

GRABBING THE CONDUCTOR'S HAND

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Nitzavim-Vayelech

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 605, Selling A Sefer Torah. Good Shabbos!

Getting Used To Obscenity

In Parshas Nitzavim, the Torah says, "For you know how you lived in the Land of Egypt and how you traversed the nations whose countries you have passed through. You have seen their abominations and their detestable idols (es shikutzeihem v'es giluleihem) of wood and stone, of silver and gold that were with them." [Devorim 29:15-16] The Torah refers to the pagan idols of the nations in a most derogatory fashion. The word "sheketz" means disgusting. The root of the word "giluleihem" is "galal," the word describing human excrement.

The Brisker Rav points out that the above cited pasuk [verses] first refer to the idols of the nations in the most disrespectful of terms - es shikutzeihem v'es giluleihem - but then describe them in terms of raw materials - wood and stone (etz v'even), silver and gold (kesef v'zahav). Etz v'even does not sound so bad. Kesef v'zahav even sound attractive. Which is it? Are the idols sheketz and galal or are they kesf and zahav?

The Brisker Rav explained that this pasuk [verse] is teaching that when a person first sees something disgusting, his immediate and natural reaction is one of revulsion. "This is nothing short of disgusting." But human tendency is that after a person sees it for a while and gets used to it, it does not seem as disgusting anymore. It is then perceived in quite neutral terms - like wood and stone. Ultimately, if a person continues to see it and becomes even more accustomed to it, that which the person originally considered revolting and abominable will be considered like silver and gold.

This addresses one of the most basic of human traits that is both the bane of mankind and at the same time is also the salvation of mankind: We can become accustomed to anything. If we could not get accustomed to anything, we would not be able to survive. Sometimes, we see people who went through the concentration camps, where the conditions were unspeakable. How did they do it? The

answer is that to some extent, they got used to it. That ability can be very useful. But on the other hand, this same ability can be very destructive. UNFORTUNATELY, we can become accustomed to anything. That which was once disgusting can become the norm.

This is indeed what the Gemara means when it says "This is the way of the evil inclination: Today it advises - do thus. Tomorrow it advises - do thus. Until eventually it advises - go worship idols." [Shabbos 105b] The slippery slope proceeds. At each step, a person rationalizes that which had originally been "unthinkable". It doesn't bother us anymore and in fact becomes the next plateau from which a person sinks lower and lower until the person eventually goes on to worship idolatry.

If a person had been away from this country for ten years and returned today and listened just to the radio -- to family oriented programming -- the person would be startled at the language used and the type of topics being discussed. One merely has to pick up a copy of the daily New York Times to be shocked by things that would have considered obscene 10 years ago. What happened?

We become spiritually deadened by what we see on billboards, by what we see as advertisements on buses or subways, and by what we hear on radio stations. It is mind-boggling!

Ten years ago, this was "shikutzeihem v'giluleihem". It was disgusting! Then it became "etz v'even". We became accustomed to it. Now it is even like "kesef v'zahav asher imahem". We already expect it and look forward to hearing and reading it.

Grabbing The Conductor's Hand

I heard the following story from Rabbi Ephraim Waxman. I don't want the same thing that happened to him to happen to me, so I am relating this story at this time:

Rabbi Waxman once davened for the Amud on Yom Kippur in a certain Yeshiva. Before Neilah, he was asked to speak to the congregation to give them spiritual arousal before the final prayers of Yom Kippur. He related the following parable.

There was once a person who had to travel by train between two cities. He inquired as to the price and was told that there was a sliding scale. A regular seat in "Coach" was a certain amount. First class was quite a bit more. However if he would arrive at the train station 4 hours before departure, he could purchase a first class ticket for the same price as coach. The fellow was not keen on spending four hours at the train station waiting for his train so he decided to forgo the first class ticket.

He was then told that if he would arrive 2 hours before departure, he would be guaranteed his choice of coach seats. After that it would be first come, first served. But again he said to himself "Why do I have to go there 2 hours early, waste my time, and sit around? So I won't get my choice of coach seats!"

He was then told that if he arrives a half hour before departure, all the seats will have been sold. The train will have standing room only available. "But," our passenger figures, "it is a short trip. What do I

care if I need to stand? I'll come a half hour early and will buy a standing room only ticket."

As things have it, he does not come 4 hours early. He does not come 2 hours early. He does not even come a half hour early. He comes at the last minute. He comes down to the platform and the train is leaving. He starts running and running after the train and he sees that the conductor on the caboose is holding out his hand. If he can just latch onto the conductor's hand, the conductor will pull him onto the train. He runs and runs and tries to grab that hand.

Rabbi Waxman then quoted the sentence from our liturgy "You send forth your hand to sinners" (Ata nosen yad l'poshim). Rabbi Waxman explained that Neilah represents the idea of Ata nosen yad l'poshim. One who waits until Neilah to do Teshuva is like the passenger running after the train to try to grab the conductor's hand.

Rosh Chodesh Elul is like 4 hours before the train leaves. That is when a person can get first class for the price of coach. Rosh HaShanna is like 2 hours before departure time - when a person can still get his selection of coach seats. The Ten Days of Repentance is first come first serve. The earlier prayers on Yom Kippur are like "standing room only." However Neilah is already "Ata nosen yad l'poshim".

Rabbi Waxman then said to the Yeshiva students "My friends, now is the time for "You stretch forth Your hand to the sinners." He proceeded to daven Neilah from the Amud and felt that the atmosphere throughout the room was highly charged with spiritual emotion.

A young student came to him after Neilah and said, "Rebbe, why did you not tell us this story on Rosh Chodesh Elul?" I do not want anyone to blame me for not telling such a story earlier, so I tell it now.

What Should We Worry About Most On Yom Kippur?

"You give a hand to the sinners and Your right hand is stretched out to accept those who repent." The prayers of Selichos, of Rosh HaShannah, of Yom Kippur are all quite repetitive. The same expressions are repeated over and over. The Shmoneh Esrays are the same throughout each day. However, the Amidah of Neilah is unique. There is nowhere else in the entire High Holiday period where we come across the expression "You give a hand to the sinners and Your right hand is stretched out to accept those who repent."

This is unique to Neilah. Neilah represents our last chance. "And you have taught us, Hashem our G-d, to confess over all of our sins, in order that we cease from the oppression that comes from our hands (L'maan nechdal m'oshek yadeinu)."

Suppose someone would want to distill the entire two-week period from the start of Selichos recitation through the end of Yom Kippur to four words. What is it all about? What would those four words be? I maintain it is the words "L'maan nechdal m'oshek yadeinu - in order that we cease from the oppression that comes from our hands." According to what the Machzor states explicitly, this is

what we have to worry about most.

Oshek Yadeinu means theft (Gezeilah). A person should not say (with a sigh of relief) "I do not have to be worried about Gezeilah. I am not a thief." The Chofetz Chaim and other works of mussar teach that Gezeilah includes much more than just shoplifting. According to the Chofetz Chaim, not paying our debts is Oshek - Gezeilah. So is not paying off bills. So is not paying workers. This is what it comes down to. This is the bottom line on Yom Kippur.

The Otzar HaTefillos writes: "The earlier works have already elaborated on the seriousness of this grave sin. Appreciate the seriousness of this sin: The Men of the Great Assembly singled it out in the Neilah liturgy. After all the "Ashamnus" (We are guilty confessions...), after all the enumerations of "Al Chet", the only sin that is singled out in the final minutes of Yom Kippur is "L'maan nechdal m'oshek yadeinu." In Neilah, all other sins are spoken of in a global reference (forgive us for ALL our sins), but not this sin of Oshek - Gezel. In fact, the sin of the Generation of the Flood was only sealed because of their crimes involving thievery.

If we want to be able to sincerely recite this solemn prayer at the end of Yom Kippur, we all need to look into our checkbooks and look into our financial records and look into our bills and make sure that we can finally say "L'maan nechdal m'oshek yadeinu." We want to be able to say that we are clean, not only from the crime of actual thievery but from any form of oshek, of withholding wages, not paying bills, being negligent when it comes to our financial obligations or tuition payments. We want to be clear from all things that we owe.

A person can have a bushel full of sins; but Gezel mekatreg b'rosh -- the sin of gezel is the first to prosecute. [Yalkut Shimoni Vayikra 25:660]

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