

THE PROVERBIAL "KICK IN THE PANTS"

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

As many of you know, the actual Torah is, for the most part, formatted in justified columns. The only punctuation breaking up the narrative is a system of blank spaces and skipped lines. Eliyahu Ki Tov in his monumental work Sefer Haparshios explains that the blank spaces serve two purposes. The blank spaces that are located in the middle of a line of words (called a Satoom - sealed-space) signify the end of one topic and the beginning of another related topic. The blank spaces that are located at the end of a line of words (Pasuach - open-space) signify the end of a topic and the beginning of another unrelated topic. Many printed Chumashim (Five Books of The Torah) identify these spaces with the Hebrew letters Samech or Pay. The Stone Chumash (ArtScroll) has the actual spaces formatted into their publication.

This week's Parsha is a potpourri of laws "intended primarily to regulate private relationships, such as family and social life." (R.S.R.Hirsch)

The first seven topics (a) The Woman Captive - 21:10. b) The First-Born's Share Of His Father's Inheritance - 21:15. c) The Rebellious Son -21:18. d) Hanging and Burial After Capital Punishment - 21:22. e) Returning Lost Articles - 22:1. f) The Fallen Animal - 22:4. g) Transvestism - 22:5.) are separated from each other by sealed-spaces, which means that they share a common theme. What is that common theme?

Wisdom is the ability to focus on the essence of an issue and not be distracted by circumstance and detail. My Father Shlita once taught me that 99% of all marital and family problems can be reduced to three problems: intimacy, money, and children. Since that time I have grown to understand that my Father's seemingly simplistic reduction of marriage and family conflicts does not deny the uniqueness of each case. Just the opposite! His wisdom frames the complexities of relationships in a manner that directs individual analysis to ignore the unimportant and focus on the real issues.

The big three, intimacy, money, and children, impact our self-image and respect more so than anything else. (Just ask Freud) We tend to define ourselves as successful or not by the three. The most successful business person in the world can feel like a failure when his family life is in shambles, or non-existent. All the money in the world will not compensate for the pain and difficulties of a troubled or rebellious child or a unhappy or anguished spouse. Love and intimacy are stretched to the limits of emotional support and endurance when there are bill collectors knocking at the door and hungry mouths to feed.

I would like to suggest that the common theme connecting the first seven topics of the Parsha is self-image, self-respect, and personal dignity.

The Parsha begins with the difficult topic of the Woman Captive. Taken in war, ripped away from family and home, forced to dwell among the victorious enemy, the "Woman Captive" is presented to her captor's family as his "bashert" (designated-one). The Torah confronts the soldier's passions and demands honesty. "What are your true motives for bringing home this non-Jewish captive? Are you motivated by mere lust or is there something else that has yet to be defined?"

The Torah's approach in challenging the soldier is quite relentless.

"You think this is your Bashert, Mr. Soldier-romantic? You want us to believe that your desires have some higher, nobler calling? We do not believe you for a second!" At present your feelings are nothing more than lust bordering on "wanton abuse!" (R.S.R.Hirsch 21:10) Bring her back to your family Mr. Big-shot and allow her to mourn the loss of her family and past. Let her hair and nails grow long. Remove her fancy clothes, jewels and contacts. Let her slump around all depressed with bespectacled red eyes and tear stained cheeks. Feel the intensity of her fear and hatred. Confront your mother's disappointment and the disdain of your family.

Go out into your community and resume normal life. Return to the Bais Medresh and shul, your Rosh Hayeshiva and Rabbeim. Involve yourself in the daily routine of Torah, Mitzvos, and work. Deal with the whispers, looks, and open disgust of friends and workers. Confront your desires away from the heat and passion of the battlefield. Begin to rediscover your true self-worth and see your "captive love" as a real person with dreams and a past of her own. Begin to respect her for being an individual and never ever fall into the destructiveness of "wanton abuse."

If your feelings can withstand the test of normal family-life, scrutiny, and perspective, marry her and treat her with the utmost respect and consideration. She may grow to love you. You may grow to love her.

However, the Torah is not certain of a happy ending. The chances are that a marriage founded upon captivity and coercion will not have a happy ending.

The second topic takes place years later. The young soldier has become a man of substance. Not only did he marry his beautiful captive and have a first-born son, he also married the "shidduch" his mother always wanted for him. However, appearances can be deceiving. The beautiful captive wife has never fully resolved her issues. Underlying her beautiful exterior is years of resentment at having been forced to become something she never wanted to be. More so, by contrast to the relationship her husband has with his second wife her unhappiness is magnified. Likewise, the husband now sees how right everyone was when he first came home from war flushed with victory and lust.

Of course, the negative feelings are never hidden from the children. The oldest son, first heir to his father's estate, has had a tumultuous relationship with his father. As the oldest he assumed that the

rights of the first-born would be his. However, the rest of the family never seemed to agree. For reasons only understood later, they projected degrees of resentment onto the son who should have never been. His father, who should have defended his legal claim as the first-born did not do so and the distance between father and son only grew greater.

The wife feels that she was never accepted or respected. The husband wonders how he ever allowed himself to get involved with such a woman in the first place. Guilt, rationalization, shame, and anger have undermined the husband's self-respect. The same have also made it impossible for him to show proper respect for his wife and son. The son does not know who he is or what his place should be within the family. He lacks a sense of personal worth and is angry, defiant, and resentful.

Yet, the Torah defends his position. "Father, he is your oldest and he is your heir. Now go deal with the consequences of your actions."

The Rebellious Son is next. A home full of conflict and resentment cannot produce self-respecting and dignified children, and in a theoretical but horrific scenario the Torah paints a stark picture of parental responsibility and failing.

"In the end, the boy will grow up to be a highway robber, endangering the lives of others. Better he should die innocent of such crimes. Therefore, the parents must bring him to the courts to be killed." (Sifri and Talmud in Sanhedrin 71a - Rashi 21:18)

The job of Jewish parents is to raise G-d fearing and moral children. To do anything less is to have failed as parents. Do not define your successes by what they do in the secular world. Do not define your successes as parents by how rich your children have become. The scale for weighing parental success is your children's moral stature in the eyes of society and G-d. Moral stature is the basis for lasting self-respect and dignity. Moral stature guarantees that your children will treat all others with dignity and respect.

The concept of personal dignity is brutally underscored by the respect accorded the executed criminal. Regardless of his past actions, the physical being of the criminal was formed in the image of G-d. On the one hand his death must be displayed as a deterrent to all others. On the other hand, his displayed body further desecrates the name of G-d in Whose image he was created. Therefore, the criminal was executed right before nightfall and his body hung on display for but a moment. Then, with all the dignity deserving of G-d's image, the body was buried in accordance with Halacha.

Self-respect and dignity must extend beyond the person or persons and embrace personal belongings as well. Therefore, the next topics discuss the laws of Returning Lost Items and The Fallen Animal. In each instance we extend our concern for the owner by showing equal respect for his property.

The prohibition against transvestism is the last of this series of related topics. It demands that each of the sexes know themselves well. Clothing was given to Adam and Chava to clothe them in dignity

and separate them from all other animals. Clothing was intended to define whom we are and what we are supposed to do. Clothing was intended to force separation not obscure it. Transvestism destroys the intent of G-d and the dignity of both man and woman.

As Moshe bid farewell to the Jewish nation he focused them on the simple truths. Self-respect and personal dignity are the foundation for building a G-d-fearing, moral, family and society. Everything else is just confusion.

In the course of history mankind's most ignoble times have been during war and conflict. It is almost as if we suspend our humanity and regress to our lowest common denominator, that of the wild beast. Murder, rape, and plunder accompany the soldier as he is given license to destroy that which should be most precious. It confirms, as the Torah teaches, that all morals and values rest upon the sanctity of human life. Devalue the pricelessness of life, and you undermine the foundation upon which all values and morals rest.

When we place a weapon in the hands of the young and mandate them to kill the unleashed amorality is never limited to the battlefield. The private domain of person and property also fall prey to the voracious human animal.

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