

אור פני משה

שיחות מוסר על התורה

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פרשת לך לך

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פרשת לך לך

The Difference Between a Heretic and a Regular Transgressor

Let's start out this week's *drasha* with a *shailah*. We all know that a person who transgresses one of the Torah's prohibitions is subject to punishment, provided that there were two witnesses present who warned him not to commit the sin. However, this person's overall life is unaffected by this sin; he gets his *malkos* and he moves on. But when a person announces that he doesn't believe - he is a *kofer b'ikar* - then his entire life is affected. He can no longer get an *aliyah*, his wine is *yayin nesech*; he is practically expelled from society. The question that was recently bothering me goes as follows: the first person we discussed should, in a way, be treated more severely than the second person! He is well aware that there is a Creator who follows his each and every move, and that this Creator explicitly forbade the action he was about to take - and yet, he went ahead and did it! Whereas the second person never actually sins with the mindset of disobeying his Creator - he just doesn't believe the Creator exists! Surely his sins should not be considered worse than that of the knowing transgressor!

There are numerous *mehalchim* that we can utilize to answer this basic question, but I would like to expound on the following approach:

One of the fascinating features that Hakadosh Baruch Hu has incorporated in every living organism is their natural instinct for protecting themselves. Each creature has a number of built-in tactics for keeping themselves out of harm's way. If you have ever attempted to swat a fly that has landed on your shoulder, then you know exactly what I'm talking about: the fly is almost always two steps ahead of its attacker. This is because Hashem granted them the surreal capability of seeing in multiple directions simultaneously, which gives them a significant edge over any potential harm coming at them from practically any angle. Similarly, have you ever seen how a deer or squirrel react when you step on a dry leaf, even from a safe distance? They immediately freeze, and focus on detecting the source of the sound. If they deem it as a threat, they dart away in seconds. It seems as though these creatures are always on the lookout, constantly keeping their ears and eyes alert for the slightest hint of danger.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu expects us to access these features when necessary. If any living organism chooses not to use its natural forms of protection, it can rest assured that it will be destroyed.

Well, what is a human being's primary form of protection? The answer is his *seichel*. Hashem has gifted every functional human being with the capacity to use common sense. If a person chooses to forfeit his ability to use his *seichel*, then he is akin to a fly who chooses to shut off its additional eyes - and he should expect to pay for it. So too, a total heretic is the biggest sinner of all - for he chooses not to utilize his basic human nature.

Let's take a look at Kayin for a moment. Why was Hashem disappointed with Kayin? He was never told that killing was prohibited! His father, Adam, was warned against eating from the *Eitz Hadaas* - but he never received similar instructions with regard to murder! The answer is that common sense decries the act of murder - especially that of one's brother. Kayin was granted enough *seichel* to recognize that murder was not the way to go, and Hashem therefore treated him as such.

Two People, Two Paths

There's an interesting theme that we see by the story of Kayin and Hevel which repeats itself throughout the following few *parshiyos*. Kayin and Hevel were both born in Gan Eden; they were both

children of Adam and Chava, the first people to walk on Earth. And yet, despite their shared background, one succeeded in reaching the stratosphere of *Avodas Hashem*, while the other wound up becoming a murderer. Apparently, two people who shared similar experiences and identical upbringings can end up in such different places.

In the following *parsha*, we see the same idea with Shem and Cham. They were both raised by Noach; they both studied in the holy 'Yeshiva' called Teivas Noach - and yet, Shem ended up being the greatest Tzaddik of his times, and merited to be an ancestor of Klal Yisroel, while Cham became a despicable *avaryon* who committed unspeakable crimes.

In this week's *parsha*, we find the same theme with the Avraham and Lot. This team of uncle and nephew traveled together for a long period of time, yet one ended up becoming the forefather of the Chosen Nation, while the other ended up becoming the forefather of Amon and Moav - the two nations that were later banned from joining Klal Yisroel.

The *meforshim* point out a similar idea in Parshas Vayera, when Avraham, Yitzchok, Eliezer and Yishmael all go to the same Har HaMoriyah - yet Avraham and Yitzchok leave changed forever, having acquired *zechusim* that would last their descendants for millennia to come, while Eliezer and Yishmael left just as they had come.

When we focus on this phenomenon, it can send a tremor down our spines. Two people can go to the same Yeshiva or be raised in the same neighborhood and have the same exposures - but they can end up lightyears apart! It's terrifying! Sometimes, two *balabatim* can walk into the same *shul*, yet one utilizes every minute and walks out with diamonds in his back pocket, while the other exits the building completely unaltered, as though he had never left his house. The first one comes in on time, doesn't talk during the *tefillos*, concentrates on the words, answers *amen*, and then takes out a *mishnayos* when davening is over and learns for a few minutes. The second one does the complete opposite. He walks in late, he approaches this fellow to tell him a joke, the other to share a wisecrack that he just told his boss, and then he texts his way through *chazaras hashatz*. When they leave, they may both be thinking in their minds that they just accomplished going to *shul* to daven Mincha; however, one achieved tremendous *s'char*, while the other acquired very little from his short trip to *shul*; in fact, he may have even lost more than he had gained.

Making Olam Habah Our Primary Focus

The Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh says that when Hashem told Avraham by the *Bris Bein Habsarim*: ואתה תבא אל אבותך בשלום - *And you shall come to your ancestors in peace*, He was reassuring him that despite the fact that his great-grandchildren were guaranteed to leave Mitzrayim with tremendous wealth - he will still have *s'char*; this great fortune will not deduct from Avraham Avinu's *zechusim*.

What is this *s'char* that Hakadosh Baruch Hu was referring to? I think it's *pashut* that He was referring to the reward in Olam Habah. *S'char* in Olam Hazei may be nice, but anyone who learns a little bit of *mussar* can tell you that the main purpose of this world is to exert ourselves and to toil in order to receive the grand reward in Olam Habah. If you are given *nisyonos* in your lifetime, and it feels like your world is always rotating faster than you can keep up with - don't fret, because that's exactly how it's supposed to be. Hashem was reassuring Avraham that although his children will be receiving tremendous reward in this world, he will not be losing out on his שלום in the next world - and that's the greatest gift one can be promised.

Our World is the Marketplace

The distinction between the purpose of Olam Hazei and that of Olam Haba was very clear to the Chofetz Chaim. He described it with the following *maschal*:

A marketplace is hosting an annual sale. One customer comes to the market, and from the outset, he is extremely vigilant. From the crack of dawn on the first day of the sale, he is constantly looking around to locate the vendors who are selling the highest quality merchandise. He doesn't skip a beat; he barely even stops for a snack throughout the few days that the sale is active. At the end, he has amassed a large inventory of valuable goods. He proceeds to return to his hometown and succeeds in making a profitable living.

Another customer arrives at the sale, but he is immediately enthralled by the hustle and bustle of the market. He meets a group of old friends, and they head off to share some tales from their hometowns over some cold beer. Finally, he returns to the market for an hour or two, but at this point the streets are even more packed than before, and he struggles to find the vendors he was originally looking for. After searching for a while, he takes a break for some lunch and a short nap. On the way back, he passes a crowd watching a fellow playing an instrument that he had never seen before; he joins the congregated group and claps along to the sweet tune. By the time he reaches the market, the streets are a little less busy - but there are also far less vendors around. He finally finds the vendor that he was looking for - but he is already closing up shop; he had sold all his wares. He sets out to find other merchandise, but all he can find is low-quality materials and items that are hardly useful. "Oy, it's hard to find good s'chorah at this sale," he mutters to himself.

Eventually, he finds a quiet vendor who still has lots of merchandise available. The vendor had a large stock of pipe-cleaners which he was struggling to sell. The customer doesn't initially think that he can make a living by selling pipe-cleaners, but the vendor talks him into it; and, for lack of a better option, he buys out his entire stock.

That night, the customer begins his journey home with a large wagon filled with pipe-cleaners - but deep down, he is doubtful about his prospects of making a living that year. He begins to wonder what could have possibly gone wrong. "Perhaps I shouldn't have spent so much time enjoying the market rather than taking advantage of it," he thinks to himself. Indeed, back at home, he only manages to sell a small portion of his wares - and he struggles to put bread on his table for the rest of the year.

Says the Chofetz Chaim: this world is just the marketplace. We're here to acquire valuable merchandise; we don't have time to sit back and relax. If we lose our focus for too long, it may be too late; we must constantly work on amassing the diamonds on the road. All the Chofetz Chaim cared about was a nice chandelier and nice flooring in the world to come; in his own home, he needed nothing! It was just the train; it was a bench in the marketplace!

My friends, if we learn to view our lives with this mindset, it can be an eternal game changer. When we get up there, and we start seeing how much time we wasted on utter nonsense - can you imagine how foolish we will feel? We will feel far worse than the *lo yitzlach* in the Chofetz Chaim's *mashal*! We will see that with every unnecessary break, every poor decision to not return to the Beis Medrash, every failed opportunity to do *chesed* - we lost treasure troves filled with spiritual delights that last forever. What an awfully painful realization that will be!

Who Wants to Feel Like a Fool?

Let's give another *mashal*:

After sitting at the airport terminal for over an hour awaiting a delayed flight to Eretz Yisroel, two individuals were informed that they will be unable to board. "Unfortunately, there's been a mistake with the bookings," the airline manager told them. "This flight was accidentally overbooked. Being that you were the last two to purchase tickets, you will have to return to the airport tomorrow for a different flight."

Understandably, these two customers were nothing short of irate. In order to somewhat mollify their anger, the manager offered them a form of appeasement. "I'm giving you each a rewards coupon. These can be redeemed the next time you fly with our airlines. They grant you a one-time right to any of our perks or benefits that are usually reserved for our first-class flyers."

Slightly soothed, the two men went home and returned to the airport the following day. At the gate, one of them noticed that his airlines offered a first-class lounge at the terminal. He glanced at his watch and noticed that there was still 45 minutes to boarding time. He excitedly whipped out his rewards coupon and redeemed it for the right of utilizing the lounge. Once inside, he was thrilled to discover numerous cushy armchairs all over the room that were at his disposal, as well as an endless amount of brewed coffee and soft drinks. The man prepared himself a delicious, steaming coffee and promptly collapsed into the nearest cozy chair, where he relaxed in style until boarding time.

Once on the plane, he met the other fellow that was knocked off the previous day's flight. "So, how was your wait in the terminal? Did you have any coffee?" he asked him.

"Well, it wasn't very comfortable, but I did manage to purchase a coffee at Starbucks for three dollars," the other man replied.

"Hmm, that's a shame. If you would have redeemed your coupon, then you would have relaxed like a king in the first-class lounge, as I did. And I had enough coffee there to keep me awake for a week," the first man boasted.

A few moments before takeoff, there was a short announcement on the speaker system. "We have a vacant seat in the first-class section. If there's anyone on board with a rewards coupon, it's all yours."

The second man hurriedly gathered his belongings and made his way to the front of the plane. His friend, on the other hand, spent the next twelve hours trying to get comfortable in his minuscule economy seat, muttering under his breath about how foolish he was.

My friends, it works the same way with regard to davening with *kavanah*. Some people allow their minds to wander to the remotest corners of the galaxy while davening *shemoneh esrei*. Sometimes, it feels like the appropriate thing to do would be to wish them *mazel tov* upon completing the *tefillah*. After all, they just managed to marry off their child, host a lavish *sheva brachos*, and purchase a brand new SUV - all in just six minutes, from their seat in *shul*! Surely a feat like that deserves some recognition! Others, however, invest their energy into concentrating on every word, difficult as it may be. When these people arrive in the *Olam Ha'Emes*, they will be showered with reward for all their efforts; the others, however, will be very disappointed to discover that their ephemeral imaginations got them less than nothing. They will feel far worse than our friend who traded a luxurious flight for some coffee and 45 minutes on an armchair.

We must remember that our hard work will pay off in the end. Instead of stressing over our struggles and complaining about our difficulties, we must internalize that Hashem takes inventory of all of our trials and efforts; this is the way it's supposed to be. While others may seem to be taking it easy and enjoying their *Olam Hazeh*, recognize that the *s'char* that is in store for you is infinitely more valuable.

The way to make this mindset a reality is by focusing on the idea we discussed earlier: Hashem has granted each and every one of us with basic *saichel*. If we would only access our common sense, which is what we're expected to do, then we would realize that all of our struggles are necessary, and the only thing that is truly important is *Olam Habah*. The same way the animals are expected to follow their instincts for their own safety, we too are expected to choose a life of *Emunah* and serenity, a life focused on *s'char* rather than enjoying this world.

The Lofty Levels Our Saichel Can Achieve

Chazal tell us that Avraham Avinu was *mekayem* the entire Torah; one of the *mamarei Chazal* teaches that he even kept Rabbinic commandments such as *Eruv Tavshilin*. This begs the question that has been asked: why, then, did Avraham refrain from getting a *Bris Milah* until the age of 99?

There are numerous answers to this question. Many have reasoned that Avraham wished to be *mekayem* this lofty commandment as a *metzuveh ve'oseh* (one who has been commanded to perform an act, as opposed to one who does so without a direct commandment), because then the *s'char* would be far greater. The Brisker Rav said a more *lomdishe p'shat* - that as long as Hashem had not yet commanded him to do a *Bris Milah*, then his foreskin was actually not considered an *arlah*, so he was incapable of actually performing the *mitzvah*. Another explanation is that a '*Bris*' literally means a 'covenant' or 'agreement' between two parties; if the two parties have not yet made an agreement, then the *Milah* would be pointless.

I would like to propose an additional explanation based on what we've been discussing. This may sound like a *chiddush*, but I would like to suggest that perhaps Avraham Avinu was actually unaware of this special *mitzvah* until the age of 99. Avraham didn't know about all the *mitzvos* by looking into a *chumash*; rather, he was able to elevate himself to the level of perceiving the *Ratzon Hashem* through his own *saichel*. The more he grew in the realm of putting his mind over his *guf*, the more levels of *Da'as* he was capable of achieving. In fact, the Gemara in Nedarim tells us that Avraham was the ultimate master over the body; his original name, Avram, had the numerical value of 243, because he was in control of that many of his *aivarim*. Hashem only added a "ה" to his name when he gained full control over the remaining five *aivarim* - his two eyes, two ears and the *milah*. Perhaps we can say that only once he reached this level of full control over all 248 body parts was he able to perceive the final *mitzvah* of *Bris Milah*.

Let me explain this a bit more. The *neshama* is actually a portion of *Eloka Mimaal*; it is capable of cleaving to the loftiest levels of *kedusha*. However, the *chomer*, the physicality, gets in the way. The more we suppress our physical desires, the more we become attached to *kedusha*. Avraham was on such an elevated level that he was able to see the words of the Torah with his own physical eyes; he observed them through gazing at the natural world and recognizing that they were the purpose of Creation. Once he became in full control, he was able to appreciate the special *mitzvah* that unifies the Jewish People with Hakadosh Baruch Hu: the *mitzvah* of *Bris Milah*.

In fact, the Nesivos says that the reason why Avraham suddenly became aware of Sarah's physical appearance upon his arrival in Mitzrayim was simply because the impure environment lowered his *madreigah*. The moment he slipped that slight level, his *guf* was able to get in the way of his *kedusha* once again. Only when he was a full *moshel* over his *aivarim* was he able to be completely unified with the Ribono Shel Olam.

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