn us that we will be punished for the suffering we cause Hashem in having to punish us, we come to understand how much He loves us.

Aside from serving as a revelation of Hashem's love, there is another salient point about the double-punishment. If we're punished doubly for the pain of punishment, then perforce we must be rewarded doubly for all our mitzvos: For doing Hashem's will, and for giving Him the opportunity to reward us, which (to the extent we can express it) gives Him great pleasure, and satisfies the main reason for which He created the world. If "one sin leads to another," as R' Shlomo Kluger explains it, then one mitzvah certainly leads to another. So while it may not seem like much fun to be held doubly-accountable, when we realize the love it symbolizes, and what it translates to when taken from a mitzvah perspective, it may not so bad after all.

Jerusalem has sinned a sin—she has sinned doubly; she has transgressed the Torah, and she has caused her Father anguish in punishing her. She has been punished doubly—for the sin, and for the punishment. But she will be consoled doubly—by understanding the great love this implies, and by realizing that in the Days of Reward, she will be doubly rewarded, for her mitzvos, and for accepting their reward.

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