

TOO MUCH "ISH"

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 375, Ain Osin Mitzvos Chavilos. Good Shabbos!

Too Much "Ish" May Contribute To The Sotah's Association With Another "Ish"

The introduction to the law of the Sotah [the suspected wife] is "Any man [ish ish], whose wife shall go astray and commit treachery against him" [Bamidbar 5:12]. The Medrash comments that we learn from here that a person should be easygoing ('vatran') in his household.

This would seem to be a strange pasuk [verse] on which to attach the advice that one should have a "live and let live" attitude. Surely the Medrash is not suggesting that if a man's wife is unfaithful to him, he should be easygoing about the matter and overlook it. If a man discovers that his wife is being unfaithful, he is biblically prohibited from continuing the marriage.

So why then, in this pasuk, where the wife is the problem, does the Medrash give advice to the husband about how he should conduct himself? Bear in mind that even if the woman is found to be 'innocent' and has not committed the offense of adultery, still she still is far from being fault free. In order to have become a Sotah, she must have gone into seclusion with a man with whom her husband already warned her to go alone.

The Medrash is prompted by the pasuk's strange use of the terminology "ish ish" (literally 'a man, a man') to describe the husband in this situation. It would have certainly been sufficient to write "ish" once to get the point across. The redundancy apparently alludes to the fact that this husband was too much of an 'ish'. He was perhaps too assertive, too particular, too overbearing. He was the type of husband who ruled his house as a type of dictatorship. He was abusive and oppressive. The result of there being too much of the 'ish' is the wife going astray.

The woman may in fact have sinned and be deserving of punishment. But the Medrash is pointing out that such things do not happen in a vacuum. Of course, if a husband is abusive, the wife is still not justified in being unfaithful. Heaven Forbid. People are obviously and ultimately responsible for their own actions. But a contributory cause of the sin might have in fact been that the husband was

"ish, ish" - he was too oppressive.

There is no greater assault to the peace and tranquility of a marriage relationship than to have one of the partners in that marriage commit adultery. But the Medrash is reminding us that adultery is only the culmination. The problem started with smaller things. There are many impediments to a peaceful and serene home setting.

The Torah is telling us that a person must look at himself and ask "Did I have a part in this?" "Is this totally her fault?" Did underlying problems with lack of Sholom Bayis [domestic tranquility], perhaps related to the husband being too overbearing and not easy going enough, contribute to the situation?

Where Does The Holiness of the Nazir Stem From?

The parsha of the Nazirite follows the parsha of the unfaithful wife. A person who accepts upon himself the status of being a Nazir is akin in holiness to that of a High Priest. There are only two people in the world who are not allowed to become Tameh [ritually impure] through contact with their dead parents: The Nazir and the Kohen Gadol [High Priest].

The Avnei Nezer (1839-1910; Rav Avraham Borenstein of Sochachov) once explained why a regular Kohen can come into contact with a dead parent, but a Nazir and a Kohen Gadol cannot. The Avnei Nezer says that every Kohen is a Kohen by virtue of his parents. It is only right that if I received my priesthood status thanks to my parents that I should be able to pay my parents their last respects and attend their funeral. However, in the case of the Kohen Gadol and the Nazir, they achieve their status of holiness not by virtue of their parents, but on their own. Consequently, they cannot attend even a parent's funeral.

Be that as it may, what is the greatness of the Nazir? He must abstain from drinking wine for thirty days. He must abstain from getting a haircut or shaving for thirty days. Finally, he must abstain from coming into contact with a dead person for thirty days. For that, he has the "crown of holiness about his head" [6:7]. What is the greatness in these three types of abstaining that suddenly places the Nazir on the same level as the High Priest?

After all, he can drink whiskey and beer. The only restriction is haircuts and shaving, wine, and funerals. There are diets that are more severe than that! From where does the great holiness stem?

Rav Mordechai Gifter (1916-2001), zt"l, wrote that the greatness of the Nazir was not the fact that he abstained from wine and shaving for 30 days or that he abstained from attending funerals for a month's time. The Nazir's greatness stemmed from the fact that he bothered to think. He bothered to look around at his world and to contemplate the meaning of what was going on around him.

Our Sages explain that the reason for the juxtaposition of the section dealing with the Sotah and the section dealing with the Nazir is to teach that it is appropriate that one who witnesses the ordeal of a Sotah, should take a vow to abstain from wine. Every day, we see things that SHOULD make an

impression upon us -- but they do not. We see occurrences that are upsetting and distressing. But what do we do? We shrug and go on with our lives. The greatness of the Nazir is that he stops, contemplates, and takes action based on what he observes around him. The action he takes is not oppressive.

It does not radically change his life. It will not impact his health whatsoever. On the contrary, it is a very minor set of abstentions. But that is precisely the point.

The fact that he is moved to do something realistic, something that he can easily keep distinguishes the Nazir from the populace around him. He is an individual who takes the time to think about the implications of what he sees around himself, and to do something about it on a personal level.

Rav Gifter cites a comment from Rabbeinu Yona. "If the person who wishes to repent is weak and cannot handle depravations and fasting -- let him just abstain from fully indulging in all of his normal eating and drinking habits." By all means, eat -- just do not take a second portion! Such a person need not engage in radical self-denial -- just let him skip dessert! Pass up that second piece of kugel, out of respect for your commitment to your Creator that you are determined to lead a more spiritual life.

This is a very low-key and very non-ostentatious means of Divine Service. No one will notice that you have passed up on a second helping or that you skipped dessert. But, if you accept this as a religious obligation for the purpose of becoming a more spiritual personality -- it can be a very meaningful way of serving the Master of the World. Perhaps, Rabbeinu Yona writes, this can be even more meaningful for a person than engaging in weekly fasting.

This is the contribution of the Nazir to spirituality. Everyone else saw the Sotah, shook their heads in disapproval, and went on with their lives as if nothing had happened. The Nazir saw the Sotah and determined that he needed to take action -- be it perhaps only symbolic and unobtrusive in scope. But at least he did something. That spiritual activism is what crowns him with the uniqueness of the status of the Nazir and equates him in certain regards with the Kohain Gadol.

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