

CONSUMERISM AND THE OVERSPENT GENERATION

by Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier

"When HASHEM your G-d will broaden your boundary as He spoke to you, and you say, "I will eat meat," for you will have a desire to eat meat, to your heart's entire desire you may eat meat." – Devarim 12:20

For forty years in the *midbar* the Jewish people ate *mon*. Guided by Moshe Rabbeinu, engaged in constant Torah study with every physical need taken care of, the *Klal Yisrael* lived on a lofty spiritual plane. Now that they were being ushered into a different era – entering Eretz Yisroel where they would begin living in a natural manner – they were given many directives to retain their status as an exalted nation.

One of the points that Moshe *Rabbeinu* made to the *Klal Yisrael* is that when they settled the land and followed the Torah, they would find success in their endeavors, and HASHEM would expand their borders. When this would occur, they would desire meat. And they would be allowed to eat it anywhere they wished.

Rashi is bothered by the relationship between the expanding of borders and the "desire to eat meat." It almost implies that the expansion of borders brings on the desire. Rashi explains that the Torah is teaching us a principle in *derech erez*. A person should only desire meat when he can afford it. When HASHEM expands our borders and we enjoy financial success, then it is appropriate to desire meat – not before.

This Rashi seems difficult to understand. What is wrong with desiring meat? The Torah might tell me that if I can't afford meat, I shouldn't eat it. If it is beyond my means and purchasing it would create an undue expense, I shouldn't buy any. But what is wrong with just desiring it?

Pleasures and Lusts

The answer to this can be best understood with a *moshol*. Imagine that you find yourself shipwrecked on a desert island. You haven't eaten in three days, and you are driven by one burning desire – food. As you hobble along the island, you notice a brown paper bag under a palm tree. You open it up to find a dry peanut butter sandwich that has sat out in the sun for three months. You gulp down that sandwich with more gusto than anything that you have ever eaten in your life.

Here is the question: how much pleasure did you derive from eating that sandwich? There is no question that you had a powerful urge, a very real *desire*, but how much *enjoyment* did you receive

from that activity? The answer is not much. It certainly relieved your hunger, and in that sense brought a release from pain, but it would be hard to imagine that for the rest of your life you would be reminiscing back to the sensation of the bitter, spoiled peanut butter and dry, cracked bread as it scratched your throat when you swallowed it.

This is a good example of the distinction between *pleasure* and *lust*. You ate that sandwich with great desire – a lot of passion – but you didn't derive much pleasure from that activity. Lust is the pull to engage in a given activity. Pleasure is the amount of enjoyment you receive from it. As unusual as it may sound, most people fail to make a distinction between *pleasures* and *passions*.

HASHEM wants us to be happy

This seems to be the answer to the Rashi. While it is true that life is a battle, and exerting self-control is the primary vehicle of growth, HASHEM created us to be happy. If you bring new desires into your world, desires that you can't possibly fulfill, you are destined to be miserable. You will be constantly wanting, constantly hungry. Your life will become the opposite of a pleasurable existence.

The Torah is teaching us that our desires are things that we can and need to control. If you have the capacity to meet the desire to eat meat, there is nothing wrong with allowing those desires to surface. HASHEM created many pleasures for man to enjoy, and you should use those pleasures to better serve Him. But if you don't have the means to fulfill those hungers and you allow them to be present, then you will be living a very uncomfortable existence, constantly hungering for something that can't be met.

When HASHEM grants you abundance and you can afford luxuries, then you will desire meat – but not before. The Torah is educating us into a higher form of living. When you enjoy the pleasures and control your desires, you use this world for its intended purpose, thereby living *b' shleimus* – complete, not lacking.

Consumerism - a national culture of competitive acquisitions

This concept is very applicable as we are the Chosen Nation – expected to be above the rest of the nations. Unfortunately, that sense of living at a higher standard can become perverted into materialism, where the expectation is that for people like “us,” nothing less than the best will do. And so our weddings, our wardrobes, our homes, and our cars have to be the best. The way our children dress and the types of toys that they expect are nothing short of top-notch. And we find ourselves with an ever-increasing cost of living. When barely surviving in our communities means that we are expected to earn **three to four** times the national median household income, something is wrong with our lifestyle.

We live in times of mass prosperity where the average person is rich, but to enjoy that great *bracha*, we must maintain control. Everything in this world was created for man's use – but it must be used

properly, in balance, in the right time, and in the right measure. When man does that, he enjoys his short stay on this planet and accomplishes his purpose in Creation.

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