

DISCIPLINE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

These are the judgments which you will place before them . . . (Shemos 24:1)

Justice can be a funny thing, especially when it seems so unjust. How many times do both parties enter a court case expecting, hoping, to win, and at least one walks out feeling as if he was taken advantage of? How many people have walked away feeling as if justice had dealt them an unjust blow? Ideally, people should be able to work out their own disagreements, and if they can't, it should be because each wants the other to win. They two sides of the disagreement should come to court out of fear of causing each other unnecessary loss, and after the court has decided in favor of one party over the other, the losing side should be happy for the winner, and the winning side should be disappointed for the loser.

Right. And french fries should be healthy for you.

Of course, that is the way it will be in Yemos HaMoshiach, at least with respect to the way people will act towards one another. French fries may still be unhealthy in the Messianic Era, but more than likely, we won't want them anymore at that time, anyhow. Without a yetzer hara, who will eat or enjoy anything that is not nutritious?

In Talmudic language, the yetzer hara is called the seor sh'b'issa, or the leaven in the dough (Brochos 17a). For, just as a little yeast added to a small amount of dough can make it rise into a large loaf of bread, a little bit of yetzer hara added to a person, which happened when the first man ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, can make him blow up into something much greater than he is, in a negative sense.

Here is a simple example of this. Have you ever gotten into an argument with someone that became blown out of proportion? (Who hasn't?) It may have started off as a quiet disagreement, but for some reason, all kinds of hot buttons got pressed along the way, and voila! a yelling match ensued. Even though you hear yourself yelling, you can't stop yourself, a little voice inside your head says, "If we don't win this, it'll be bad news for the entire universe!"

Then someone else walks into the room, and hearing the shouting, tries to calm everyone down. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it just aggravates the situation. "No, you don't understand," we plead, trying to justify our hysteria. We may even drag them into the argument, and deal with them as an evil collaborator of the "other side."

Most arguments always come to an end, and with time, lose their importance. In fact, sometimes, when remembering how angry and out-of-control we became, we get embarrassed before ourselves, knowing that we never had to get so excited or animated. If it had been video-taped, we probably couldn't even stomach to watch ourselves again.

Even more amazing is how, when the same topic comes up again, this time with a different person, or perhaps, in a different frame of mind, you do not get so upset, or even upset at all. You even wonder what it was that got you going the first time, unaware that it could easily happen again, if it happens in a way to make you subjective, and therefore, defensive once again.

This is the entire difference that the yetzer hara makes: it transforms an objective person into a subjective one. It cleverly takes life situations, and when we're not looking, turns them into threatening crises, that make our decisions a matter of fight-or-flight. When that happens, truth becomes secondary to winning, and we have to go to Bais Din to solve our problems, though not necessarily our feelings.

This does not mean that you are not right about what you claim against another person. Even objective people can damage one another, and become culpable to make amends. It means that subjective people see everything that does not fit into their game plan as an existential threat, and fight to win as if their very lives depended upon victory.

Some people, sadly, walk around like this all day long, argumentative people in search of an argument. Most, I think, are relatively objective about life, at least until the yetzer hara finds a breach in their objectivity, and helps to transform their personalities, for at least the duration of the fight. It's as if the yetzer hara makes people temporarily have a split personality.

It's not what we want. Even if we enjoy the argument and walk away the winner, it's not what we want. As human beings, we like to remain calm, in control, objective. Yes, it can be easier to capitulate to the yetzer hara and allow yourself to become hysterical, to lose control, and to live a subjective existence. But, in the long run, it hurts us a lot more than it soothes us to be that way. We know that it is wrong to approach life, and other people, that way, and we lose self-esteem.

Some gangsters wear pin-stripe suits and mow down everyone who gets in the way with a sub-machine gun. Others dress like everyone else, and mow down people who get in their way with psychological bullets, either with hurting words, by applying excessive guilt, or by making it impossible to reason with them, at which point giving in becomes, sadly, more appealing. You can't change such people; they have to realize that change is good for them. But you can change yourself, which is what this parshah is telling us. It could have easily begun where last week's parshah left off, with Moshe Rabbeinu going up into Heaven to receive the rest of Torah, as he does at the end of the parshah. Instead, however, it broke up the two sides of the story with a very detailed account of technical laws called mishpatim. Why?

The answer is one word: Discipline.

Reins are to a horse, and a yoke is to a cow, what disciple is to a human, the means by which to channel energy into a positive and creative direction. As God told Moshe Rabbeinu in last week's parshah, after Moshe had told God that the people knew not to climb the mountain once the Divine Presence descended over it, "In their exuberance to know Me, they may risk death and climb it anyhow."

It would have been a great act of love, wouldn't it have been? Yes, but that is not what God wanted at that time. What He wanted from the Jewish people at that unique and historic moment was not only great love and devotion, but greatly disciplined love and devotion. He wanted a productive love, not a destructive one - which would have resulted if people had lost their lives climbing the mountain out of love for God.

Discipline is mind over emotions. It is the ability to recognize what the moment needs from us, in spite of what we might feel we need from the moment. We work for history, not the other way around. God's master plan carries the day, and us as well, if we work with it. But, if we don't, though we may declare victory by putting our wants and desires first and demanding, and getting, what we want, in the end, we are the losers, as the Talmud states:

Anyone who allows himself to be pushed by the moment, the moment will be pushed off for him. But, anyone who pushes off the moment, he will eventually be pushed off by the moment. (Brochos 64a).

Text

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