STAM TORAH

PARSHAS NETZOVIM 5776

“FACING WHICH DIRECTION”

Rabbi Elya Meir Bloch zt’l, the Telsher Rosh Yeshiva, was once in the Chicago train station with a few of his students, waiting to board the Pacemaker to New York. A few feet away stood the Sunshine Express to San Francisco.

Rabbi Bloch asked his students, “How far apart are these two trains?” They speculated whether there was a distance of eight or ten feet between them. Rabbi Bloch disagreed. “These two trains are 3,000 miles apart; because one is headed to California while the other is headed to New York.”

Moshe Rabbeinu stood before his beloved nation on the final day of his life and cautioned them to remain faithful to G-d:

*“Perhaps there is among you a man or woman, a family or tribe, whose heart turns away from being with Hashem, our G-d, to go and serve the gods of the nations; perhaps there is among you a root flourishing with gall and wormwood.”*

Rabbi Henoch Leibowitz zt’l asked that it seems as if Moshe grouped together two vastly different individuals. The first is a pagan idol-worshipper who has completely renounced his faith, while the second merely has a ‘bad root’ within him. In fact, Ramban explains, that at the present moment he is still an observant Jew. His only flaw is a spark of rebelliousness stirring in his heart.

Rabbi Leibowitz explained that the Torah juxtaposes them because there indeed exists a much deeper connection than what appears. If in the heart of the believer there is a slight yet unchecked feeling of treachery and rebelliousness, he deserves to be grouped with the idolater. They may appear to be worlds apart but if the mindset of the believer has veered, he has placed himself on a path which leads to the gravest sins. Perhaps at this moment he has not done anything wrong. However, the Torah – the guidebook to life – understands human nature. If he is headed in the wrong direction and does not immediately seek to rectify his erroneous attitudes and mindset, he will end up an idolater.

Moshe Rabbeinu was warning Klal Yisroel that if a ‘bad seed’ is allowed to germinate in someone’s psyche, even if only subconsciously, it may remain dormant for years, but eventually it will sprout.

In the epic story of Megillas Rus, after Rus and her sister Orpah’s husbands died, the sisters decided to return to Israel with their mother-in-law, Na’ami. Na’ami tried to reason with them that it was pointless for them to remain with her. Both Orpah and Rus wept along with Na’ami. Orpah eventually hearkened to Na’ami’s words and returned home, while Rus remained determinedly resolute.

The name Orpah means ‘turned her back’, because of her reaction at that juncture. Rabbi Leibowitz notes that the tears of Orpah and Rus were both genuine. However, there was ‘a root flourishing with gall and wormwood’ within Orpah which led her astray at that most critical moment.

Although to the naked eye it may have appeared as if Rus and Orpah were both standing together alongside Na’ami, in truth they stood worlds apart. The distance between them was as vast as the distance between their descendants, Dovid and Goliath.

The gemara Succah[[1]](#footnote-1) relates, “Rabbi Yehuda expounded: In the future G-d will bring the Evil Inclination and slaughter him in view of the righteous and the wicked. To the righteous it (the Evil Inclination) will appear like a high mountain; to the wicked it will appear like the hair of a needle. These (the righteous) will cry and these (the wicked) will cry. The righteous will cry and proclaim, ‘How were we able to conquer this high mountain?’ The wicked will cry and proclaim, ‘How were we unable to conquer this hair of a needle?’ Rabbi Yose said: The Evil Inclination at first appears like the thread of a spider, and at the end he appears like cart ropes.”

Rabbi Shalom Schwadron zt’l explained this gemara by relating a personal story: “On one occasion I was traveling on a boat when we approached a city well known for its grandeur and beauty. As we neared, the passengers amassed on the deck to get their first glimpses of the city.

“I trailed slowly behind them to see if there was anything special to see. When I was able to see the city I was bothered by the many houses of worship that I saw and I quickly returned to my cabin.

“Some time later I was again traveling when my boat neared that same city. This time when there was an excited rush to the deck I felt more of an urge to join and again see the city. I realized that when I saw the city the second time I wasn’t as repulsed by it as I had been the first time.

“The third time I was on a boat passing that city I was surprised to find that for a moment I too was marveling at the beauty of the city along with everyone else.”

Rabbi Schwadron noted that the incident brought to mind a thought he heard from the Brisker Rav. When Moshe Rabbeinu warned Klal Yisroel about the dangers of falling prey to idolatry he says, “For you know how we dwelled in the land of Egypt and how we passed through the midst of the nations through whom you passed. And you saw their abominations and their detestable idols – of wood and stone, of silver and gold that were with them.[[2]](#footnote-2)”

The Brisker Rav explained that, in his carefully chosen words, Moshe was warning the nation of the rapid progression of sin. When the nation was first exposed to idolatry no doubt they were repulsed by what they viewed as “abominations and detestable idols.” But with time when they became more accustomed to the notion of idolatry the idols were no longer as horrid to them as they once were. At that point they seemed like harmless pieces of ‘wood and stone’. Then, as more time passed, they came to respect and revere the idols until they became valuable like ‘silver and gold’.”

Rabbi Schwadron explained that his experience - which parallels the Brisker Rav’s explanation of the verse - reflects the workings of our Evil Inclination. He knows he cannot lure us into sin in one fell swoop. So he lays his traps in steps. “Today he says do this and this; until he says to serve idolatry[[3]](#footnote-3).” In his crafty and wily manner our Evil Inclination enervates our resolve and deceptively entices us into sin without us realizing that he has ensnared us down a slippery slope.

This is what the gemara is conveying. How are the righteous able to desist from the machinations of the Evil Inclination? It is because they are acutely aware of the danger of doing those things which ‘aren’t so bad’. True, the act itself may not be so terrible, but the righteous look ahead and contemplate the potential effect such an act can have.

*There are certain drugs which are dangerous, not as much because of their own inherent dangers, but because they are known as ‘gateway drugs’. Taking that first drug more often than not leads to taking other drugs which are far more perilous.*

In that same vein our Evil Inclination employs the usage of ‘gateway acts’. He leads us to commit acts which may not even be considered a sin, however, can easily lead to more sinful behavior.

The wicked live in the moment. They seek to enjoy hedonistic gratification available *now*, and do not contemplate the long-term consequences of their actions. Such a mindless attitude ensures that even a simply avoidable act can quickly metamorphose into ‘mountains’ of sins, which become almost insurmountable.

Thus, in the future when the truth becomes evident, the wicked will morbidly and regretfully look and contemplate the original actions they performed and see how much simpler it would have been if they had restrained themselves before their actions grew progressively worse.

Perhaps the shofar blasts of Rosh Hashanah symbolize the crying of the righteous and wicked in the future. The tekiah - the elongated single blast - represents the pure tears of the righteous who weep in reverent joy for their ability to remain pure and unsullied in sin.

The shevarim and teruah blasts - which are fragmented and intermittent - represent the tears of the wicked who allowed their lives to become fragmented by blindly following the whims of their Evil Inclination.

On Rosh Hashanah, all blasts commence and conclude with a tekiah to represent that even if one has fallen prey to his Evil Inclination, and even if he is mired and sullied with sin, as long as he is alive he can repent and rectify. He can still join the ranks of the righteous whose tears are complete and whole. The first step is to make sure he is heading in the right direction.

“A root flourishing with gall and wormwood”

“How were we unable to conquer this hair of a needle?”

*Rabbi Doniel Staum, LMSW*

*Rabbi, Kehillat New Hempstead*

*Rebbe/Guidance Counselor – ASHAR*

*Principal – Ohr Naftoli- New Windsor*

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1. 52a [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 29:15-16 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Shabbos 105a [↑](#footnote-ref-3)