

OF HEARTS AND MINDS

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

harass to mean, "You are to hate them." (25:17). This mitzvah is so unusual because it is in addition to the commandment of waging war against the Midianites. (Which is not until next week's Parsha at the beginning of Chapter 31).

Why were we commanded to hate the Midianites? With Amalek, we were commanded to destroy them and always remember what they had done to us. Yet, there is no specific command to hate them or not intermarry with them (after conversion). Additionally, we are forbidden to intermarry with the Midianites (even after conversion) and are forbidden to make peace with them (Divarim 4-7). Yet, we were not commanded to destroy them as we were instructed to do so with Amalek? What was unique about the incident of the Baal Peor at the end of last week's Parsha that the Midianites must remain our hated enemies?

The Ohr Hachayim (25:17) explained the commandment of Tzror as fundamental to countering the effect the sinning at Baal Peor had on the soul of our nation.

There are natural tendencies in humans toward activities that are termed sinful. These tendencies are not within the control of the human to have or not to have. They are the urges and desires that are natural to the human animal. These desires are not in and of themselves good or bad; however, depending on time and circumstance their expression can be good or bad. Once a person has allowed his natural tendencies to be expressed in a sinful manner, such as what happened when the Jewish men consorted with the Moabite and Midianite women by Baal Peor, it becomes easier for the individual to sin again and again.

The Midianites perpetrated this terrible damage against the Jewish people. By sending out their daughters to seduce the Jewish men, they opened our souls to the taste of sinning. Baal Peor was a deity that was served through sexual performance. In so doing, they associated religious practice with sexual promiscuity and perverted the actions and thinking of the nation. The purpose of commanding the Jews to hate the Midianites in addition to waging war with them was to counter the effect that the sinning had on the soul of the nation. (An extensive elaboration on the actual words of the Ohr Hachayim).

In essence, the Midianites were responsible for compromising our pure hearts. The purity that King David yearned for in Tehilim - Psalms was the purity and innocence of the sinless. We are each born sinless and pure. However, as we mature and confront life, we encounter sin and lose the

innocence of our youth. Although we can do Teshuva and repent our sins, we can never regain our original pristine purity. Once we have tasted the taste of sin we are left with an indelible mark on our hearts and souls and can more easily be awakened to sin again.

Before the sin of Baal Peor the shortcomings of the Jews were in relation to understanding the extent of G-d's caring and the degree of their dependency. They had never defected solely because of lustful desire and promiscuity. However, the Midianites and Moabites, following the advice of Billam, went out of their way to pervert the purity of our hearts and expose us to sinning for the sake of carnal desire. Therefore, we were commanded to hate them.

How would hating the Midianites correct the damage done to our hearts and souls?

In the story of Yoseph and the wife of Potiphar, we find Yoseph reacting to the presence of sin. Alone in the house with his master's wife, the wife attempted to seduce Yoseph. The verse records, "She took hold of his garment and said Lie with me! "However, Yoseph left his garment in her hand and fled." (Bereishis 39:12).

Why did Yoseph the brilliant planner and strategist leave such incriminating evidence as his jacket with Potiphar's wife? In fact, when she accused him of attempted rape she used his garment as evidence of his guilt? My Grandfather, Rav Yitzchak Isaac Tendler Zt"l explained that we learn from Yoseph what it means to be a true Tzadik. Of course, he should have taken any incriminating evidence with him when he fled. However, because Yoseph was a true Tzadik his reaction to the proximity of sin was gut-felt and emotional, rather than intellectual and rational. The Medresh tells us that if not for his gut level reaction to flee he would have succumbed to the seduction. In fact, Yoseph had much more to gain from giving in to his mistress than by fleeing from her. Who knows what favors and advantages would have been his for the asking, including the possibility of freedom. Instead, Yoseph's sole reaction was to flee from the seduction and put distance between him and the temptation of sin. The purity of his heart overcame the rational protests of his mind.

The Medresh states that hatred is among the emotions that interfere with rational thought. When Pinchas killed Zimri and the Midianites princess he acted from a gut level that denied rational thought. He did not wait to see what Moshe or the other elders would do. He did not allow himself to dwell on the personal danger he would be exposed to. Pinchas knew that the nation was in mortal danger because of their sinning. Pinchas, the peace loving and sensitive grandson of the great Aharon knew that he had to do something to save the nation from destruction. He had to become the zealot who acts on his emotions and convictions for the sake of principle and truth. In so doing, he overcame the protests of his mind with the purity of his heart. He was like Yoseph the Tzadik who allowed the purity of his heart to ignore the protests of his mind.

The evil Billam was among the few individuals in history who understood G-d's intentions for humankind. Yet, he openly denied G-d and did what ever he could to thwart His plans. How is this possible? How could someone who knew G-d so well still be able to completely rebel against Him?

The Talmud describes Billam as the quintessential egotistical, hedonistic, sensualist. He was driven by the desire for power, money and pleasure. Therefore, although he rationally recognized and understood G-d, he was unwilling to curb his physical urges. Instead, he suspended rational thought for the sake of fulfilling his desires. He allowed the impurity of his heart to overcome the protests of his mind.

The Mitzvah of hating the Midianites as explained by the Ohr Hachayim, was intended to counter the damage Billam and the Midianites had done to the purity of our hearts. The only way to correct the damage was to replace the hedonistic desires they had awoken with an even more powerful emotion, hatred. As the Medresh says, hatred clouds rational thinking. When in the future the Jewish people would confront the carnal seductions of the non-Torah world, they would bolster the purity of their hearts by viewing the opportunity of sinning with hatred and disgust. They could then be like Pinchas who attained Shelaymus; wholeness by integrating his mind and heart in the service of G-d, rather than in the service of self-gratification and carnal pleasure.

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