

COMMITTING A SIN

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Justice, justice you must pursue, so that you may live in and inherit the land which God, your God gives to you. (Devarim 16:20)

Can you feel Rosh Hashanah breathing down your back? I can. I usually do right after Tisha B'Av is over, as if some sort of countdown begins Motzei Tisha B'Av, which it does. Yom HaDin is coming, and it is time to get into the teshuvah mode, especially after the summer, the time of year that people are the most laid back.

To do that, I am going to use the verse above in a somewhat unconventional way. For, though it is talking to the nation as a whole, instructing us to establish a just system of justice to maintain our hold on the land, it is also talking to the individual, and his portion in Eretz HaChaim — the Land of Life — the World-to-Come. Though we may be born with portions in Olam HaBah (Sanhedrin 90a), just as we are with portions in Eretz Yisroel, we spend the rest of our lives trying to keep them, and when possible, increase them.

The Talmud states:

A person does not sin unless a spirit of insanity — ruach shtus — enters him. (Sotah 3a)

That would imply that a person has to be crazy to sin. However, since we have all done so at one time or another, and more than likely remember being full cognizant of our actions at the time, we have to assume that this form of craziness is not the typical one, the kind for which one has to go to therapy. Rather, the insanity to which the Talmud refers has more to do with what it says in Pirkei Avos:

Rebi said ... Consider the loss incurred for performing a mitzvah compared to its reward, and the reward received for sinning compared to the loss. (Pirkei Avos 2:1)

Life is filled with risks. However, some are unavoidable, being necessary just to continue living. Others may be avoidable, but worth taking just to be able to achieve a higher quality of life. And then, there are those risks that are not only avoidable, they are crazy, and certainly not worth the life experience they may provide for taking them, something that can only be determined by weighing the potential gain against the potential loss.

However, some people like to live dangerously, or, perhaps more accurately, stupidly. Not only do they take unnecessary risks, but they take them for the most ridiculous reasons. How many people

have died, or at least been seriously injured, doing something that was not only avoidable, it was suicidal? How many people, on the other side of the risk, after having lost so much, so wantonly, when asked, "Was it worth it?" would answer resoundingly — if they are being completely honest — "NO!"

However, that is in the physical world. The bad thing, and the good thing, about the physical world is how risk-taking can have real-time consequences. If a person performs a risky stunt by jumping a motorcycle over the tops of 25 tractor trailers, and made a miscalculation, it is quite likely that he will find out about his mistake shortly after take-off, and pay for it dearly shortly upon landing. If he lives, it will be hard to avoid the conclusions about the risk he took.

Not so in the spiritual world. Even though the damage from a sin is immediate, it may not be felt for some time. Indeed, it may not be felt at all on this side of history, if Heaven chooses not to take a person to task now for his sin. Rather, Heaven may choose to wait for Gihenom to collect payment for the sin in this world, since punishment, in this world, may not bring the person to teshuvah, and he does not merit the atonement that comes from suffering.

But, even if Heaven responds to a person's sin in this world, is it guaranteed that the person will understand why it happened to him, so that he can learn from the past for the sake of the future? Not necessarily, because even our educated guesses might miss the mark, though, I have found, if you are really into improving yourself, Heaven works things out that the connection between the punishment and the crime seems too obvious to be wrong.

I may not always bite my tongue just as I am speaking loshon hara, but something invariably seems to happen to my mouth shortly after I have knowingly done so. And then, almost without even trying, the connection occurs in my mind, as if the most obvious thing in the world, and believe me, most the time, I wish it weren't. This is just a simple example; I have more complex ones that have blown my socks off, so-to-speak.

From the Talmud, it seems as if we should be able to make such connections. After all, Heaven does not usually punish just for the sake of punishing, unless to destroy something or someone evil. At the end of the day, it is personal growth that God wants from us, so that we can enlarge our portion in the World-to-Come:

Rava — some say Rav Chisda — says: If a man experiences suffering, let him examine his conduct, as it says, "Let us search and try our ways, and return to God" (Eichah 3:40). If he examines and finds nothing, let him attribute it to the neglect of the study of the Torah, as it says, "Happy is the man whom You chastise, God, and teach out of Your law" (Tehillim 94:12). If he did attribute it, and still did not find [this to be the cause], let him be sure that it is suffering of love, as it says, "For whom God loves He corrects" (Mishlei 3:12). (Brochos 5a)

Nevertheless, times have changed. It's been 1,939 years since we have had a Temple, and even longer since we had one in which the Aron HaKodesh resided. And, though, God runs the world,

every last aspect of it, meaning that everything is a function of Hashgochah Pratis — Divine Providence — that does not mean that we can see how today, being so spiritually lame compared to previous generations.

Hey, even in the good times, when we had prophets who could deliver to us a message from the mouth of God, so-to-speak, we didn't always get the point. So, how much more so today, when the only prophets we know about today are spelled p-r-o-f-i-t-s, is it going to be difficult for us to know what's on God's mind?

Hence, the wisdom of the Mishnah:

Consider the loss incurred for performing a mitzvah compared to its reward, and the reward received for sinning compared to the loss.

Not only were we given the Torah to be able to distinguish between right and wrong, we were even told, in explicit detail, the positive results of doing the former, and the negative consequences of pursuing the latter. In other words, we were given all the components of the equation, so that all that remains for us to do is put them in the proper order, and make the calculation.

Leaving right and wrong to chance or opinion is the greatest risk a person can take, and doing so is clearly insane. Does a person invest randomly in the stock market, especially if he needs the money? That would be insane. Should a person blindly invest his time and resources into a lifestyle that might be spiritually destructive, either now, or after history, or both? That, says the Talmud, would be insane.

A lot of jokes are made about Jews, money, and their calculating ways, but the truth is, it's not only the way we are, it's the way we're supposed to be as well. This does not mean that we are supposed to be obsessed with wealth, or stingy to the penny. It means that we are supposed to be calculating as far as our time goes, and our energy and resources are concerned.

For, though life may not always come down to seconds, the World-to-Come does, as the Talmud states:

Rebi [on hearing of it] wept and said, "One may acquire eternal life after many years, another in one hour!" (Avodah Zarah 17a)

Not only this, but the biggest mitzvah at the wrong time can have less of an impact on the world, and on a person's portion in the World-to-Come, than the smallest mitzvah at the right time. Even a simple smile can change people's lives, as the following story portrays, told by Rabbi Berel Wein, shlita.

A young man, an orphan, was forced to stay at an orphanage to survive, one which happened to be supervised by the great Rabbi Aryeh Levine, zt"l. One day, after lunch, they served chocolate pudding for desert, and being a big fan of chocolate pudding, the boy quickly finished his and

returned to line for more. However, he was told that he had already received his portion, and to remove himself from the line. Angered, the boy had a temper tantrum, and threw the entire pot of pudding on the floor. When the man, responsible for the day-to-day running of the yeshivah heard what happened, he reprimanded the boy in public, and told him that he would be brought before Rabbi Levine the next day, who would decide his fate. He might even be forced to leave the yeshivah.

That night, the boy could not sleep, worrying that he would be forced into the streets from the only home he had at that time. Later the next day, he was brought before Rabbi Levine, and stood there in trepidation.

"They tell me that you poured the pot of chocolate pudding onto the floor. Is that true?" Rabbi Levine asked the terrified young man.

"Yes, I did it," the boy answered sheepishly.

"Tell me," Rabbi Levine further inquired, "would you do it again?"

"Oh no," the boy said emphatically, "I wouldn't!"

Rabbi Levine calmly added, "Do you like chocolate pudding?"

Not knowing what to think, the boy answered, "Yes."

"Well," said Rabbi Levine, "I happen to have two right over here. Let's eat them together ..."

The boy was allowed to remain at the orphanage, and grew up to become one of the best Torah educators in Jerusalem today, and said that, "Because of that chocolate pudding that we ate together, I am Torahobservant today!"

There are many stories like this, but then again, too few of them. The first rabbi thought he had done the right thing by reprimanding, and then threatening the boy, after he had wasted all the rest of the chocolate pudding. However, had the story ended there, the boy might have rejected his Yiddishkeit in anger, and gone off, as many have, in search of a far more lenient lifestyle.

In this case, the story did not end in the kitchen room, but in the office of one of the greatest rabbis of the previous generation. And, because it did, the boy not only remained Torah-observant, but he grew up to contribute greatly to the world of Torah education, passing on to others what he had been blessed to learn first hand.

Who is a wise man? One who sees what is being born. (Tamid 32a)

And, if what is being "born" was the result of well-made calculations, then it will be for good. Furthermore, if, based upon what has been "born," more calculations are made, then the good will only get better. For, being Jewish means to be concerned about what it is that brings us the greatest portion in the World-to-Come, and in a world as physically bountiful as the one in which we live, the

only way to make sure of this, is to put all the issues in the balance in the pursuit of personal justice.

In this case, this means maximizing one's life in this world, but with the least amount of spiritual risk. It means a lot of research, some pretty serious thinking, and a lot of self-honesty. On Yom HaDin — the ultimate one, and the one which we experience each year on Rosh Hashanah — that is what they will be evaluating, and what will determine the kind of year we will have next year. Text

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