

DERECH HATORAH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

In the third month of the children of Israel's departure from Egypt, on this day they arrived in the desert of Sinai. (Shemos 19:1)

TORAH HAS BEEN called by the Talmud itself an "elixir of life" and an "elixir of death." We've explained many times what determines which it will be for the person learning it. Derech Eretz, literally the "Way of the Land," is the key because, in this context, it means good character traits such as humility, appreciation, truth-seeker, etc.

This became clear from the start. Adam HaRishon ate from the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Ra and undid Paradise for man and the world. The consequence was the knowledge of good and evil, which is really what Torah provides. However, without the essence of Torah, which is embodied in the Aitz HaChaim, such knowledge presents a person with temptation to abuse the world, and not always the willpower to overcome it.

Thus, one of the first acts of "repair" Adam instituted was to make clothes for himself and his wife. Now knowing the world could be abused, he still had enough sense to make a psychological fence against misusing it by promoting modesty to lessen temptation. The knowledge of good and evil, "ingested" before even eating from the Aitz HaChaim, made the world a scarier and spiritually more dangerous place.

I was talking to a person recently who grew up secular and was now quite "frum." He bemoaned certain aspects of his previously secular life because they still haunted him. How many times during learning or prayer had unwelcome images from his past flashed across his mind's eye, adding a profane aspect to a holy moment?

He envied the person who grew up religious. Of course they have a yetzer hara and their own kinds of spiritual challenges. We all do. But, he told me, they can't imagine what they haven't previously seen, and they have been protected from seeing things they should probably NEVER see, and WON'T. Their distractions, he said, are "holier."

It depends upon the person, and there are exceptions to the rule, but I heard his point. Sometimes I can just see an advertisement on the side of a bus, think nothing of it at the time, and then later be surprised when, closing my eyes to concentrate during prayer, the image returns for an encore. "What's that doing here?" I'll wonder to myself, distracted and frustrated.

As I have mentioned in the past, it's like going to university before going to yeshiva. In yeshiva, you learn about God's existence, His control over everything, and how to work on approaching him on an ongoing basis. At university, people often learn just the opposite. More religious people have come out of university irreligious than secular people have come out religious.

Some however have become MORE religious from the secular knowledge they learned. Despite constant attacks against God and Torah, they grew more committed to both. Their Torah background gave them the ability to see the flaws in secular thinking, and the smarts to learn more about God and His world from it.

In halacha there is something called "Mori Heter." It's when someone uses halacha to justify doing the wrong thing. A person who basically keeps halacha does not want to be an outright sinner. If they are going to do something wrong, or at least not-so-right, they want to do it with the "blessing" of Torah. Or, at least what they have convinced themselves is the blessing of Torah.

When someone is "Mori Heter," using halacha to break halacha, then Torah has become an "elixir of death" for them. How many anti-Torah events have occurred in the name of Torah? How many sins have been committed while trying to uphold Torah and defend God? A LOT.

Take the golden calf for example. It occurred right at the base of Mt. Sinai. Now, the Jewish people had already heard God speak from on top of the mountain so they knew He was there. And, though some doubted if Moshe Rabbeinu was coming back down again, it was still only doubt. Yet, they carried out one of the most grievous sins possible right at the bottom of the mountain.

Obviously they hadn't jumped right into it. They had to have worked up to the golden calf. The Erev Rav, the main perpetrators of the sin, knew that they could not enlist people in their cause by being up front about their intentions. They knew they had to camouflage their plans, at least in the beginning, in some kind of Torah cause. If they could succeed at that, they knew, the yetzer hara would take care of the rest.

It's because ALL of us, religious or non-religious, have the same instincts. We ALL have a yetzer hara. It's just that a "frum" person has been raised to recognize it as an enemy, and to make a valiant effort to counteract it. Even if a secular person acknowledges something as temptation, they do not necessarily see that as a bad thing, but as something to be "safely" fulfilled.

The yetzer hara, in the non-Torah world, is not an enemy per se, but more like a child with unbridled wants. It is the adult's role to give the "child" what it wants, albeit in a way that is not harmful to the "child" or society. You don't get many points for withstanding temptation in such a world, just a lot of frustration and second thoughts.

For a Torah-abiding Jew, the yetzer hara is a mortal enemy. Life is a constant struggle to keep the enemy at bay, defeat of which is only possible through death. Victories during life are usually only likely with the help of Heaven, and short-lived without constant vigilance to maintain them.

This is why it took 50 days to get to a point where we could receive Torah, and every step along the way was part of the development process. They left with an "exalted hand," and then became trapped at the sea and faced imminent death. This was followed by a spectacular salvation, and the end of their food and drink, which was solved with the mann and the Well of Miriam.

Then came Amalek. The war with Amalek was instrumental in preparing the Jewish people to receive Torah, because it showed them how quickly the world falls apart without it. It was Amalek who "produced" Haman and eventually Hitler, ysv"z. The defeat of Amalek and the survival of the Jewish people depend upon the same thing: the CORRECT approach to learning Torah.

The journey to Sinai was a journey to develop "derech eretz." As it says in Tanna d'Bei Eliyahu, the "derech" to the Tree of Life that God blocked with the circling flaming swords was "derech eretz." Derech Eretz is not automatic. It has to be earned, and once it has been, then a person has the key to turn Torah into an "elixir of life."

It's not an all or nothing thing. A little derech eretz helps too, just not enough. A person has to work on this trait ALL the time. If a person chooses to stagnate, his Torah will as well, and it will work against him. If a person continues down the path of derech eretz, even little-by-little, then God will help him with his yetzer hara, and his Torah will only bring them more of "life."