

CONTROL YOUR LIFE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

The mixed multitude with them developed an urge, and with the Children of Israel cried and said, "Who will give us meat to eat?" (Bamidbar 11:4)

Today there is cause to celebrate, and there is cause to mourn. Technology has brought out so much potential from Creation, the result of which has been to help so many people in ways that were previously impossible. Most people take it for granted, but technology has extended the reach and ability of man to such a phenomenal degree that we are like supermen, without the red and blue spandex suits.

On the other hand, and there always is one in this period of history, the ease with which people can achieve spiritual disintegration is incredible as well. The yetzer hara has always been around, and there have always been spiritual stragglers, and no shortage of spiritual pitfalls. But today, they are so well integrated into life and the business world, not to mention social networks, that people barely notice themselves doing things that really, certainly according to Torah, are completely forbidden.

Today, it is all about connectivity. Not a day goes by that the average person with e-mail does not receive an invitation from someone with whom to become "linked." And, not a day goes by that a new system is not developed and offered to do the same as others, but with some new feature. "It's all about social networking," people tell you, who laud all the new services that allow you to instantly share private information with all kinds of strangers, the vast majority of whom you would otherwise never have met, and in some cases, perhaps, shouldn't.

I'm sure it is heartwarming to hear about how two people met using some kind of social network, and I was fascinated to read how a new author used one to make her book into a bestseller. It sure is tempting, especially when it comes to free and clever marketing and advertising. You used to have to pay thousands of dollars, if not a lot more, to get the kind of exposure to mass markets that you can get for free today via the Internet.

On a level, it is all kind of Kabbalistic. According to Kabbalah, history is about the reunification of everything, a process that began behind the scenes since Creation, occurring mostly on a spiritual level, and which will operate out in the open, on a physical level as well, once Moshiach comes. Everything that has ever existed, whether we have been aware of it or not, has been for this purpose. Perhaps social interconnectivity is part of the breaking out into the open of this spiritual undercurrent

of history.

Perhaps. However, true as this may be, that may be more God's business than ours at this time. There will always be people who will naturally go with the flow, and throw caution to the wind. They may not even believe in God, and more than likely, do not believe in Divine judgment, so, as far as they are concerned, there is nothing wrong with approaching all of this with an eat-drink-and-be-merry attitude. If they are part of the process of world unification, it is definitely not their foremost concern.

What about the Jew? Obviously secular Jews see no reason to be concerned about the inherent dangers of the modern technical world, and minimally religious Jews with a very Western attitude probably assume that God has better things to do with His time than take note of how we use technology to our physical advantage, and spiritual disadvantage. It's the Jew who believes otherwise that feels as sense of spiritual drowning in today's advanced society.

About two weeks ago, a reader of mine sent me a cartoon titled, "The UnGoogle Man." It was a caricature of a man who seemed faceless and incognito, and the caption read: He's not on Facebook, he doesn't have a Twitter account, and he doesn't even have Gmail. He's UnGoogle Man!

Chuckle. But, after a few moments, the point began to hit home. In the rush to be connected to just about anyone and everyone, we are exposing ourselves so much that by not doing it, one becomes somewhat of an outcast from the Internet society. As I looked at the picture of UnGoogle Man, I felt a kind of longing to be like him, a kind of admiration for his willingness to just live in his own world, without the frenzy of Internet interconnectivity.

The world today, more than ever, is like a mighty river raging to its final destination. If you stick your foot in to see what the water is like, you can get sucked in and drawn downstream. There is so much going on, so much to take part of, and so easily. As technology advances, potential greatly increases. If you just watch what is going on and what it can do for you, it can be so electrifying.

In fact, if you watch people, they are really having fun. Between uploading personal videos onto YouTube, some which have become viral getting a million hits, or taking advantage of a myriad of other services to leave a personal imprint on the world's consciousness, people are having a great time. And it is not hard to understand why.

But, if you think about it, it is really just a souped-up version of the Wizard of Oz, except this one is called the Wizard of Awe. You know, the part where we find out that the great and mighty Oz is really just an old man with loud speakers and a light-and-sound show. That is, he really wasn't great or awesome after all, and actually, was downright deceitful and power hungry.

Furthermore, as the storyline goes, he wasn't even necessary to accomplish what the characters had been pursuing: a heart, a brain, and a returntrip back to Kansas. It turns out that all of that had always been in their possession the entire time, and yet they worked so hard to get to where they thought

their answers to happiness lay, only to find out that they had them all the time, but completely overlooked them.

In this case, it is all of mankind that is pursuing a heart, or brain, or trip to wherever it is people want to get to, which usually is a constant state of bliss. The wizard? It is the world of technology for whom the sky is the limit, which is why it seems to offer so much to so many, especially happiness. If it is not providing some kind of convenience to make life sleeker, it is providing a sense of self by allowing people to have it.

See Jack.

See Jack run.

See Jack run to some store for the latest technological wizardry.

See Jack smile with joy as he unleashes the power of the latest technology at the press of a few buttons, and upgrades his level of self-confidence along the way. See Jack do it all again next week when the next must-have is released to the world. And not only Jack, these days, Ya'akov as well.

I am obviously not coming to bash technology and send us back to the farms like the Amish do. That would be too hypocritical. I am merely coming to point out one of the greatest dangers of it, especially at this late stage of world history, beyond the more obvious ones. In fact, this one seems so obvious and innocuous that it is usually overlooked for other dangers that seem more severe. But the truth is, the latter are really a function of the former, as every good magician knows.

I am talking about the Art of Distraction. For a good magic trick to work, the magician has to do something that will compel the attention of his audience in one direction, so he can do his slight of hand in the other direction. The magician understands quite well how the human eye and mind work and interact, and takes advantage of it to his benefit, and the audience's entertainment.

Perhaps the greatest magician of all time are the Klipos, the Kabbalistic name for the reality of spiritual impurity, that which blocks a person from acting Godly, and from focusing on Godly issues. His goal for a person, as the Talmud explains (Kiddushin 30b), it to kill him, primarily in a spiritual manner. His weapon of choice is distraction.

It doesn't make a difference what he uses, and his device usually changes from generation to generation. But, it is always works towards the same end: stop people from focusing on what really counts in life. And, even though technology today is being used for good on so many levels, and is advancing the cause of Torah in so many ways, overall, this is a very distracting and distracted generation. And, the rule is, wherever there is physical distraction, there is spiritual desensitization.

Which brings us to this week's parshah. As Rashi points out, when it came time for the Jewish people to leave Mt. Sinai after being there for an entire year, they left too quickly. Rather than hesitate, or ask Moshe Rabbeinu for just a little more time at the place that God came down and gave His Torah,

as people do after having a good time somewhere, they ran to leave like school children who hear the bell ringing at the end of a school day.

To where were they running, and why? Well, immediately after that episode, the Erev Rav, the Mixed Multitude, stirred things up, once again creating social unrest amongst the Jewish people. All of a sudden, once again, the minds and the hearts of the Jewish people were back in the material world, the world of the Erev Rav, the world of Egypt, the Western world of that time.

In Kabbalah, there is a very strong connection between the Erev Rav and Amalek, the master magicians of all time, who delight in doing that which distracts the Jewish people away from God. The best distraction of all? Discontentment, a sense of wanting more than what one presently has, even though what one presently has is more than enough to make them happy. It is getting people to believe that life is much better after a visit to the Wizard of Awe.

Being a family movie, the Wizard of Oz had to have a family ending. However, had it had a real-life ending, it might have ended like this:

Dorothy: What? Are you kidding? You mean I could have gotten home without all these troubles?

Tin Man: And I always had a heart but didn't know it? Scare Crow: And me, a brain? Lion: And I have always been courageous! All Four: Wow, what a waste of time and energy! Wizard of Oz: Yeah, but just think about how much you gained along your journey, and about how you all became such good friends as result! Tin Man, Scare Crown, and Lion (together): Yeah . Dorothy: No offense, guys. It has really been swell. But, there really is no place like home, and if I wanted to spend time with characters like you, I would have gone to the zoo! That's why I'm not going to waste a single second and start tapping my shoes together and get on with this return trip immediately! I've got better places to go and better places to see .

I know that ending would have left a lot of people feeling cheated, but then again, life does it to us all the time. And, it's either one or the other: either we cheat life, and make the most of it, or it cheats us, and makes the most of us, in an ultimately meaningless way. It's a dangerously fun and exciting world out there: approach it if you must, but do so with extreme caution, and with a sense of contentment, lest you get drawn down river with the rest of society.

Dedicated in honor of my parents' 54th wedding anniversary on the 12th of Sivan R' Eliezer Chaim ben Yehudah Yitzchak & Rivka Menya & Masha bat Ya'akov & Leah May HKB"H grant my parents a refu'ah shelaimah, arichut yamim, shalom bayit, parnasah tova, nachat from all the children, grandchildren & great-grandchildren and that they be zocheh to greet Moshiach ben Dovid.

Text

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