

THE NEED TO BE WARNED AGAINST IDOLATRY

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshios Netzavim & Vayeilech

The Need To Be Warned Against Idolatry

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: CD # 913, The Tefilah of Aleinu. Good Shabbos!

In Moshe's final admonition to the Jewish people he reminds them of their familiarity with the abominations of Avodah Zarah (idolatry): "For you know how we lived in the land of Egypt; and how we came through the midst of the nations through which you passed. You have seen their detestable things and their idols (giluleihem), wood and stone, silver and gold, which were with them. Lest there be among you a man or woman or family or tribe whose heart turns away this day from the L-rd our G-d to go to serve the gods of those nations; lest there should be among you a root that bears gall and wormwood...saying 'I shall have peace, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart... The L-rd will not be willing to pardon him, but then the anger of the L-rd and His jealousy shall be kindled against that man and all the curse that is written in this book shall lie upon him and the L-rd shall blot out his name from under heaven..." [Devorim 29:15-19].

There is something counter intuitive here. Moshe describes the absolutely disgusting nature of idolatry. The term he uses is giluleihem which is related to the word galal, meaning human excrement. One must ask if indeed Avodah Zarah is so repulsive, why was it necessary for Moshe to spend so much time and verbiage warning the Jewish people against it. Should they not recoil from it just because of its despicable nature? Why would they even be tempted by it?

Dr. Abraham Twerski raises this question and gives an interesting explanation for this phenomenon. I have a bit of a different take on this issue, but his comments are instructive:

He writes that a certain television network once did a two hour documentary on the evils of cocaine addiction and how cocaine is such a powerful addictive substance and if a person gets entrapped in a cocaine addiction he will literally destroy his life. Such a person will be so driven to feed his habit that nothing else in the world will matter -- not his wife, not his children, not his job, not his career. Nothing. The only thing that matters to him is getting his "fix".

Researchers found that the teenagers and young adults who watched this program were more likely to get into cocaine addiction than someone who didn't watch it. How can that be? They had two hours of graphic evidence showing them what would happen if they got into cocaine and they turned around and did it anyway. It doesn't make any sense!

His take on it was that when you show people the pleasure of something and the subsequent pain that will result if one gets involved in the pleasure the message of the pleasure overwhelms the message of the pain. The take away from the TV documentary was "Hey this stuff must be really great because look at what people are willing to do for it."

I am very hesitant to argue with someone like Dr. Twerski on human psychology, but I have a different take on the results of this research. In my humble opinion I believe the lesson to be learned is the following: When one views someone doing something that for the viewer was originally out of the question, the matter becomes somehow less "off limits" for the viewer and he now has a greater chance of trying it out himself.

This is why there are some Jews in Eretz Yisrael who when they see violation of the Sabbath (e.g. -- cars driven in the street on Shabbos by non-observant Israelis) say to themselves 'Shabbos! Shabbos!' I've seen this myself. Nobody hears them, certainly not the cars driving by. Why are they doing this? The answer is that they are doing it to inoculate themselves from Chillul Shabbos. They don't want to lose the outrage and horror of seeing the Sabbath being desecrated lest somehow the possibility of violating the Shabbos becomes more tangible and realistic in their mental thought process.

This is analogous to what Chazal tell us that if one sees a suspected adulteress (Sotah) in her shame, he should (on the spot) take a vow to abstain from wine (which may lead to a loosening of one's moral inhibitions). One might have asked: "Just seeing the embarrassment of the Sotah should itself be enough to discourage such loose behavior". Why does one need the vow? The answer is: One does need the vow! Intellectual awareness of the despicableness of the behavior will not by itself keep one away from it.

Whether one accepts Dr Twerski's explanation, or they prefer my explanation, or they have another explanation of their own we see from here that when we see someone do something which should be unimaginable and totally off limits then it is necessary to take preventive action of some sort so that one does not become influenced by having witnessed this.

This is precisely when the passage in Nitzavim is teaching us: Even though you have seen the despicableness and primitiveness of these gods of wood and stone, nevertheless one must take great heed to avoid them and be aware of the dire consequences of one who follows after them.

A Three-twined Thread Teaching Bitachon: Shmitah, Succah, Aliyah L'Regel

In Parshas Vayelech the Torah gives us the mitzvah of Hakhel: "At the end of every seven years, in the set time of the year of release in the Festival of Succot, when all Israel is come to appear before the L-rd thy G-d in the place which He shall choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones, and the stranger that is within your gates that they may hear, and that they may learn and fear the L-rd your G-d and observe to do all the words of this law..." [Devorim 31:10-13]

The King gets up in the midst of the entire congregation at the conclusion of the holiday of Succoth following the Shmitah year and reads the Torah to the gathered assembly. It is interesting: We have the confluence of three events: Motzai Shmitah; Motzai Succoth; and Aliyah L'Regel. [The Sabbatical year has just ended; Succoth has just ended; and all the Jews are together because they traveled to Jerusalem for the Festival pilgrimage].

The Rosh Yeshiva of the Gateshead Yeshiva, Rav Avraham Gurwitz makes the beautiful point that these three events have a common denominator. All three associated mitzvos (Shmitah, Aliyah l'regel, Succah) bring home to the Jew the attribute of Faith (Bitachon) in G-d.

When one just finished Shmitah, he hasn't worked for a year but has been relying on the Being Who provides sustenance. The farmer thereby gains a new perspective on life. When he sees a year later that he still has sustenance this brings home the concept that "He is the One who gives you strength to carry on with valor" [Devorim 8:18].

Aliyah l'regel is also a lesson in Faith. Everyone leaves home and comes to the Temple in Jerusalem. Who will guard their property? Who is watching the farm? The answer is that no human being is watching the farm but Someone is watching the farm. This too is a lesson in faith in the One Who is the Guardian of Israel. The Almighty guarantees "And no man will covet your land" No one will steal. The neighbors are not going to attack. Your property will be safe. We see real live Bitachon in practice.

Finally Succos is also a lesson in faith. What is Succos? Succos is "walking after Me in the wilderness in an unsown land". [Yirmiyah 2:2] The Master of the Universe took us out of Egypt into the shadow of death. We found ourselves in a wilderness with no water and no protection from the elements -- but the Master of the Universe protected us. We sit in the Succoth to commemorate this event. "For in Succoth I caused the Children of Israel to dwell." [Vayikra 23:43]

Here then we have the confluence of three events, three periods of time that shout out to us the truth that at the end of the day it is the Almighty who takes care of us, who provides us with sustenance. That is why this is the appropriate time to read the Torah in the presence of all Israel (i.e., -- the mitzvah of Hakhel).

There are normally so many things going on in our lives that prevent us from devoting ourselves to Ruchniyos and spirituality. We are in general so hassled with the need to make a living that we have no time for learning or for devoting proper time for prayer and contemplation of spiritual matters. Here we are on the eve of Rosh HaShannah and we always say to ourselves, "We'd like to learn more, we'd like to daven slower, we'd like to be better Jews, but we can't because of the hassle of making a living" (Tirdas haParnassah).

We blame our lack of spirituality on our lack of serenity due to the pressures of earning a living. The lesson of Hakhel is that we really should be serene because at the end of the day it is really the Ribono shel Olam who will provide the parnassah. We pay lip service to this and we say it, but we don't really believe it.

This is not to say that everyone should resign their jobs tomorrow, join a Kollel, and somehow their families will exist. One has to make a legitimate effort to do what it takes to earn a livelihood (hishtadlus). But he has to realize that at the end of the day the Ribono shel Olam will give him what he is supposed to get and working the extra hours or staying later is really not going to make the difference.

What Hakhel provides is the lesson in Bitachon, which is a lesson in serenity. If there is one bracha we should all daven for it is not only that it should be a year of peace (shalom) for our brethren the Children of Israel in all places they find themselves, but it should be also a year of serenity (shalvah) that we realize the Ribono shel Olam takes care of us. The longer we live the more we see the Hand of the Almighty in our lives. We see that ultimately He takes care of us, He is going to provide for us. This belief gives a person a certain serenity with which he can face life.

When we have that sense of confidence (Bitachon) and that sense of serenity, then we can do those things we want to do -- be it learning or davening or spending more time with our children and with our families, growing with them spiritually. At the end of the day we recognize that "it is He who gives you strength to act with valor."

May the Ribono shel Olam bless us with a year of Redemption and Salvation, a year of Peace and Serenity for us and for all the House of Israel.

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion. The halachic topics dealt with in the portion of Nitzavim-Vayeilech in the Commuter Chavrusah Series are the following:

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