

HE IS IN CONTROL

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Can a person die before his or her time? The halachah of the Sotah in this week's parshah seems to imply yes, for just as in the case of other sins for which the punishment is death, it seems that a person can bring on his or her own death prematurely.

The Sotah, or the suspected adulteress, drinks a special mixture meant to prove her innocence or guilt. If innocent, the drink will not affect her negatively, and even result in blessing. If guilty of adultery, then she, and the man with whom she sinned, will die shortly after, and not in a very pleasant manner either.

Hence, it was her own errant behavior that caused the Sotah's early death. Had she remained true to the Torah, seemingly, she would have lived a much longer life. The same thing is true for anyone who warrants the death penalty.

Not only this, but it seems as if one can even die prematurely accidentally, as the Talmud seems to teach:

The Malach HaMaves used to frequent Rav Bibi bar Abaye. He said to his messenger, "Bring me Miriam the hairdresser."

He went and brought him Miriam, a children's nurse.

"I told you Miriam the hairdresser!"

He answered, "Then I will return her."

He said, "Since you have brought her, let her be added. But how were you able to take her [before her time]?"

"She was holding a shovel in her hand and was heating and raking an oven. She put it on her foot and burnt herself, damaging her mazel, so I brought her."

Rav Bibi bar Abaye asked him: "Do you have permission to do that?"

He answered: "Is it not written: *'There are those taken away without justice'?*"

He countered: "But it says, *'One generation passes away, and another generation comes!'*" (Koheles 1:4)"

So, he explained: "I have charge of them until they have completed the generation, and then I hand

them over to Dumah!"

He asked, "In the end, what will you do with her [missing] years?"

He said: "If there is a Rabbinic scholar who overlooks things,

I will give them to him in her place." (Chagigah 4b)

Elsewhere, the Talmud discusses how the righteous king, Chizkiah HaMelech, almost lost 15 years of his life:

The Holy One, Blessed is He, brought suffering to Chizkiah and told Yeshayahu, "Go and visit the sick," as it says, *"In those days Chizkiah became ill to the point of death; and Yeshayahu the son of Amotz, the prophet, came and said to him, 'So says God, Lord of Hosts: Command your house for you shall die and not live.'"* (Yeshayahu 38:1).

"Why do I deserve such a severe punishment?" asked Chizkiah.

"Because," answered Yeshayahu, *"you have not had children."*

"But I saw through prophecy that I will have evil children."

"What business have you with kavshei Rachmanah?" Yeshayahu answered. (Brochos 10a)

In the end, Chizkiah did teshuvah, regained the rest of his years, and married the daughter of Yeshayahu. However, that did not prevent him from fathering Menashe, who steered the nation to idol worship for decades before doing teshuvah himself. There's no second guessing God when it comes to the needs of history.

But, it was a good thing that Yeshayahu was dispatched to warn the king of his fatal error. Otherwise, one of the most righteous kings of Jewish history, who himself was almost Moshiach (Sanhedrin 94a), would have left this world 'early.'

So far, all of this makes sense. However, there is a short statement from the Talmud that states that nothing, absolutely nothing happens by chance (Chullin 7b). Indeed, one of the main lessons of the Shema that we recite twice daily is: Everything that has happened, is happening, and will ever happen is the result of the will of God, even if He exercises His will through an agent, including the Angel of Death.

So which is it, that a person can die accidentally, or that even when it seems that a person has died prematurely, it was what God always wanted for the person all along?

As if the question isn't complicated enough, the Talmud says elsewhere that a Jew, if he is worthy, can change his destiny, or mazel (Shabbos 156a). Apparently, because of living by Torah, a person can mitigate the impact his destiny has on his life, to either improve it or worsen it. How does that affect the equation of life-and-death?

First of all, have you ever noticed how situations that could have, and perhaps should have, resulted in disaster somehow ended up okay? Or, how, in some situations, no matter how well a person prepares for a situation it can still backfire on him, perhaps because of something he never thought could go wrong, because it never had in the past.

Or how, for an unexplained reason, you recall an important detail that saves you from a difficult situation, or you forget one you should have remembered, and suffer the consequence as a result. Things work out the way they do because that is what God wants, no matter how accidental the events may seem to us, or how serendipitous they may seem to occur.

Just imagine, had Yeshayahu not gone to visit Chizkiah, he would not have known what he had been doing wrong, and die early as a result. But it was no coincidence that he did either: Apparently, the king was only meant to come close to death, not actually experience it. It just hadn't been his time to go, so he didn't.

The agent of the Angel of Death can make a mistake about a person, but not God. And, when the Angel of decides to keep the wrong person, and grant her remaining years to a talmid chacham, that too is from God, and not by chance. God meant for the 'mistake' to occur, and for her 'extra' years to be given to someone else, who probably already had them coming.

If so, seemingly, we can do no wrong that is not meant to happen. However, if that is true, then what does our free will impact, if anything at all?

For one, it affects our eternal portion in the World-to-Come, for without mitzvos to our credit, we can't receive much reward in Eternity. Many questions can arise about whether or not we really have free will, but the important thing is that, as far as God is concerned, we do, and that we are evaluated based upon how we use it. All questions aside, our portion in the World-to-Come is based upon our usage of what seems to be our free will.

However, our choices seem to have an impact in this world as well, for it can make all the difference in terms of how we leave this world, either as a hero, or as a no-good, either peacefully, or in unpleasant manner. The Sotah, or any person who seems to have been killed prematurely, was destined to die when he or she did. But, had they stayed out of trouble, then they might have died nobly instead of ignobly.

The Arizal revealed that people can die 'early' for all kinds of built-in reasons. For example, it could be a blessing for someone to die early, since having completed his current tikun, he can't go the next level up until he dies and reincarnates. Since we are not privy to such information, we only see someone cut down before his time, while the upper world sees someone moving from one stage of his tikun to the next.

Ultimately, our lives come down to their final moments, when we reveal who we have really become, which affects us for eternity. We all know how difficult it is to control any moment in life, let

alone our final one. However, by living a meaningful life and sticking to the ways of Torah is how we enlist the help of the only One can Who control the moments of our lives, to make sure than when our time does come, we can go out in style.

Text

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