

EVEN JUST "A LITTLE SIN"

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

However, if you do not obey the voice of God, your God, and observe all of His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, then the following curses will come upon and affect you. (Devarim 28:15)

This time of year makes me feel rather uncomfortable. Some of it goes back to my childhood, when spending a lot of time in shul was terribly boring. Sometimes it was so painful that I thought it was the real source of atonement for a year's worth of sins. And, even though now, I welcome the opportunity to put everything aside and truly focus on my connection to God, that little boy in my closet seems to still be able to express his feelings in the matter on some level.

I wish it was the fact that I am going to be judged that made me shudder. I wish I truly felt concern for life, and was real with the idea that I could be sentenced to death in the upcoming year. Hey, there are still 27 days left to Rosh Hashanah, b"H, enough time to take care of such business even before Judgement Day.

Unfortunately, judgment is not what scares me, at least emotionally. It's the disruption of life, the seriousness of the mood, and the overeating that seems to concern me, at least when I'm not focussed. I love my daily schedule, which I find quite peaceful even when storms rage around me. I love chilling out, and I hate overeating, and both seem to distant realities during the Aseres Yemai Teshuvah—the Ten Days of Repentance.

Fortunately, once Rosh Hashanah comes in, I get serious. It's a powerful time, and I feel its effect immediately once Ma'ariv begins, if not before. The prayers speak to me, and having the time to really think about their meaning, I get into it. Once that happens, thank God, the mood usually stays with me the entire 10 days, and by the time Yom Kippur leaves, I have the reverse feeling: I am sad to see it all end. Relieved, but sad.

"Where am I coming from?" I have asked myself each year around this time. "Why don't I feel the awe of this time like Jews used to, when all you had to do was say, 'Elul Zman!' and people broke out in tears, fearing for their judgment and their lives?" It was time for self-analysis.

One of the most frightening things about a nuclear bomb is how much destruction can result from as a single device. Conventional bombs also make a lot of noise and destroy much, but are much more commensurate to their size. But, a nuclear bomb takes advantage of a different explosive process:

A nuclear weapon is an explosive device that derives its destructive force from nuclear reactions, either fission or a combination of fission and fusion. Both reactions release vast quantities of energy from relatively small amounts of matter. The first fission ("atomic") bomb test released the same amount of energy as approximately 20,000 tons of TNT. The first thermonuclear ("hydrogen") bomb test released the same amount of energy as approximately 10,000,000 tons of TNT. A modern thermonuclear weapon weighing little more than 2,400 pounds (1,100 kg) can produce an explosive force comparable to the detonation of more than 1.2 million tons (1.1 million metric tons) of TNT. Thus, even a small nuclear device no larger than traditional bombs can devastate an entire city by blast, fire and radiation. (Wikipedia, Nuclear Bomb)

What is there to learn from this, aside from the obvious lessons? As the Chofetz Chaim explained, everything in the material world functions the way it does to teach us about how the invisible and often elusive spiritual world works. The former mimics the latter one, since it is derived from it, and this allows us to reverse-detect, a little like researching deceased parents through their children who are still alive.

To answer this question, we need to first know a fundamental from the Talmud:

Reward for a mitzvah cannot come in this world. (Kiddushin 39b)

The Talmud comes to this conclusion based upon a verse, but the truth is, logic itself dictates this truth. The true reward for the mitzvos that we do in this world can only come in Olam HaBah—the World-to-Come—just like the real punishment for the sins that we commit can only be atoned for in Gihennom, unless the person does sincere teshuvah while still alive, and even that's a miracle.

Why? For the same reason that remaining indoors at the blast site of a thermonuclear weapon is a futile attempt to protect oneself from its impact. Just as there is no way for the roof and walls of a house to withstand the blast even a little, likewise is there no way for our physical bodies to withstand the punishment necessary for even a single sin. Therefore, the punishment, which is really a refining process, is saved for a time when our bodies are far more spiritual, and therefore far more capable of persevering the punishment for past sins, what we call Gihennom.

It's not a matter of overkill. It's not that Heaven overreacts to our sins. Rather, it is that we do not appreciate the incredible destruction to Creation that results from what we might call even just "a little sin." Like people who treat a nuclear weapon carelessly because they have no idea of the amount of damage that could result from its explosion, we drop spiritual nuclear bombs all over the place when we sin, oblivious to how much catastrophic destruction is resulting and for which we will have to answer at some point in the future.

Thus, we also take teshuvah for granted. Teshuvah is small, yet extremely powerful, because it can

mitigate the destruction from sin. So little is required of us to do teshuvah, but if it works, it does so much, like pouring a single glass of water on a parched field, and watching an entire field of wheat growing on the spot, and then some.

And, as the rabbis point out, if this true for punishment, then it is even more true when it comes to the reward for mitzvos. In our mind, even the greatest of mitzvos can only bring back so much reward. For example, if reward was measured in dollars, how much money could one possibly earn for a day's worth of learning? One hundred dollars? Five hundred dollars? A thousand dollars?

"No way!" we'd have to say.

On the other hand, ever wonder why people like Bill Gates and Steven Jobs got to become billionaires? Who knows for sure, but it is interesting that the two of them have been responsible for so much Torah being learned and taught over the last two decades. And, who knows what their inventions will do for the learning of Torah over the next two decades?

"But," you will argue, "they have no mitzvah to do so, per se, and they more than likely had little or no intention to further the cause of Torah and redemption in the first place, so why reward them!"

Because that is the way God works. He let Egyptians become Jews after only three generations because they "hosted" the Jewish nation for 210 years. As ungrateful as we may have felt towards our oppressors, God still found something good in all that they did to warrant their receiving some kind of reward.

How much more so, then, Gates and Jobs, and all the other entrepreneurs out there using genius, technology and lots of money to make our Torah lives work better, even if it is unintentional. How much more so, then, will Jews who are commanded to keep the mitzvos and intend to do so, receive great reward. How great? There aren't enough billions of dollars in Creation to pay even a single Jew for a life of Torah and mitzvos!

Hence, that is why it is irrelevant for a Jew to receive any of the reward for his mitzvos, or any of his punishment for his sins, in this world. At this stage of history, our bodies are completely incapable of handling either, and would explode early from either the ecstasy of the reward or the unbearable suffering of the punishment.

However, from Yemos HaMoshiach onward, our bodies begin a transformation process that eventually turns them into soul-like realities by the time we get to the World-to-Come (6000 onward), with a much greater capacity to either receive Divine reward or suffer through Divine punishment. Then we'll be able to see just how great the reward is for a single mitzvah and, just how destructive even a single sin really was.

Knowing this alone is good preparation for Rosh Hashanah. The Aseres Yemai Teshuvah is about course-correction, a time of year when we are supposed to come to terms with, at least a little, how much greater the spiritual world is than the physical world. It is the time of year when we try to get

real with the reality of this little story from the Talmud:

Rebi Yehoshua's son became weak and his spirit left him. When he returned, his father asked him, "What did you see?"

He answered him, "An upside down world: the esteemed were down, and those who were down were esteemed."

He told him, "My son, you saw a clear world!" (Pesachim 50a)

Another way of saying this is that what is small over here is big over there, and vice-versa. In this world, 40 billion dollars commands complete attention, as do big houses, large salaries, and lots of popularity. In such a world, a tzaddik and the mitzvos he performs count for very little, if anything at all, and do not compete at all with a popular movie star or super-successful businessman.

Not in the next world, the real one, the eternal one. In that world, not only are righteous people the only ones who count, they are the only ones who are there. The rich and famous, unless they were righteous too, aren't even invited to the main banquet, being left behind here in the corridor that leads to it:

This world is like a corridor before the World-to-Come. Rectify yourself in the corridor in order to be able to enter the Banquet Hall. (Pirkei Avos 4:16)

To give us a taste of this course-correction, the Talmud shares the following projection into the future:

In the time to come the Holy One, Blessed is He, will bring the Evil Inclination and slay it before the righteous and the wicked. To the righteous it will have the appearance of a towering hill, but to the wicked it will have the appearance of a hair thread. Both the former and the latter will weep; the righteous will weep saying,

"How were we able to overcome such a towering hill!"

The wicked also will weep saying, "How is it that we were unable to conquer this hair thread?!" (Succah 52a)

The answer is simple. The righteous are those who appreciate the value of a mitzvah, and the destructive power of even a single sin. Not, perhaps, on the actual level, something that can only be comprehended in the time to come. But, on enough of a level that performing mitzvos becomes all-important, and avoiding sin becomes all-necessary.

Not so the evil. For them mitzvos are as important as the dust on the ground, and performing sins is

no big deal, especially when doing so is so much fun. They never course-correct, and by the time they wake up to the reality of the meaninglessness of their lives, they are long over, and all they can do is stand in shock, as they prepare for the final opportunity of course-correction, one in which their increased capacity to suffer will reveal to them, at last, just how destructive even a "little sin" can be.

Text

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