

MEAT YOUR MAKER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Doctors are a central part of everyday life. The first thing that most people do when they get sick, at least in the West, is go to a doctor. People believe in doctors so much these days that they assume visiting one will certainly result in a cure, and are surprised when it doesn't.

This is difficult to reconcile with the Mishnah's perspective on the medical profession:

The best of doctors are destined for Gehinom. (Kiddushin 82a)

If it said the worst of doctors are headed for Gehinom we might not have a problem. The medical profession and the position in which it puts itself easily leads to abuse. Any profession on which the public greatly depends is one that often leads to corruption on some level.

Another reason is that, Western medicine can easily distract a person away from the true Source of illness and recovery, as the Talmud explains:

A Jew named Zunin asked Rebi Akiva, "Both of us know that idols have no power. So how do we explain the fact that sometimes their worshippers come to them crippled from illness and walk away with their limbs healed?"

He replied with a parable: "There was once a very honest person in a town, whom people trusted to the point that they would leave their precious belongings in his safekeeping, even without witnesses. One man however refused to rely on the man's honesty and would insist upon witnesses being on hand when he left something in his safekeeping. However on one occasion he left something with him but forgot to bring witnesses. The guardian's wife insulted by the man's lack of trust in her husband, suggested to him that they deny that they ever received the deposit, since this time the deposit had been made without witnesses. 'Because this fool acted improperly,' said her husband, 'we should abandon our faithfulness?' Likewise," concluded Rebi Akiva, "when pains are sent from Heaven to afflict a person they are sworn to a strict schedule exactly when they must come and when they must depart, at precisely which hour they must leave, as well as to which healer and medicine will be the agents of remedy. When the appointed time comes for them to leave and the sufferer visits the idol's temple these pains say, 'It is only right that we should not leave.' Then they say, 'Because this fool acted improperly we should abandon our faithfulness about which we took an oath?'" (Avodah Zarah 55a)

How many doctors keep this in mind when practicing medicine? How many help their patients keep

it in mind as well? This is why some people make a special declaration about God being their Healer before taking their medicine. They want to be clear that God is the One Who heals.

What the Mishnah says about butchers however is less clear:

The worthiest of butchers is a partner of Amalek. (Kiddushin 82a)

Again, if the Mishnah was talking about the least worthy of butchers, we might understand the harsh language. We have seen scandals in recent years in which treif chickens were sold as kosher. Even the Talmud discusses what to do about a butcher who is caught cheating, resulting in the consumption of treif food by trusting customers.

But the Mishnah is not talking about such people. It is talking the trustworthy butchers. Yet they are being called "partners with Amalek"? What is this supposed to mean?

Rashi on the Mishnah, provides direction when he explains as follows:

Doubtful treif comes to their hands, and concerned about their money, they feed it to people. (Rashi)

Does this not sound again like the worst of butchers? No, says Rashi. The worst of the butchers will sell meat that they KNOW is treif. The best of the butchers would never do that, but concerned about financial loss, they might sell doubtful treif. Even still, how does this put them in partnership with Amalek?

To answer this, we need to recall where Parashas Zachor occurs in the Torah. It is in Parashas Ki Seitzei, right after the commandment to keep proper weights and measures, a law for maintaining fair and just business practices.

Nothing occurs in the Torah where it does randomly, even if it appears that way at first. Therefore, the commentators ask about the connection between the two matters, that of conducting honest business and the attack of Amalek after leaving Egypt.

The answer is that cheating in business actually leads to confrontation with Amalek. Simply, when a person cheats in business he states, whether he realizes or not, that either God does not provide him with parnassah, or that if He does, He does not do so fairly. He doubts Hashgachah Pratis—Divine Providence, the kind of doubt that Amalek lives to promote. As mentioned numerous times before, the gematria of "Amalek" is "suffek," the Hebrew word for "doubt."

We learned about the connection between doubt in God and the onslaught of Amalek from their first attack, as Rashi explains:

The Torah places this section [about Amalek's attack] immediately after this verse [when they asked, "Is God among us or not?"] to imply [that God says], "I am always among you and ready at hand for everything you need, and yet you say, 'Is God among us or not?' By your lives, that dog shall come and bite you, and you will cry for Me and then you will know where I am!" (Rashi, Shemos 17:8:)

When a person doubts Divine Providence, that's when Amalek attacks. It can be an actual physical attack, as it was in the desert, later in the time of Haman, and according to many, during the Holocaust. Or it can be a conceptual attack, like today, as so many people turn to atheism in light of advanced scientific understanding.

Why though are butchers the symbol of something that potentially occurs in every profession? The answer may have to do with the actual meat they sell. Most other professions have the potential to damage a person physically, through the loss of money. Treif meat, as the Talmud says, actually reduces a person's level of spirituality, and his or her ability to sense the Presence of God and His Providence. This certainly makes a seller of such meat a partner with Amalek.

When a person doubts God's involvement in their financial livelihood, they are losing the battle against Amalek. When a person trusts in God for their parnassah, they win it. Thus, it was the half-shekel that spearheaded the defense against Haman. The giving of the half-shekel was also a symbolic statement of our trust in God for financial survival.