

FUN VS. PLEASURE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

"Where's the fun in that?" someone might ask reading this week's parshios. These deal with forbidden relationships, and then with all sorts of other activities to be avoided because they reduce holiness, or with activities to be pursued because they increase holiness. Indeed, it seems as if holiness is that which results from doing just the opposite of that which provides the most fun in life.

Therefore, it follows, if one wants to pursue a life of holiness, he or she has to turn his or her back on fun, just as a person who wants to have fun has to give up on being a holy person, just as so many have done throughout the ages. Being mutually exclusive, a person has to choose between one and the other, and trying to have one's cake and eat it too can only result in hypocrisy, as it has over the ages, and as the media keeps revealing.

Given the nature of man, and the world of fun in which he finds himself, we can understand why a person would choose fun over holiness. More difficult to understand and appreciate, however, is why an intellectually-sound and emotionally-balanced person would choose holiness over fun.

The answer comes in one word: Pleasure. However, it will take several to explain why that is, in fact, the answer. It's just one of those everyday ideas that people think they understand, but really don't, resulting in so much wasted time, energy, and life, and historically, Divine wrath and world destruction.

"That was fun!"

What does a person mean when he says those words?

"No problem, it was my pleasure!"

What does he mean when he says those words?

We rarely have to be thanked for doing something that is fun because fun is usually all gain and no loss for those who have it. Even when considerable effort is involved, if it is part of the fun, we think nothing of it and gladly expend it. Quite the contrary, we usually feel like thanking others for our experience after the fun is over.

Not necessarily so when it comes to pleasure, which often entails some kind of personal sacrifice. For example, there are plenty of times when it might seem more enjoyable to not help someone out, either because we're tired, or going the other direction, etc., but we do it anyhow and, remarkably, feel better about ourselves because we do.

In fact, the more we have to sacrifice to do something meaningful in life, the better we later tend to feel about ourselves, and, ironically, the more pleasure we seem to derive from life. Fun and pleasure are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they certainly can be.

There is a fundamental reason for this, which has to do with the very make-up of a human being, who was made in the image of God. What this amounts to is what we call free will, something we only seem to be able to exercise when what we want to do comes into conflict with what we feel like doing, especially if this happens for moral reasons.

We rarely feel like doing the moral thing because the moral thing usually requires some kind of personal sacrifice that a body does not easily make. Indeed, often the sacrifice is very uncomfortable, requiring a lot of personal will power to overcome its resistance in order to do what we know is the right thing.

Many people either do not have or do not exercise such levels of will, and often capitulate to what they feel like doing over what they want to do. However, even though in the short run that might feel good, in the long run, it denies a person the pleasure from life they ultimately seek, and that hurts even more than the sacrifice they could have, but did not make.

Unable to live with the pain of doing the immoral thing, they are forced to either do better next time, or eliminate the idea that what they do is immoral in the first place. This is what Hitler, ysv"z, did when he tried to eliminate what he called "two Jewish inventions: circumcision and conscience." From his perspective, the Torah took all the fun out of life.

What he, and others before and after him, failed to comprehend was that, as true as that may have been, it was in exchange for something better: pleasure. For, though man is capable of sinking to the level of an animal, or even lower, he cannot remain forever on that level. Eventually, his Divine spark begins to fight back, souring the fun while in search of true and lasting pleasure.

The Torah, especially in these parshios, is trying to save us the trouble. We may not understand why, and many may certainly disagree, but the Torah is telling us which activities and which relationships bring out the Godly aspect of man, and which do not. The fact that we do have problems with some or many of its restrictions only increases the opportunity to use our free will, which was given to us for this very reason.

Of course, there are people who do not understand the difference between fun and pleasure, or that there is any difference at all, and they only know the pain of denying themselves the fun that may result from things that the Torah rejects. This is too much for them, and for many, the only alternative is to reject the Torah and the people who advocate it.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the greatest amount of pleasure from doing the moral, that is, the Torah thing, will only come in the World-to-Come, and not in this world. As the rabbis explain, all the fun in the world could never equal even just one hour of pleasure in the World-to-

Come, but try and explain that to someone who does not believe in Torah, and may not even believe in God.

The tragedy is that, regardless, Creation has its bottom line. Some Torah violations may have a limited impact on Creation, slowing down world rectification, but not aborting it. However, others violations of the Torah by their very nature go against the very fabric and purpose of Creation, regardless of the "innocence" of the perpetrators.

We have seen the result of that on many occasions. Though the method may change from one epoch to another, the result is virtually the same: death and destruction. When the Torah prescribes a serious punishment, even a deadly one, for a violation of its commandments, it is not out of revenge. Rather, it is the Torah's way of saying: This is an extreme violation of Creation and cannot be tolerated, for Creation's sake.

Not too long ago, some little child shot and killed his mother. The father had been showing off some of his personal collection of guns to some relatives, who had gathered for some happy family occasion, when the young child just happened to pick one of the guns that happened to be loaded. Innocently, the child pointed the loaded weapon at the woman and pulled the trigger, hitting her at close range and killing her.

What a tragedy. How could something so innocent result in something so sinister? How could someone so guiltless become so guilty? And, even though the child will never be punishable by the law, he will have a punishing life once he discovers the truth about his mother's death. Some terrible results cannot be avoided even because of innocence and naiveté, not when they undermine the fabric of Creation and purpose of mankind.

And, nothing is less fun than the world once it begins to fall apart along its path to correcting that which mankind destroys.

Text

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