KEEPING OUR WISDOM

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Command the Children of Israel to bring clear olive oil, beaten for the light, so the Menorah can burn continuously. (Shemos 27:20)

I knew someone who met his wife only after 110 shidduchim— 110 shidduchim! Even though he was happily married, he complained about the amount of times that he had to date before finally settling down, and attributed it to the fact that he had probably met his soul mate early on in the process, but out of doubt, had passed her up. To teach him a lesson, he surmised, God didn't bring another one around until 100 shidduchim later!

Maybe yes, and maybe no. One thing is for certain, though, and that is, that doubt can be very destructive—VERY destructive. It can lead to relationships that should never have begun, and destroy those that should never have stopped. It can cause world leaders to trust those who threaten their lives and those of their countrymen, and not trust those who have their best interest at heart. In short, doubt is insidiously dangerous for mankind.

In fact, so-much-so, that of all the negative traits that can be associated with an enemy of God, doubt is the one that is connected to Divine Enemy #1, Amalek. Even his Name, when the numerical value of each Hebrew letter—Ayin-Mem-Lamed-Kuf—is added up, totals the Hebrew word for doubt: suffek—Samech-Peh-Kuf.

At first, doubt, as troubling as it can be at times, doesn't sound so bad. This simple example, however, shows why we're easily fooled by doubt, until it's too late to do anything about it, and the full depth of its destructive power becomes known.

Imagine standing on the corner of a busy street, waiting for the light to change before crossing, when all of a sudden, a news reporter along with his film crew approach you.

"Can you answer a question for us while we record?"

Thinking about it for a moment, wondering how bad the situation could possibly get, you answer, "Sure, I can try."

"Great," the reporter says. "We're part of a survey crew for the Channel 2 News, and we just want to find out how well the man in the street knows his history."

Recalling that history was one of the subjects to which you barely ever paid good attention, you shift your position, displaying obvious nervousness. Picking up on your uneasiness, the reporter says, "We

just have one simple question that you probably know the answer for."

You smile uncomfortably, doubting the sincerity of the interviewer.

"And, just to make it worth your while," he adds, "we're going to give you and your wife an all-expense paid vacation to a resort of your choice if you get the answer right."

How did I get myself into this? you wonder to yourself, as you break out into a sweat. If you get the right answer, you can finally take your wife on a long awaited vacation at no cost to you, but if don't get the answer right, public humiliation won't be the worst of it!

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Ah . . . David . . ." you answer, hesitatingly.

"Well, David, for an all expense paid vacation at the resort of your choice, tell me, what is the name of the thirtieth President of the United States of America?"

"Funny you should ask that question," you tell him, "because when I was in college, my roommate used to memorize the names of all the Presidents of the United States. I used to make fun of him, telling him, 'Like that's ever going to make a difference in your life!' but he just kept on doing it."

"That is funny," the reporter says. "Bet you now wish you memorized those names right along with him, eh?"

You laugh nervously, wondering if your old roommate is going to watch the interview later on, yelling out the answer, long after you blew the opportunity to take your wife on her well-deserved vacation.

"So, David, do you have the answer?" the reporter asks, clearly wanting to move on already to his next victim.

In a voice that clearly reveals your doubt, you say, "Ah . . . Roosevelt?"

"Wow!" he responds, boosting your hopes momentarily, before crashing them with the words, "So close . . . but not exactly. The thirtieth President of the United States of America was Calvin Coolidge. FDR," he tells you, as you turn different shades of red, "was the thirty-second President, I believe."

"Right," you say somewhat sheepishly.

"Well, thanks for participating in our survey," he says, getting ready to move on to the next interviewee, "You have a good day now," he adds, leaving you totally humiliated and deflated, and wondering if your entire office staff was watching. And all you had wanted to do was cross the street and get some lunch. What a turn of events.

It is amazing how much doubt we live with on a daily basis, and do little about, not knowing that much of it is like a time bomb waiting to go off at some inopportune time in the future, like in the

following story.

When I was a buchur back in yeshivah, some where a long time ago in a distant galaxy, I paid the price for some doubt. I had been learning Hilchos Shabbos in the Mishnah Berurah, and when I got to the section about how to deal with a fire that, God forbid, breaks out on Shabbos, I decided to skip it, save it for a future time, and move on to more practical Shabbos halachos. "The chances that I'll need to know these laws in the next little while are slim," I rationalized.

To make a long story short, though the details are interesting as well, a fire broke out in our dorm room. Though there were several of us there watching the conflagration grow and becoming increasingly panicky, as we ran from room to room, and halachah sefer to halachah sefer, none of us knew exactly what to do within the confines of Shabbos halachah.

In the end, we put the fire out, reasoning that it could spread and endanger the lives of others. Though that was true, halachically, there was a simpler and more permissible solution: pick up the flame, which had been possible at first, and put it outside and let it go out by itself. Fire is muktzeh, which is rabbinical prohibition, but extinguishing a flame on Shabbos can be a Torah prohibition.

The entire experience burned a lesson into my memory. First of all, never ever assume that the odds of some halachic situation occurring are few, and therefore, its laws are unimportant. The odds can be 100 billion to one that it will happen, but when God is the one, the odds might as well be reversed. He'll tolerate not learning something for a halachic reason, but not out of carelessness.

Second of all, I learned how debilitating doubt can be. As the fire burned, I felt so paralyzed, and angry at myself for being so vulnerable. Since then, I have made a point, whenever I can, of knowing something about any situation that might cross my path. Only by ridding ourselves of doubt, especially philosophical and halachic doubt, can we remain protected against the wiles of Amalek.

Doubt is to a human mind what germs are to a immune system. While kept in check, a person can remain healthy and in control. But, should a germ find a weak spot, it can grow and fester, and, in some cases, even result in death. Likewise, doubt can eventually result in intellectual and spiritual death, and has, so many times through history.

This ties in very nicely with the beginning of this week's parshah, which begins with the mitzvah of olive oil for the Menorah.

As Rashi explains, the oil, which represents wisdom, that could be used for the Menorah, also a symbol of wisdom, had to be free of any sediment from the start. It wasn't enough that it was clear after filtering; it had to be clear of all extraneous particles from the time of harvest.

Just as the oil for the Menorah, both symbols of wisdom, must be free of sediment, likewise must our wisdom be free of sediments, that is, doubt. Only then can we remain strong against the onslaught of Amalek, true to Torah, and worthy of our eternal portions in the World-to-Come. Purim Samayach.

Text

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