

# THE SOTAH IN US ALL

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

## FRIDAY NIGHT:

G-d told Moshe, "*Speak to the Children of Israel, and tell them about when a man's wife deceives him . . .*" (Bamidbar 5:11)

Youthfulness can be the biggest trap of all, being the time of the greatest temptation from the yetzer hara. These have been called the "lustful" years, and it is truly amazing all the damage that occurs during these years. People act as if they are under some sort of spell, sacrificing so much good, and for what? For the satiation of some pleasure that will be forgotten shortly after, and can only lead to an unstable way of life.

And, how many mitzvos get pushed off during this time? Even if people have sufficient self-control to avoid the pitfalls at this period of time, they may still lack the motivation to take advantage of their youthful energy to do mitzvos that they have pushed off to a much later time in their life.

But, the Talmud teaches:

It was taught, Rebi Shimon ben Elazar said: Perform [tzedakah] while you have the opportunity (i.e., a poor person to give it to), and while you can (i.e., have the money to give. Shlomo in his wisdom also said, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no desire in them" (Koheles 12:1).

I hate being late for minyan. Just the idea of being late to pray to G-d doesn't sit well with me, and practically-speaking, I hate missing sections or having to play catch-up. The Talmud has praise for the person who says Pesukei d'Zimra in completion, every day, so I try and do exactly that, something I rarely can do if I don't start on time.

Nevertheless, I would sleep in until the very last second I could get away with. Then, I would jump out of bed, get dressed in five minutes, and walk five minutes more to a minyan, perhaps saying some Karbonos along the way. At certain times of the year, when the sun rose late enough, the Neitz minyan would just be ending as I got to shul, and immediately I would feel a sense of, "Gee, I wish I had dovened Neitz each morning."

Realizing that it was unlikely that I would ever get to that point any time soon, I would just think to myself, "Perhaps, one day when I'm in my seventies and eighties, and getting up early is easier for me." I don't know what I found so attractive about getting up at what seemed to me to be such an

unG-dly hour to do that which most of the Torah world did long after the sun was already in the sky, but it touched something inside of me.

The truth is, at one time we all dovened Neitz, before the time of light bulbs and a business world that is so hectic. The Talmud calls it the mitzvah min hamuvchar, and an expression that means it is the ideal way of doing a mitzvah (S.A. 89:1). However, for a variety of reasons it has become a mitzvah for the few, and not the many, for those whom the time may be more convenient, or just more spiritual.

I stumbled into the mitzvah myself. A friend of mine had convinced me about the virtue of dovening Neitz on Rosh Hashanah, of all days. He told me that the dovening is great, and that you actually have time to do some learning on such an important day. In addition, I found out that it allowed me to baby sit so my wife could at least doven Mussaf with a later minyan.

My friend was so correct in his assessment that I ended up dovening at Neitz on Yom Kippur as well. This gave me a three hour break that allowed me to learn, and even rest a little before Minchah, giving me extra energy for the end of Yom Kippur, so I could doven with more intention until the end.

Eventually, I started going to Neitz on Shabbos as well. There was something very nice about coming home from dovening just as everyone else was getting up and going to doven. I also enjoyed having Kiddush early (the cholent tastes the best then, I found), learning some Torah, and taking a nap, all before the rest of my family came home for the second meal.

But, in spite of this, the idea of dovening Neitz EVERY DAY, seemed a distant reality for me, even though I was doing it every Shabbos, and on the High Holidays. "When I'm older and I need less sleep," I told myself. "Then I'll doven Neitz every day."

I guess G-d read my heart, because the opportunity to make the changeover that has had such a tremendous impact on my life came in a way I would never have guessed. The L-rd truly works in interesting ways, and I suppose it is because we do too.

### **SHABBOS DAY:**

*Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no desire in them." (Koheles 12:1)*

The turning point in this mitzvah for me came once we decided to sell our house and move. The people who were supposed to pack up the boxes and ship out our stuff said they would come about 7:30 am, and in order to be there, I had to doven Neitz.

So, I got up while it was still dark the next morning, and went to shul. I dovened at Neitz, and I felt good about myself, I returned home only to find out that the movers still had not come, and it was already 7:30. In fact, they only came about two hours later; I could have dovened regular time and still been on time. Oh well.

At the end of the first day, there was still much to pack up since they arrived so late and took many breaks. So, they planned to come back the next morning at, you guessed it, 7:30 am. They said they would be punctual this time, so I had to get up at Neitz once again, the second day in a row.

Again, they did not come back the next morning on time either, and sure enough, a third day became necessary. Frustrated, I made plans to get up for Neitz the next morning as well, and prayed that the move would finally take place that day. By that time, everything was just about done.

Thank G-d, we did move that day, but after having dovened Neitz three days in a row, all of a sudden I felt as if I had a dilemma; "How can I go back to a regular time for minyan after dovening three days in a row at Neitz?" So I didn't, and have since dovened Neitz for many years now. There is just something very uplifting about having dovened Neitz, learned Torah for an hour, and all by 8:00 in the morning.

However, all I had to do was take the words of Koheles seriously:

"Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, 'I have no desire in them.'" (Koheles 12:1)

Remembering my Creator in the days of my youth while I still enjoyed sleep earns more reward than doing the mitzvah in the "evil days," when the resistance to such mitzvos becomes less and less.

That was one explanation of that verse. The Talmud offers another one as well:

"Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come"-this refers to the days of old age; and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no desire in them"-this refers to the Messianic era, when there is neither merit nor guilt. (Shabbos 151b)

In other words, in Yemos HaMoshiach, since there will no longer be any yetzer hara (Succah 52a), there will also not be a chance to do a mitzvah or a sin. Without a yetzer hara, man will naturally do the will of G-d, for that is what is natural for man to do.

It's like water running downstream. It's possible that wood and stones can block the path of the river, making a dam. However, that does not change the water's desire to flow straight; it just makes it physically impossible to do so. Break down the dam, and the water will instantly resume its natural course of the least resistance.

We naturally love G-d and His Torah. However, our own personal desires act like a spiritual and psychological dam that blocks that love, and it can even make it feel like hate on some occasions. We see this in everyday relationships, where two people who love each other can, after a fight, feel negative feelings that all of a sudden, for the moment, suggest the possibility of divorce, until they make up again. One apology can smash through the dam of negative emotions, and love can be felt immediately.

The yetzer hara is a dam. That is why he is called the "sutton" (usually spelled, "Satan"), because the

word means obstruater. Just like a physical dam, the Sitra Achra (his other name) obstructs our love of G-d by distracting us with things in life that make us subjective, opening the door to all kinds of negative emotions that block the positive ones.

In Yemos HaMoshiach, the veil lifts because it disappears altogether, and the "conspiracy" of life is revealed for what it is. It will be like waking up from a dream in which you imagined your life was threatened, so you were forced to live in a constant state of paranoia and mistrust, only to wake up and find out that you are perfectly safe.

That's the good news. The bad news is, we will remember all the time we spent chasing things and worrying about things that had no ultimate value, whims of the moment, though they sure seemed worth dying for at the time. Just like with respect to old age, the yetzer decreases until it goes poof and disappears altogether, and only the things that really count, will count then.

The bottom line? Though Neitz is not for everyone, or even necessary at all times, but we all have our own "neitz," something we know is important that we are putting off for later, when "we have more time." The Talmud is saying, "Don't! Do it during your "youth," while you still have your yetzer hara and desires to do less meaningful things. That is when you truly earn your reward in the World-to-Come.

### **SEUDOS SHLISHIS:**

*May my lord's soul be bound up in the bond of life with G-d, your G-d. (I Shmuel 25:29)*

This is what Avigayil told Dovid HaMelech before parting, but in truth it is what all of us are striving to achieve. In a general sense, we are supposed to be working on elevating the entire physical world to the level of Kodesh l'Hashem (holy to G-d). The latest tally does not show enough success in this area, but that does not mean that individuals cannot accomplish this for themselves, as the Talmud continues and says: Our Rabbis taught: "And the dust returns to the earth as it was originally, and the spirit returns to G-d who gave it" (Koheles 12:7); give it back to Him as He gave it to you: in purity [He gave it to you], so must you [return it] in purity. This can be compared to a human king who distributed royal clothing to his servants. The wise among them folded it up and stored it away in a chest, whereas the fools among them worked in them. After a time, the king requested his garments back, and the wise among them returned them to him immaculate; the fools among them returned them soiled. The king was pleased with the wise but angry with the fools. Regarding the wise he said, "Let my robes be placed in my treasury and they can go home in peace," while with respect to the fools he said, "Let my robes be given to the cleaner, and let them be put in prison." So too is it with respect to The Holy One, Blessed is He.

Concerning the bodies of the righteous He says, "He will come in peace; they will rest on their resting places-he who walks in his integrity" (Yeshayahu 57:2), while concerning their souls He says, "May my lord's soul be bound up in the bond of life with G-d, your G-d" (I Shmuel 25:29). However, concerning the bodies of the evil He says, "There is no peace for the wicked, said G-d" (Yeshayahu

48:22), while concerning their souls He says, "and may He hurl away the soul of your enemies as one shoots a stone from a slingshot" (I Shmuel 25:29). (Shabbos 152b)

Indeed, we pray in the morning upon waking up:

G-d, the soul that you have given to me is pure. You created it, You formed it, You put it into me, and You protect it within me. And, You will take it from me in the future, and return it to me at a future time . . .

Thus, this is the challenge of everyday life. We are not here to try and make a dirty soul clean, but to keep a clean soul from getting dirty. The yetzer hara keeps trying to get us to walk through spiritual mud puddles all the time, convincing us that this is where the fun is, and that there will be plenty of time to clean ourselves off afterward.

But how many people leave this world with their royal garments intact? Like the Sotah in this week's parshah, we lose it, in one way or another. In her most elemental form, she is merely the symbol of all mankind selling off future reward for immediate physical gratification. "She" balks at the following:

It was taught, Rebi Eliezer said, "The souls of the righteous are hidden under the Throne of Glory, as it says, "May my lord's soul be bound up in the bond of life with G-d, your G-d." But those of the evil continue to be muzzled, while one angel stands at one end of the world and a second stands at the other end, and they sling their souls to each other, as it says, "and may He hurl away the soul of your enemies as one shoots a stone from a slingshot." (Ibid.)

However, we know from Rosh Hashanah that there are more than these two extremes, the righteous on the far right and the evil on the far left. There is also what we call beinonim (intermediates or those in between) and the Talmud addresses that issue as well:

Rabbah asked Rav Nachman: "What about those who are intermediate?"

"Had I died I could not have told you this," he replied. Shmuel said: "Both these and those (i.e., the evil and the intermediates) are delivered to Dumah; these enjoy rest, whereas the others have no rest. (Ibid.)

The question is, do we know who we are? We may think less of ourselves than Heaven does, or worse, think more of ourselves than Heaven does. And, we may never know the truth until the Day of Judgment, so therefore, we must make our spiritual best out of every moment while we have one, always asking ourselves before indulging in the physical world, "at what spiritual cost?"

### **MELAVE MALKAH:**

*After he makes her drink the water, if she was defiled and acted deceitfully against her husband, the water that causes the curse will enter into her and be-come bitter . . . (Bamidbar 5:27)*

While our brothers celebrate the second day of Shavuot this Shabbos, for us in Eretz Yisroel,

Shavuos 5766 has come and gone, which means Pesach has finally come to an end. For, as we have said before, the entire period of Pesach is through Shavuos and is like one long holiday, with Sefiras HaOmer connecting the two Yom Tovim as a Chol HaMoed does the seventh day of Pesach to the first day of the holiday.

The Geulah Shlaimah (the Final Redemption), whenever it finally comes, will begin on Pesach and end on Shavuos. That is what tradition teaches us. But, it is hard to imagine that of all the three major holidays, Shavuos is the shortest and is not connected to any specific mitzvah.

However, this is because redemption is something that we create. It is the automatic end to a continuous process of what the Vilna Gaon referred to as "Sheviras HaMiddos," the breaking of (bad) character traits. It is our bad middos that block the redeeming light of G-d from entering us, the Jewish people, and therefore the world as well. Thus, the entire focus of the forty-nine days between Pesach and Shavuos is middos, the correct ones.

The Talmud says that a person does not sin until a spirit of insanity enters him (Sotah 3a). We learn this from a play on the Hebrew word for insanity (shtus), which is very similar to the word "sotah" from this week's parshah. After all, who in their right mind would sacrifice so much for so little, giving in to the drives of the body while ignoring the pleas of the soul? That would be insane, even if only temporary.

There is no greater exile than a confused mind, confused to the extent that the person's take on life is totally inconsistent with the true reality of life, and yet that person hasn't a clue that he or she is missing the entire point. The Sotah was just an extreme example of this, but as those people who witnessed the process of getting to the truth about her shook their heads, they had to ask the question, "Am I like this on any level? I mean, I would never stoop to that type of disloyalty . . . but do I stoop to a lesser level?"

We'd be surprised to hear the answer, and to the extent that we deny it, to the extent that we simply live with the Sotah in ourselves is to the extent that we remain in exile.

Shavuos, perhaps, has come and gone. However, its association with Kabbalos HaTorah is like drinking Mei Sotah, the special drink that was prepared by dissolving the Name of G-d into it, to clarify the status of the suspected adulteress. The kedushah of the day itself is supposed to help clarify how loyal we are to Torah, and therefore, how free we are as individuals.

In this respect, the Geulah comes on Shavuos, as it does every year. As to whether or not it is a "shlaimah," all depends upon how many of us first achieve it on an individual level by increasing our loyalty to G-d and to His Torah, beyond any shadow of a doubt (Amalek). Even if it takes until Succos to see the actual results, its beginning will have begun on Pesach and its ending will be on Shavuos, as far as setting the final stage in motion.

*Have a great Shabbos.*

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