

אור פני משה

שיחות מוסר על התורה

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Shmuessen from
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פרשת בא

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לעילוי נשמת
דינה בת עישה חיה ע"ה מנצור
לכבוד היארצייט ט' שבט

פרשת בא

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל פְּרֹעֶה כִּי אֲנִי הִכְבַּדְתִּי אֶת לִבּוֹ: (שמות י"א)

And Hashem said to Moshe, 'Go to Paroh, for I have made his heart heavy.'

וַיִּקְרָא פְּרֹעֶה אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר לָכֵן עֲבַדוּ אֶת ה' רַק צֹאנְכֶם וּבָקָרְכֶם יֵצֵג גַּם טַפְכֶּם יֵלֶךְ עִמָּכֶם:
וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה גַּם אֶתָּה תִּתֵּן בְּיָדֵנוּ זִבְחִים וְעֹלֹת וְעֲשִׂינוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ: (י"א, כ"ד-כ"ה)

And Paroh called to Moshe and said, "Go serve Hashem your G-d – only your flock and your cattle shall remain; even your children will go with you!"

And Moshe answered, "You, too, will place Korbanos in our hands, and we will offer them to Hashem our G-d!"

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After Paroh suffered through the *Makkah* of חֲשֵׁךְ, he was nearly ready to finally concede to Moshe's demands. This time, he did not specify which people could or could not go. He would allow the entire Nation without exception, to go for a three-day holiday in order to serve Hashem. In fact, Paroh stated clearly that even the children could be taken along. Paroh was agreeable to all Moshe's demands, except for one condition that he left for himself: The livestock of the Jews would be left behind. *Just your sheep and cattle will remain.*

How did Moshe respond to this stipulation? Did he simply tell Paroh that such a condition would be unacceptable, as he had done in all the previous times when Paroh had try to lay down conditions on their leaving?

The *passuk* tells us that this time Moshe went a step further. He did not suffice with simply telling Paroh *'Our cattle must go with us, not a hoof will be left, for from it we will take to serve Hashem!'* Instead, this time he advanced a further condition on Paroh. He told Paroh, *'You, too, will place Korbanos in our hands, and we will offer them to Hashem our G-d!'* i.e. 'You won't allow us to bring along our animals? On the contrary, you will send some of you own animals with us!'

The question is that we don't find that Moshe had asked for such a condition until then. He had always simply requested for the Bnei Yisroel to be allowed a three-day holiday to serve Hashem. Why was he now adding to the demand and saying that Paroh will also send along his own animals?

Hashem Hardening Paroh's Heart

To answer our question, let us learn a Medrash in this week's *parshah*. At the beginning of the *parshah*, Hashem tells Moshe *Go to Paroh, for I have made his heart heavy*. The implication seems to be that Paroh had no choice about whether he listen to Moshe, because Hashem had hardened his heart against doing so. The obvious question arises – if so, how can Paroh be held responsible for not listening? How is it fair to punish him if he did not choose to act the way he did?

מכאן פתחון פה למינין / A Place from which Non-Believers Will Have an Opening to Question

The Medrash presents two opinions in Chazal regarding how we should deal with this question. First, Rabbi Yochanan states his opinion – *מכאן פתחון פה למינין / From here is a place from which non-believers will have an opening to question*. i.e. It is indeed beyond our comprehension to understand how Paroh could be held responsible for that which he was forced to do. Certainly, as true believers in Hashem and the Torah, we understand that there is an answer to the question, even if it may not be readily understood. However, because of the challenge that exists in comprehending Hashem's ways regarding this point, it is difficult to quiet the voices of the non-believers in this area.

Paroh Was Stuck in his Own Behavior

Let us delve further into Rabbi Yochanan's point. Rabbi Yochanan certainly understood that it was Paroh who had brought himself into the situation. After all, he had treated the Bnei Yisroel in the worst and cruelest of manners, and he had consistently refused all of Hashem's messages to him instructing him to let the Bnei Yisroel leave. For the first five *makkos*, Paroh did not even need Hashem to harden his heart; Paroh hardened it on his own. This means that with all the terrible destruction and humiliation of the *Makkos*, Paroh refused to humble himself to Hashem. Clearly, after taking all these steps, Paroh finally earned his own treatment, and as such, would no longer have the ability to back down. At this point, he was stuck into his own pit of stubbornness and refusal.

Yet with this entire history of behavior that preceded the hardening of Paroh's heart, Rabbi Yochanan argued that it is still difficult to reach a clear understanding of the justice of Paroh's punishment. True, Paroh was the one who brought himself into the situation, and he had only himself to blame for his extreme stubbornness. With all this, however, the fact remains that he was forced in the end. How can there be a punishment for an action that was not done with free-will – even if the reason why there is no free-will is the fault of the individual himself? Perhaps his very stubbornness could be considered a punishment in its own right, such that he would even if he would truly desire to stop, he would not be granted the ability. However, how could he be punished for the actual act of refusal which he was forced to perform?

A Punishment for Repeatedly Ignoring Hashem's Warnings

The Medrash then records the response of Reish Lakish to the difficulty raised by Rabbi Yochanan. יסתם פיהם של מינים אלא אם ללצים הוא יליץ שהקב"ה מתרה בו באדם פעם ראשונה שניה ושלישית ואינו חוזר בו והוא נועל לבו מן התשובה כדי לפרוע ממנו מה שחטא, אף כך פרעה הרשע כיון ששיגר הקב"ה ה' פעמים ולא השגיח על דבריו אמר לו הקב"ה אתה הקשית ערפך והכבדת את לבך הריני מוסיף לך טומאה על טומאתך, הוי כי אני הכבדתי את לבו, מהו הכבדתי שעשה הקב"ה את לבו ככבד הזה שהיא מתבשלת שניה וארסטים נכנס בתוכה כך *Let the mouths of the non-believers be sealed! After a person sins two or three times, HaKadosh Boruch Hu shuts his heart against teshuvah in order to be able to punish him for his sins. So too in the case of Paroh: After five times of refusing Hashem's directive, Hashem said to him, 'See, I will make your heart like a כבד/liver which becomes harder each time it is cooked!* i.e. Reish Lakish places all the blame on Paroh himself. It was he who stubbornly refused to accept Hashem's command, even as it became more and more difficult. By conditioning himself to this negative cycle, he programmed his own self to be unable to stop the behavior. When he was then completely trapped in the web that he spun, he must take full responsibility.

Cycles of Behavior

As this Medrash states clearly, this logic was not a unique practice applied by Hashem to Paroh alone. People often fall into negative cycles of behavior from which they cannot pull themselves out.

Reuven consistently wakes up late for davening. As time goes by, he is simply unable to pull himself out of bed on time in the morning, even as he wants to change. His body is trained to remain in bed.

Shimon has programmed himself into the habit of speaking loshon hara about anyone who comes to mind. He knows that it is wrong, and he wants to change his habit. He resolves that he will stop from then on.

As soon as there is a group of people shmoozing in Shimon's vicinity, his old habit will kick in. 'You think Schmerel is a good person? You don't know what I know! Wait until you hear...!'

Shimon wants to change his habit, but he cannot.

Reish Lakish tells us that we should not view this as simply an unfortunate, coincidental twist in a person's situation as he is trying to change himself. It is more than the person simply happening to be having a difficult time. It is rather that Hashem specifically placed this nature in a person. Through allowing himself to behave negatively for a period of time, he will drag himself into a continuous spiral from which he cannot break free.

The Sinner is Responsible

Reish Lakish then argues further: Who is the one responsible for the cycle of behavior? The sinner himself! He should never have let himself fall into the cycle, and he is therefore held responsible for all his future actions that could have originally been avoided.

A heavy smoker is responsible for every cigarette that he smokes, no matter how heavy his addiction is. It was he chose to take that first cigarette even while knowing about the terrible addiction into which a smoker falls. Even after he started, he could have stopped himself before he became heavily addicted. He chose to give into the temptation back when he could still control himself, and through this he brought himself into his current predicament. He has no one to blame but himself.

Yanky joins a certain group in his shul whose members skip the rav's drasha each Shabbos morning to make kiddush before Mussaf. Yanky enjoys the break and the chance to have the kishka a few minutes early, rather than listen to the drasha of the rav. He joins in the group's shmoozing and he has a great time.

After a few weeks go by, Yanky begins to feel some discomfort about his new practice. He knows that rather than having his cholent fifteen minutes earlier, he should really be listening to the drasha. He also knows that the shmoozing that goes on amongst this group is definitely not about divrei Torah, to put it nicely. Yanky wants to stop participating in the group, but he finds that he now feels too uncomfortable to do so. Everyone involved had enjoyed his 'contributions' to the joking and fun that went on, and now Yanky feels 'stuck'. Against his better judgement, Yanky continues to take part in the 'kiddush club' each week.

Although Yanky's continued participation was largely due to the pressure that he felt, he will be held responsible. Because he could have refrained from the joining the first few times, his current predicament is his own fault.

Let us try to understand the opinion of Reish Lakish. He faults the individual for his current behavior, because he could have stopped himself from reaching that stage. The question is, that all that may be fine and true, but how does that negate Rabbi Yochanan's argument? True, the person can be held blamed for having brought himself into his behavior, and indeed, the punishment for it should take into account the severity of the behavior that had such repercussions for the future. How, though, can he be held accountable, for his current actions? The reality is that at this point, there is nothing he can do to change. If so, let him be considered an אונס/one who is forced, not liable for any more punishment!

The Story of Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish

Perhaps we can understand that the viewpoints of Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish stem from each of their own personal histories. The Gemara records the story of how Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish met for their first time.

Reish Lakish was a bandit who possessed tremendous physical strength. In his earlier years, he knowingly took a trip, unaccompanied by any companion, to an island inhabited by a tribe of brutish cannibals. While there, he managed to outwit and overpower the entire group, killing all of them.

It happened one time that Rabbi Yochanan was bathing in the Yarden, while Reish Lakish was on the other side. Perceiving Rabbi Yochanan's intense beauty, Reish Lakish jumped all the way across the Yarden, exclaiming to Rabbi Yochanan, "Your beauty is fitting for women!"

Without missing a beat, Rabbi Yochanan responded, "Your strength is fitting for Torah!"

Rebbi Yochanan then told Reish Lakish that he had a sister who was even more beautiful than he, and he would give her to Reish Lakish as a wife in exchange for him beginning a new life devoted to Torah. Reish Lakish agreed to the deal, and the shidduch was made. Reish Lakish then tried to jump back over the river to retrieve his own items, but he was unable to. Having already devoted himself to a life of Torah, his strength weakened. Reish Lakish went on to become Rebbi Yochanan's primary talmid, and one of the foremost Amoraim, quoted throughout Shas.

Rebbi Yochanan merited to spend his entire life completely engrossed in Torah and *Avodas Hashem*, reaching unimaginable heights of greatness in *ruchniyus*. Reish Lakish, on the other hand, experienced life on the 'other side', with all its indulgences and temptations.

Rebbi Yochanan saw the situation of Paroh as one who has become entangled in a web of negative behavior, and having no 'inside' frame of reference, Rebbi Yochanan therefore concluded that at that point, there is no way out. As Hashem Himself testified to Moshe regarding Paroh, there was a point in which Paroh was no longer in control of himself; it was Hashem Who was hardening Paroh's heart. Seeing this reality as he understood it, Rebbi Yochanan therefore raised the difficulty about how the *rasha* could be held responsible for actions which he did not choose to perform. True, it is the *rasha's* fault for bringing himself to that point, but going forward, he seemingly should be considered as though he is forced.

Reish Lakish Experienced that it is Possible to Change

Reish Lakish, however, started off on the other side of the fence! For a large portion of his life, he was completely hooked onto a life of thievery and crime, and yet, he was able to make the change within himself and return to a righteous life of Torah. Reish Lakish therefore understood that in truth, there is no point in which it is completely impossible for a person to make a life-altering change. What

does happen when a person pulls himself into the depths of sin is that he makes it more and more difficult for himself to effect the desired changes. He therefore requires more effort to be able to do so, and a calculated well-planned offensive as well.

When Reish Lakish stated that after two or three chances, Hashem seals a person's heart against *teshuvah*, he was not saying that there is a supernatural force that is held against the person which prevents him from doing *teshuvah* under any circumstances. On the contrary, Reish Lakish was coming to contest this view which had been espoused by Rebbe Yochanan. Reish Lakish was merely saying that to the level of difficulty which a person makes for himself to hearing HaKadosh Boruch Hu's *mussar*, to that same extent will HaKadosh Boruch Hu harden the person's heart in return, making it difficult for him to change even if he desires. There are no free rides; a person must suffer the consequences and repercussions of his own choices. The deeper, therefore, that a person drags his own self into the pit of sin, to that same extent will he find it difficult to pull out later. However, if a person will apply himself with effort that is **greater** than the force of his previous sins, he can pull himself out.

When a person climbs down a steep cliff, it is understood that for every step down that he took, he will need to reascend it later. What about, however, if he did not climb down a cliff, but rather threw himself into a deep pit? He cannot simply jump back out, because the opening is too high. If he wishes to leave the pit, he will need to employ all his powers of ingenuity and resourcefulness to come up with a plan of action. The deeper the pit in which a person threw himself, the harder will he have to work to be able to get out.

'Let the mouths of the non-believers be sealed!' When Hashem hardens a person's heart, says Reish Lakish, it is not simply an isolated measure taken by Hashem as a reaction to the person's behavior, hampering him from doing *teshuvah*. It is rather the person's own actions which Hashem allows to reach their full effect, thus causing tremendous difficulty for the person to return. If the person surrenders to that difficulty, then, he has no one to blame but himself for bringing himself to situation. What he must now do is apply all his strengths and efforts to rise above the difficulty he created for himself.

Mounting a Powerful Offensive

How will a person who sincerely desires to return be able to achieve this? Rather than simply trying to undo the damage that was done, he must instead mount a powerful offensive against his *yetzer hara*. He will need to advance new initiatives and ideas for his positive behavior, accomplishing even more than he used to before his fall. Through the extra positive energy that he will create, he will find it within himself to climb out of his rut of sin.

For a smoker to quit after he has allowed himself to fall into a heavy addiction, it will not be sufficient for him to simply resolve not to smoke anymore. That resolution will last exactly until the next time he feels an urge for a cigarette. Instead, he will need to follow a full, aggressive quit-smoking program. He will need a firm determination to see it through and not weaken as it becomes difficult.

Reuven used to be a serious yeshiva bachur, but in a period of several months, he allowed himself to slacken in his learning. At first, the changes were minimal, but soon a clear transformation had taken place. In place of the masmid that he once was, he was now a total batlan, paying no attention to his sedarim or his learning.

*It happens that Reuven feels a **הרהור/חשיבה** of teshuvah, and he wishes to once again become the serious bachur that he was originally. If he will simply 'decide' to begin a new chapter and behave in the way that he did previously, without any undertaking or commitment along with his decision, it will be almost impossible for him to snap out of his habits. The way for him to change will be to begin new, fresh sedorim which he will begin with enthusiasm and vigor. Through the excitement generated by the extra learning that he undertakes, he will be able to overcome his yetzer hara and begin a new period of diligence and seriousness in his learning.*

Paroh Must Take Extra Steps

Let us now return to our original question. Why did Moshe suddenly tell Paroh that he would have to give of his own animals for the *korbanos* of the Bnei Yisroel, when he had never mentioned this condition in the past? The answer may be that in truth Moshe did not need the *korbanos* of Paroh. On the contrary, as the Ohr Hachaim and other *meforshim* discuss, they would never want to offer the *korbanos* of Paroh. Even the validity of his *korbanos* is questionable. This is why Moshe never mentioned this stipulation until this point. Now, though, after Paroh demanded that the Bnei Yisroel leave behind their own animals, Moshe told Paroh that he has henceforth made it more difficult for himself. By lowering himself to a deeper level of wickedness, it would be that much harder for him to change. In order to overcome this level of arrogance and wickedness, Paroh would now need to decide to send his own animals as *korbanos*. Only by taking such initiative would there be any possibility for Paroh to actually lower himself to Moshe Rabbeinu.

In Conclusion

The lessons for us are clear. We must guard ourselves with all our might from falling into negative habits and cycles of behavior. And in the event that we have sunk into such habits, we must be prepared to take great and heroic steps to free ourselves from them. We must recognize that without doing so, we will be unable to free ourselves from the repercussions of our own actions. By applying ourselves with determination and effort, we can be *zoche* to *siyatta d'shmaya* to break free of our negative traits.

Bez"H we should apply these lessons properly in our lives, and we should live lives of continuous *shteiging* in *Avodas Hashem*.

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