

THE WORLD WITHIN

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

How can I alone carry your contentiousness, your burdens, and your quarrels? (Devarim 1:12)

We are in the final phase of the Three Weeks, ending with Tisha B'Av next week, b"H. And, to get us in the proper frame of mind for what's coming up (in case the prohibitions of the last two weeks didn't do it sufficiently), we read the above verse, which begins with the word "eichah," to the tune of Eichah, which we intone the night of Tisha B'Av.

Just as a picture can be worth a thousand words, sometimes one word can be worth many as well. Eichah is one such word. It is kind of a mantra, one that we should be meditating on throughout history. In general, it means, how did things ever get this bad? However, once you start asking that question, you might as well go back and ask "how" about each step along the path to destruction: How did we do that? How did it lead to that? How did this cause that? Etc., etc., etc., until the final one: How did it result in divorce, or bankruptcy, or the exile of the entire nation?

It is no coincidence that the same word was used to address Adam HaRishon after He violated the commandment to not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Bereishis 3:9). Comprised of the same letters, in the same order — Aleph-Yud-Chof-Heh — though vocalized differently and translated as "Where are you?" it means, essentially, the same thing:

You had it good. All you had to do was maintain the good. But, instead the destroyed the good. How?

Exactly. How?

The better question, or at least, the more accurate one, is: why do people do that which is forbidden, or do not do that which is commanded of them? When a situation is bad, then, understandably, change is in order. But, when a situation is good, why upset the balance? Why take the risk, and invite trouble? Why not guard and protect the status quo, if it is beneficial, rather than change it and create uncertainty and potentially, cause destruction?

The answer is simple: people perceive a need for change where it doesn't exist. They seek improvement where there is nothing to improve. They imagine there is lack when there really isn't. In other words, the problem is not with the world around them, but with the world within them. If anything is missing, if there is any lack of balance, it is inside, not outside, and not understanding this, or not accepting this can result in a malicious manipulation of the world in which they live.

The rabbis summed it up with a very simple, but time-honored, statement:

Who is wealthy? He who is satisfied with his portion, as it says: "When you eat the toil of your hands you are fortunate and it is good for you" (Tehillim 128:2). (Pirkei Avos 4:1)

This is the secret to a meaningful and fulfilling life. For, life is about satiation.

Everything goes well when people are satisfied, because feeling satiated, people are inspired to be good.

But, as the joke goes, "I will be happy with my portion as soon as I get it!" However, that is not what the rabbis meant when they gave their advice. Obviously, they meant, the wealthy person is the one who is happy with his portion each minute of the day, no matter how big or small it becomes in the process. Compared to what one could have, there is lack, and a sense of poverty, ... even for a very rich person. However, compared to what you have already, there is no more to be had.

Do the rabbis state the obvious? On paper yes, but in everyday practical life, not at all. The amount of discontentment in the world is epic. In fact, I dare say that the main driving force that fuels the economy and drags people out of bed each morning is a sense of, "Today, I will get more!" With billions of people sharing the same mantra each day, it can get awfully competitive out there, tense, and eventually, distorted, as frustrated people start looking for shortcuts to get what they feel is coming to them, one way or another.

Depending upon one's level of integrity, life becomes a test. To cheat, or not to cheat, that is the question for many people. Or, perhaps, cheat a little, which, according to some, is not really cheating at all, because everyone cheats a little at some time, or so the thinking goes. Then again, some people don't cheat at all, but they have no one to blame for that except themselves, right?

The trouble with cheating, though, is like bacteria, once it starts, it just keeps on growing, and growing, until it becomes all-consuming. Big cheaters rarely began that way, just as black lies didn't begin as black lies. They began, at first, as white lies, and left unchecked, they became gray lies, until they finally grew into black lies. Some people lie so much that eventually they cannot tell the difference anymore between reality and falsehood, and readily believe their own lies even while others do not.

It's no different with business relationships, and even marriages. Anyone looking at "before" and "after" pictures of a couple about to get divorced, especially after many years of being together, can't help but wonder, "How?" After all, the wedding pictures project love and affection, providing a sense of eternal hope. "This is a couple truly meant to live together," people say.

And yet, years later, the divorce "portrait" paints a different picture, one of anger and eternal rejection. What a complete turnabout. Even the couple themselves often find themselves asking, "Where did it start, and how did it ever become so bad?" Business partners who were friends for decades, who go their separate ways, often ask themselves the same questions.

Check it out: in so many cases, it begins with discontentment. Someone in the relationship, at some point in time, feels entitled to more. If they are being cheated, then they are right, and breaking up the relationship is a good thing. But, if, objectively-speaking, they are not being cheated, and their sense of lack is coming from them, and not the relationship, then they can only do damage by taking more, and it can only result, eventually, in the destruction of good things.

If this is true of relationships between people, how much more so is this true about one's relationship with God. For, people, no matter how wellintentioned and trustworthy they are, make mistakes and fall short of our expectations sometimes. To err is human, to forgive is Divine: the shortcomings of good people must be taken in stride.

However, when it comes to the Master of the Universe, it is a different story. He has no shortcomings and can deliver anything He chooses. He can make the impossible come true, bringing a person from rags to riches in record time, or vice-versa. There is nothing He cannot do, so if He has not done something we have asked for, or has done something that we prayed to avoid, it was not an accident, and we must understand why. To cheat God is to cheat oneself.

That's the answer to "eichah." Everyone feels a sense of lack at some point in time. Even great righteous people have their moments of weakness, and find themselves desiring something they don't yet have. But that's all it is: a MOMENT of weakness, not because they despise physical pleasures or give up trying to have more. But, because their sense of lack reflects back on them, forcing them to question what it is they lack on the inside that has resulted in what they lack on the outside.

Indeed, they understand, God Himself creates the situation that stimulates our sense of lack. He arranges our lives such that we walk by just at the right moment to see or hear something, while we're in a certain state of mind and mood, to agitate us into feeling our lack, not to tease us, but to use it as a way to inspire introspection. Where we go from there is truly our own free-will choice.

We have only to go back to the beginning of history to see just how true this is:

God favored Hevel and his meal-offering, but not Kayin and his mealoffering. Kayin became very angry and dejected. God said to Kayin, "Why are you angry, and why are you dejected? If you did the right thing would I not accept it? But, by not doing the right thing, sin crouches at the doorstep. He desires you, but you can rule over him." (Bereishis 4:4-8)

That is, with a little introspection, you can figure out what it is you didn't get right, to get what you wanted. Then you can fix it, and we can all happily move on.

However, that is not the path that Kayin chose in the end. Rather than take responsibility for what he lacked inside, he instead tried to change the world on the outside. The result:

[One day,] Kayin engaged his brother Hevel in conversation, and when they were in the field, Kayin

attacked his brother Hevel and killed him. (Bereishis 4:8)

And, what did it get him in the end? Anywhere closer to where he really wanted to be? Not even a little:

[God] said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood shouts out to Me from the ground. Therefore you are cursed by the land that has opened its mouth, taking your brother's blood from your hand. You will work the land, but it will no longer give to you of its bounty. You will be a nomad in the land." Kayin said to God, "My sin is too great a burden ..." (Bereishis 4:10-13)

What a fitting word to use: burden. We don't normally think of sins as burdens, but, in fact, that is what they really are: heavy weights on our moral backs. For, even though we like to have things and feel satiated, and might even be willing to cheat and steal, and in some extreme cases, kill for it, God forbid, at the end of the day, what was once sweet becomes incredibly bitter.

This is because, what some people call our "moral compass" is really the spark of God that makes us human, which must, ultimately, be satisfied if we, ultimately, are to be satisfied. To err is human, but to do teshuvah is truly Divine, for it reveals our sense of right and wrong, and our commitment to the former and our rejection of the latter. Amazingly, we can feel very satisfied just by doing the right thing, even if we do not get the physical pleasure we seek.

Hence, it is no coincidence that each year, Tisha B'Av falls on the same day of the week that the Pesach Seder does, for they represent two sides of the same coin. As the word "seder" implies, Creation is orderly, and our job as a light unto nations is to respect that Divine order, work with it, work within it. It is not to manipulate the world to our liking, to make life as comfortable as possible for ourselves.

Tisha B'Av is the result of failing at that mission, personally, and nationally.

As Moshe Rabbeinu will point out during these weekly readings, all that went wrong in the desert, all that has ever gone wrong and will go wrong in history, is the resulting of trying to cheat the system. It doesn't work in business, it does not work in marriages, and it certainly does not work between us and God.

If we're going to mourn anything at this time, it is the fact that we have yet to take such responsibility for ourselves and our world, and the destruction it has brought about. If we are to be consoled at all, it will be because we can still turn over a new leaf, and make good what has yet to be made good, before God imposes such changes on mankind. Text

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