

A MATTER OF ATTITUDES AND ALTITUDES

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Declare before G-d, your G-d, "I have removed all the holy portions from the house, and have given the due to the Levi, the proselyte, the orphan, and the widow, according to Your commandments which You have commanded me. I have not transgressed Your commandments, nor have I forgotten them.
(Devarim 26:13)

One of the heaviest parshios in the Torah begins with mitzvos of dealing with produce of the land. First, there is the mitzvah of bikurim -- the mitzvah to bring the first fruits up to the Temple, which, in itself, was quite a procedure and celebration. Next, there is the mitzvah to verbally verify that all tithes due have been given to their respective recipients, as mentioned above.

Then come the blessings and the curses, all ninety-eight of them.

What is the connection between this and this?

The Talmud answers this question with the following point:

Rabbah bar Bar Chanah said in the name of Rebi Yochanan, who said it in the name of Rebi Yehudah bar Illai: Come and see how the later generations differed from the earlier generations. The earlier generations used to bring their fruits through the gate (Tosfos, q.v. Troksimon) in order to make them subject to tithes. The later generations used to bring them over the roof and through outside enclosures in order to exempt them from tithes Š (Gittin 81a)

For, as the Talmud explains, produce is not subject to tithes until it "sees" the house, which, as Rashi explains, means coming in through the gate, and not through the courtyard or the roof. Tosfos explains that this technical loophole, based upon the above posuk, "I have removed all the holy portions from the house Š" only works on a temporary basis. However, one can, perhaps, assume that the same people who relied upon this leniency on a temporary basis would have done so on a permanent basis, if they could have.

Why? Because, leniencies in halachah exist for people for whom, for one reason or another, alternatives to be more strict do not exist. They are, ideally-speaking, for people whom would like to do the halachah in the BEST WAY POSSIBLE, but, are prevented from doing so for reasons beyond

their control. As the Talmud says, the Torah was not given to Ministering Angels, but, to humans who have physical limitations, and Halachah takes this into account.

However, when leniencies become a way of life, a way to skirt the true law with what people rationalize is a "clear conscience," then, it is called "yeridos hadoros," a spiritual lessening of the generation. It is indicative of a lack of love of G-d, of Torah, of His mitzvos, and, a lack of belief in reward in the World-to-Come, which can only come from self-sacrifice in This World.

It is also indicative of the beginning of the end, the path to curse as opposed to blessing.

Consider the following article:

The Cheater Principle: Americans are indulging in old-fashioned petty cheating like never before.

By EILEEN DASPIN
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

For Mike, a recent cross-country flight was business as usual: He boarded the plane early, found his seat in coach and tucked his bag into the overhead bin. He then moved back up the aisle and settled into a plush leather post in first class.

"It was exhilarating," says Mr. , who works at a TV network in Los Angeles and has self-upgraded four or five times recently. "I felt like I robbed a bank."

Americans may have fatter wallets these days, but you'd never know it from the way they're nickel and diming the system. In what may be one of the oddest aspects of the New Economy, businesses across the country are reporting an upturn in old-fashioned petty cheating. Instead of doing well by doing good, many people are doing well by acting badly: barreling through toll booths without paying, sneaking onto expensive golf courses, even stiffing restaurants for the bill. Often, these are consumers who could easily afford to pay but view their actions as a kind of protest over high prices or poor service. Others simply fret that this might be the tail end of the economic boom -- and want to grab what they can now.

So they're resorting to a new brand of self-help. The National Association of Convenience Stores says that, even after adjusting for higher gasoline prices, there has been more than a threefold increase this year in the amount of money lost to people who drive away from the pump without paying.

Another scheme: buying items such as a party dress or a power tool, using them and then taking them back; retail consulting firm Doneger Group estimates that practice has jumped about 15% over the past few years. At many restaurants, theft of everything from silverware to bottles of wine is also up; Aureole in Las Vegas says it lost \$10,000 in Limoges ashtrays alone in its first two weeks of operations last year.

"The taking-advantage people have gotten worse," says Bud Konheim, president of designer Nicole

Miller. "There used to be a mentality that I don't take something that's not mine. Now, it's, "Look at everyone getting rich. How about me?" "

Take Kevin. The New Jersey engineer says that "on principle," he never pays the tolls on the Garden State Parkway. His reason: The toll plazas are badly designed and irritating, with far too many cars converging at the same time. The state "set up a system so bad, you have to abuse it," he says. Even if he were to get hit with the standard \$250 fine (and he hasn't yet), he figures it still will have been worth it since he's already busted through more than 700 tolls at 35 cents a pop.

While people have always chiseled around the rules, this kind of self-help is especially vexing to proprietors because it seems so unnecessary. Not only are many of the perpetrators relatively well-off, but the objects of their transgressions often carry remarkably little value.

Elaine Petrocelli, owner of Book Passages in San Mateo, Calif., says she has grown particularly frustrated with people trying to get full-price refunds on books bought from discounters. She turns them away. "You want to send them to Miss Manners," says Ms. Petrocelli. "But snuffing out these self-helpers may be an uphill battle. After all, since most of this stuff isn't regarded as serious enough to warrant fines or prosecution, a lot of cheaters don't even care about getting caught. "The repercussions are worth it," says Mr. , adding that even though he's been busted a number of times on airplanes, the humiliation of getting sent back to coach is nothing compared to the thrill of a free ride. Each conned upgrade has saved him a couple thousand dollars and made him feel like a million bucks: "You transform into this person who believes they should be in first class."

End of article; I only used half of it. Just a lot of hype? Just a breaking story?

I agree that not everyone is like this, and maybe not even the vast majority of the world's population. However, more people are like this than ought to be, and, though some people would never go as far as some of those mentioned in the article -- that may only be today. Attitudes are slipping, and moral standards are vanishing, and an eerie, distorted sense of self-indignation is seeping into the Western mind.

People, a frighteningly large amount of people, feel they are being "ripped off" by "something," or by "someone," "somewhere." Therefore, they "feel" justified in viewing other people's property as being rightfully their own. Today, one man's theft is another man's "correction" of the system.

It might be kind of an amusing story if the Torah did not explain in Parashas Noach (with the help of Rashi), that it was this attitude towards the property of others that angered G-d to the point that He brought upon mankind the massive Flood in the year 1656 (from creation). If you know Chumash, it is a curious repetition of history. If you BELIEVE in Chumash, it is very disturbing echo of history.

From where did such disrespect for G-d and others come? What is the source of such selfishness and self-indignation?

It comes, explain the rabbis, from not being happy with one's portion, which, in turn, comes from a lack of belief that all that G-d does He does for the good -- for OUR good. In fact, one of the most important tell-tale signs of a godless society is a thieving one. First it starts with "stealing" through leniencies (the tithes belonged to others) -- taking advantage of situations that don't really apply to us -- and then, it moves its ways, slowly, toward all kinds of extremes -- and, the rest of Parashas Ki Savo that follows, the not-so-pleasant part.

Are we too far gone? That remains to be seen, and regardless, still, we must resist the temptation to follow such a path, and work, instead, on a counter-revolution of attitude.

Shabbos Day:

G-d will exile you and the king you set over yourselves to a foreign and unfamiliar nation ... (Devarim 28:36)

The guards that Yeravam set up along the way were to prevent Israel (i.e., the Ten Tribes) from going up (to the Temple) on the holidays. Hoshea came along and removed them, but still, Israel did not go up for the holidays. The Holy One, Blessed is He, said: For those years that Israel did not go up let them go into captivity! (Gittin 88a)

After the Twelve Tribes split into two parts, the ten tribes of Israel to the north, and, the two remaining tribes to the south, they acted as independent nations. To the north was the Kingdom of Israel, under the leadership of Yeravam ben Nevat from the tribe of Ephraim, and, to the south was the Kingdom of Yehudah, under the rightful kingship of Rechavam, son of Shlomo HaMelech.

The Temple, however, remained in the territory of Yehudah, which posed a problem for Yeravam ben Nevat. For, when his constituents used to go up to Jerusalem on the holidays, they would see only the king from Yehudah sitting in the Temple courtyard, a reminder that true Jewish kings descend only from the tribe of Yehudah. This, of course, undermined Yeravam's right to be a king, and, terribly damaged his ego.

Hence, Yeravam did the most logically evil thing: he stopped the tribes under his rulership from going up to the Temple at any time. Apparently his plan succeeded, and the people lost all connection to Jerusalem and the Temple, for, even when the road to the Temple opened up again, the tribes of the Kingdom of Israel did not travel there by choice.

Like with all such midrashic accounts, we have to understand the connection, that is, how the punishment fit the crime. Why would the failure to come up to the Temple on the Shalosh Regalim (literally, "Three Holidays" of Pesach, Shavuot, and Succos) result in exile and captivity? What does Jewish exile and captivity have in common with the Jewish holidays (since G-d punishes "measure-

for-measure")?

Exile is meant to serve one basic purpose for the Jew: to cause humility that leads to the recognition that all we become is only with G-d's help, whether that help is visible or not. The Shalosh Regalim acted in the same way, for, going up to the Temple and being a "guest" in G-d's house reminded us that everywhere we go we in life we are only a "guest" in G-d's house. Going up to the Temple on the Shalosh Regalim emphasized and reinforced this message.

Physically, Jerusalem and the Temple were not the highest spots in the world, but, spiritually, their altitude was high enough to gain a clearer picture of man within the context of G-d's history, something so sorely lacking then, and, today.

Furthermore, unifying in Jerusalem around the Temple and the banner of Torah resulted in a miniature Mt. Sinai experience. Going up to the Temple on the Shalosh Regalim was a way to tie the Jewish people to their past, to reconnect them to their historical mission. It is THIS specifically that maintains our right to remain on the land, and to live in freedom.

When the tribes of the Kingdom of Israel showed no interest in going up to Jerusalem and the Temple, even once they were physically permitted to do so, they revealed their lack of connection to Jewish history, Jewish purpose, and the land itself. Exile and captivity were the inevitable, but tragic result.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

G-d will bring you into Egypt again by ship, by the route I told you that you would no longer see. You will offer yourselves to be sold to your enemies as servants and hand-maids, but no one will want to buy you [wishing instead to exterminate you]. These are the words of the covenant, which G-d commanded Moshe to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moav, besides the covenant which He made with them at Chorev. (Devarim 28:68-69)

There is an interesting disagreement between Rebi Akiva and the evil Turnus Rufus, which amounts to, in the end, an argument about the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people. Turnus Rufus argues that the Jewish people are but slaves of the A'lmighty, and the posuk he quotes to prove his point is:

Š Because the Jewish people are My servants. (Vayikra 25:55)

Rebi Akiva, however, begged to disagree (even though doing so could, and did cost him his life in the end). He told him that we, the Jewish people, are called "children of G-d," as the posuk from a few weeks ago said:

You are children to G-d, your G-d Š (Devarim 14:1)

Turnus Rufus says to Rebi Akiva:

You are called children, and you are called servants. When you do G-d's will, then you are called "children." But, when you do not do the will of G-d, then you are called "slaves." At this time, you are not doing the will of G-d. (Bava Basra 10a)

Hence, the choice is ours, to uphold the Covenant of our ancestors and remain "children" of G-d, or, to forsake that Covenant, and, perhaps, G-d forbid, turn against it, and end up being "slaves" to everything else but truth. Most of this parshah is designed to make us fully aware of the consequences of each choice, to make us responsible for the direction in which we walk.

Having said this, let me give you a glimpse of how Kabbalah views the End-of-Days, of which we are very likely a part.

Ever since Adam HaRishon ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, life outside the Garden has been about birrur -- separation. This is because, the main consequence of Adam's eating prematurely, which led directly to the need for death in the world, was the intermingling of good and evil, which, up until the sin, had been distinct and distant from each other.

The birth of Kayin, the first human being ever born with an intrinsic yetzer hara, was the very embodiment of this tragic and catastrophic result. Therefore, Tikun Olam -- Rectification of the World -- in advance of Moshiach and world perfection, is about reversing this process, about sending good and evil back once again to the respective corners (except this time, evil will be eliminated for good, literally).

The entire eating process symbolizes this reality. We take in food which, prior to chewing and digestion, contains both "good" and "bad." The body, quite phenomenally, somehow can recognize and distinguish each, and therefore absorbs and makes use of the good, and, rejects the bad. We do the same thing intellectually when we weight the pros and cons of a idea when making decisions, and in all aspects of life.

We are not the only ones who work this way. Better than we do this, G-d does this, but not with food and ideas, but, with us. When the Talmud says:

Š Just as coming into the land (of Canaan in Yehoshua's time) was only with 120,000 (men above the age of 20), so, too, was the leaving of Egypt with only 120,000 (men above the age of 20). Rava said: It will be the same in the time of Moshiach as well! (Sanhedrin 111a)

-- it is alluding to a "weeding out" process spoken about in Kabbalah. Just like G-d, first through Egyptian slavery, and then through the Ten Plagues, "weeded out" Jews unworthy of redemption, so too, says Rava, will G-d use modern day events to "weed out" those unworthy of experiencing and surviving the Final Redemption.

In case you haven't noticed, changes have taken place over the last one hundred years, but, even

more incredible changes have taken place over the last five to ten years! The long and short of it is that there seems to be a polarization taking place within society and around the world. Extremes are becoming more prevalent, and, middle grounds seem to be fading. Issues and circumstances are occurring that are "forcing" people to take "sides," to reveal their inner feelings and where they actually stand, morally, and politically.

Just a phase of history, a repetition of past periods and destined to pass just as they did?

Furthermore, the negativity that some groups feel towards Torah and Judaism is so strong that it is beyond reason, especially when you consider that the sources are almost all Jewish! In fact, in one e-mail I received this morning, I received two articles: one from the New York Times praising Joseph Leiberman for his openly pro-religion stance, condemning the Jewish groups who criticize him for this, and, taking pride in America's Torah roots, and, the second article, from an American Jewish group soliciting funds for anti-Chareidi activities in order to sever their connection to the Israeli political scene.

In fact, recently, I have a whole list of such articles. As a result, emotionally (if not intellectually), as an Orthodox Jew, one might begin to feel more comfortable and respected among the non-Jewish population than among his or her own secular brethren!

Ironically, as uncomfortable as this may be, it is not surprising. It is the fulfillment of prophecies over 2,500 years old, and, it has all been predicted by the Talmud. In fact, if such Jews were to familiarize themselves with the various sources that speak about the time just in advance of Moshiach, they might second-guess themselves and wonder if they are remaining on the wrong side of sieve. They might consider how their ideas and emotions are pushing them against Torah tradition, especially at a time when the non-Jewish western world is just recovering theirs, and wonder if they are "pushing out" or, in actuality, being pushed out.

Maybe they can't. However, for the rest of the Jewish population, we have to take heed. Jewish history is reaching what might be the most important and final fork in our historical road. On path has a sign that says, "Children of G-d," while the other path says, "Servants Only." To make the right choice -- THE right choice -- you'll need a spiritual map, and perhaps a guide. Which map and which guide you choose will determine the path you will take, for which you, and only you, can bear full responsibility.

In the article from the New York Times (September 4, 2000), in an article titled, "The Founders and the Torah," Michael Novack writes (among other astute statements):

"The best kept secret of American history is that the favorite language of that founding generation came from the Torah. The founders referred to their own experiment as the Second Israel. They commissioned a design for the Great Seal with a symbol recalling the first Israel, for they thought of themselves as crossing the deserts of Egypt en route to building a 'city on the hill.' "

I don't think it was the way Jews can abandon Judaism and live secular lives that impressed the founding fathers of America; it is not what is impressing Americans today. The "weeding" process may be in full swing, and, it is our responsibility to make sure, whoever we are, to end up on the right side of the Heavenly sieve.

Melave Malkah:

Of Dovid. G-d is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? (Tehillim 27:1)

As of the second day of Rosh Chodesh Elul, we began, once again, saying this psalm twice a day, and will continue to do so until Shemini Atzeres. Some question why Psalm 51, which reveals Dovid HaMelech's broken spirit as a result of his own sin, is not instead recited as a prelude to Rosh Hashanah and the Ten Days of Repentance.

However, I think the answer lies in the very idea of Elul Zman, which, the rabbis teach alludes to G-d's great love of the Jewish people and His desire and willingness to wait for our return. Hence, the word "Elul" itself is said to be an acronym for: Ani l'Dodi v'Dodi li -- I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me. (Shir HaShirim 6:3)

Psalm 27 so eloquently speaks of this relationship, and focuses us on its profundity. Dovid HaMelech so beautifully yearns:

One thing I asked of G-d, that I shall seek, that I dwell in the House of G-d all the days of my life! To behold the delight of G-d and to meditate in His Sanctuary. (4)

To be free of all the distractions of this world that interfere with intellectual and spiritual union with G-d -- that is "paradise." This was the curse of work that came in the wake of the first sin. G-d wasn't saying that we will never enjoy earning a living in the exciting business world; He was telling us that it would interfere with a much greater pleasure: sitting and basking in the light of G-d. Dovid HaMelech, a great lover of G-d, appreciated this, and wrote about it often.

"G-d is my light," says the Midrash, is an allusion to Rosh Hashanah, "and my salvation" refers to on Yom Kippur. "He will hide me in His shelter on the day of evil," of course, must therefore allude to Succos, when we enter our succos to meditate on the oneness of G-d, our relationship with Him, and our need to rely upon Him for security and serenity of mind.

What is the "day of evil"? On a pshat level, Dovid refers to any time of trouble during which his life may be in peril. However, according to Kabbalah, the final war of Gog and Magog, from which only Moshiach can save us, will begin at Succos-time. Living in succos and waving the lulav and esrog are considered to be important mitzvos for surviving such the epochal war.

On Your behalf, my heart has said, "Seek My Face"; Your Face, G-d, I seek. Do not conceal Your

Presence from me, and do not repel me in Your anger. (8-9)

Dovid HaMelech shows us here just how deep one's love for G-d can go, to the point that one's own heart can act as a messenger for G-d. Thus, even though the rest of our bodies may become lazy and selfish, our hearts must become so attached to G-d and Torah that they feel inseparable from Him. It is THIS that carries a person through the test and tribulations of life, with his faith in G-d intact.

Though my father and mother have abandoned me, G-d will gather me in. (10)

Not that Yishai and his wife, Dovid's father and mother didn't love their son, or want the best for him. But life is such that even the people upon whom we depend the most cannot be 100% reliable, for a number of reasons. Only G-d is 100% reliable, because He is above all circumstance and limitation that prevents humans from always coming through for us. It is WE who limit G-d's help, by becoming unworthy of it through misdeed and a lack of care.

Hope to G-d, strengthen yourself and He will give you courage. Hope to G-d. (14)

This is the goal of the Yemai Noraim -- Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur and Shemini Atzeres: to train ourselves to look only to G-d for hope and strength. Sin is the result of losing faith in G-d and His Providence, which forces us to decide what we need and how to get it, even if that means stepping over lines drawn by Torah. Complete trust in G-d is the path toward righteousness, and, to being able to tap into a phenomenal source of spiritual energy to discover our purpose in life, and, to fulfill it.

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston

L'Shannah Tovah ...

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