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*With  
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Parshas Eikev

20th of Av 5784

## Godly Goodness

In Maseches Sotah (3a), there is recorded a seemingly peculiar statement from one of the Amoraic Sages. He declares that, “Nobody ever commits a sin unless a spirit of senselessness enters them.” This assertion seems to be saying that only when a wave of irrational thinking floods one’s brain and cloaks him with utter foolishness, does one go ahead and commit a sin.

What’s strange about this declaration is that in real life, we don’t see this being the case. What compels most people to sin is a desire they are faced with, and despite knowing the repercussions, they consciously choose to follow the path of sin, since it appears to offer more instantaneous pleasure. We wouldn’t label one who says gossip about a competitor as foolish; we might call them cruel, mean, or selfish, but we wouldn’t think they would warrant the title of “foolish”. The same applies to someone who looks at something they shouldn’t or eats something they shouldn’t; we wouldn’t label them as “stupid,” rather lustful or gluttonous. So how do we reconcile these facts with the above declaration? Why are we calling them senseless??

This week’s parshah gives us a clue.

### Is It Really So Easy?

In the middle of Moshe’s final speech to the Jewish people, as he told them about the spirit, morals and ideals they will experience in Eretz Yisrael, he inserted a seemingly bizarre comment. Moshe addressed the Jewish people and asserted, “*Mah Hashem elokecha shoel mimcha ki im l’yirah*” (Devarim 10:12). He declared, “All Hashem asks of you is to fear Him. It isn’t complicated. All He wants from us in life is a little fear. Is that too difficult?” he asked them.

Now, what kind of question is that? Of course, it's difficult to watch every word that comes out of our mouths, every second of every day. Of course, it's difficult to watch where our eyes go. Of course, it's difficult to turn down a job opportunity that conflicts with Shabbos. Of course it's difficult to fast on Tisha B'Av. "Fearing Hashem" dictates what we say and when we say it, what we wear and how we wear it, what we eat and how we eat it, what we think and how we think it. Why did Moshe make it sound like it's easy? What exactly did Moshe mean when he proclaimed that, "All Hashem asks of us is to fear Him"? Isn't that a huge mountain to climb?

### **Mitzvah Wonderland**

The following foundational explanation given by the Chinuch can completely alter the way one looks at mitzvos. The Chinuch (mitzvah 95) explains that in Hashem's infinite desire to bestow goodness upon man, He created a road map promising that all those who follow it will be led to unadulterated goodness. Every single one of the mitzvos on that map is another nugget of goodness, and if followed properly envelopes the follower with peace, tranquility, harmony and holiness. Some commandments prevent us from becoming hurtful people. Some commandments make us more benevolent, some more patient, and others are there purely to give us opportunities to build a relationship with Hashem. The mitzvos are the instruction manual of how to lead a loving home, of how to raise proper kids, of how to ensure society is safe. They teach us how to cope with sadness and how to properly channel joy. No scenario is not addressed and no circumstance is ignored. They inject them all with goodness. They infuse life with meaning. The common denominator that runs through all 613 mitzvos is that they are all here for our own benefit. Not a single human being in the entire history of humanity ever benefited an iota from deviating from Hashem's path.

Following this logic, continues the Chinuch, Moshe turned to the Jewish people and emphatically declared that these commandments that he lovingly taught them all these years, all 613 of them, are purely for them to attain goodness. Hashem isn't asking anybody to do something detrimental to their pursuit of goodness, for these commandments are the very definition of the pursuit of goodness. It is for this reason that Moshe finished off his declaration by saying, "letov lach" (Devarim 10:12). All Hashem asks of us is to follow the map, and it will lead us to His treasure chest of goodness.

## **Reward on Top of Goodness**

But there is another layer.

Not only did Hashem give us the Torah, the road map to goodness, He also gave us unfathomable spiritual reward in the next world for following it.

Think about that for a moment. Hashem rewards us for following the guidebook that is solely there to give us the greatest life we can have. We get rewarded for living a life of goodness. Is there any other deal on earth as good as that one?

When we realize that every single one of the mitzvos are here for our own benefit, suddenly it's not nearly as hard to follow them. Suddenly, it's not overly difficult to refrain from doing something we ought not to do. When we vividly internalize that refraining from saying something we shouldn't say or thinking something we shouldn't think or doing something we shouldn't do is purely for our personal benefit, it becomes significantly easier to follow suit.

And similarly, when we realize that fulfilling the mitzvos brings the best form of goodness into our lives as well as unfathomable spiritual reward in the next world, it becomes drastically easier to fulfill them.

Hence, the Gemara in Sotah declares that nobody sins unless a spirit of stupidity overcomes them, for how foolish must one be to deviate from the Torah which is purely in place for our own benefit? How foolish it is to neglect the map leading us to a life of supreme contentment.

## **Disney World**

Imagine you were going to Disney World for the first time, but had only six hours to spend there. Being that time is precious, you would need a plan to ensure that you got the most out of your short visit to the park. Imagine if the day before you arrived you got a letter in the mail from the owner of Disney World, personally drawing out a map of the places you should go and the places you should avoid. The bridges you should circumvent and the rides that have too-long lines. The shows that you must see and the pathways that get too crowded. Imagine the owner writing it all out for you. Would you take one look at it and say, "Eh, look at how many places he tells me not to go, look at all the rides and attractions he tells me to avoid, I'm not listening to this!" and throw the map in the garbage?

How foolish. How dumb.

Well, how foolish we are to fall to the glitter and glow of the sins we commit. How foolish it is to abandon the God-stamped map of a utopian life in exchange for our convoluted version of pleasure.

### **The Strength of the Human Heel**

The name of the parshah is Eikev. That's because the very first pasuk in the parshah describes Hashem telling us that if we are careful to fulfill all the mitzvos, even the seemingly insignificant ones that people step on with the eikev (heel) of their foot, we will be granted a life of bliss. Merely showing up a few times a year to perform the big grandiose mitzvos while neglecting the hundreds of other seemingly less glamorous ones, is demonstrative to Hashem that we don't view His Torah as a road map to goodness, but rather as a road block, getting in the way of our hike to happiness.

It is precisely the day-to-day grind of following each and every one of the 613 commandments, even the "small" ones, that reflects our firm realization that all Hashem wants for us is goodness, and in His kindness and grace He shows us exactly how to get there. How foolish it would be of us to miss out even one mitzvah.

The only person in the entire Tanach who is called a tzaddik – a righteous man – is Noach. Why is that? Weren't there other righteous men who filled the pages of our holy Torah? Perhaps it's because *"Sheva yipal tzaddik v'kam"* (Mishlei 24:16); a righteous man is one who has the ability to pick himself up despite falling seven times. For 120 years Noach went outside and worked on the teiva (ark) while the naysayers mocked him. He didn't give up and he didn't budge. He showed up rain or shine. He tried to inspire them to change their ways. They called him crazy, and they called him insane. Yet he stood there, day in and day out, year in and year out, decade in and decade out, never flinching once. He knew that the best life on earth was a life of following Hashem, and no amount of mockery and scorn would convince him otherwise.

An eikev is a heel. The human heel can absorb more pain than any other part of the body. You can stick needles into it and you can walk with it on coals. The Torah specifically uses this term to tell us that we must show up as soldiers in Hashem's army. Day in and day out. Not only for the big parties and gatherings, but for the early morning drills, the late-night missions and the grinding it out in the heat of the day. A soldier is there no matter the circumstances, and he takes the pain. For he knows there is nothing more rewarding than serving the king. So too, we show up rain or shine to follow Hashem's Torah, with the conviction that there is nothing more rewarding.

## The Few, The Proud

After the destruction of the first Bais Hamikdash, the subsequent exile into Babylon and the episode with Haman on Purim, the Jewish people enjoyed relative tranquility and prosperity in Persia. Life was good.

One day out of the blue, King Cyrus, king of the Persian Empire, decided to grant the Jews permission to move back to Yerushalayim and rebuild the Bais Hamikdash. Misradas, the royal treasurer, was instructed to go into the royal vault and remove the vessels stolen from the Bais Hamikdash. Thousands upon thousands of vessels were brought out.

Ezra, the leader of the Jews at the time, excitedly ran into the town square and broke the news to the Jewish people. With the Purim story still fresh in their minds, the threat of the complete slaughter of the entire Jewish people still at the forefront of their minds, one would think there would have been a national outpouring of excitement to go back to Yerushalayim. They should have been ecstatic. There should have been a stampede to begin the pilgrimage back. But no, there was not. Not even close.

Out of the millions of Jews that were living at the time in Persia, shockingly, only 42,360 people picked up and marched with Ezra back to Yerushalayim. Only 42,360! After almost being annihilated by Haman, after going through the pain of getting exiled and watching the Bais Hamikdash burn, we were finally given an opportunity to go back; and yet, 95 percent of us didn't. We liked our life in Persia. Of course, we wanted to rebuild the Bais Hamikdash, but only conceptually. We didn't yearn to actually go out there and build it.

The act of such devotion by these 42,360 people picking themselves up, without missing a beat, to go serve Hashem with alacrity, was so praiseworthy in the eyes of Hashem that He did something almost never done in Tanach. He listed each and every family that accompanied Ezra by name (Ezra 2,1): Parosh, Shefatiah, Arach, Pachas, Yeshua, Yoav, Elam, Zatu, Zakai, Bani, Bebai, Azgad, Adonikam, Bigvai, Adin, Ater, Hezekiah, Betzai, Yorah, Chashum, Gibbar, Bais Lachem, Netofah, Anasos, Azmaves, Kirias-Arim, Chefirah, Be'eros, Ramah, Gava, Michmas, Bais El, Ai, Nevo, Magbish, Eilam, Charim, Lod, Chadid, Ono, Yericho, Sena'ah, Yedaiah, Yeshua, Immer, Pashchur, Charim, Yeshua, Kadmiel, Hodaviah, Asaf, Shalum, Ateir, Talmon, Akub, Chatita, Shovai, Tzicha, Chashufa, Tabaois, Keros, Se'iaha, Padon, Levanah, Chagavah, Akub, Chagab, Shalmal, Chanan, Giddeil, Gachar, Reaiah, Retzin, Nekoda, Gazam, Uza, Paseach, Vesai, Asnah, Meunim, Nefusim, Bakbuk, Chakufa, Charchur, Batzlus, Mechida, Charsha, Barkos, Sisera, Tamach, Netziach, Chatifa, Sotai,

Hasoferes, Feruda, Ya'alah, Darkon, Gideil, Shefatiah, Chattil, Pocheres-Hatzevaim, Ami, Delaiah, Toviah, Nekoda Chavaiah, Hakotz, Barzillai and their families.

These previously unnoteworthy individuals realized the tremendous opportunity they had in front of them. The opportunity to move back to Yerushalayim and rebuild the Bais Hamikdash. The opportunity to be one with Hashem and His mitzvos. They were soldiers in Hashem's army. From the big commandments to the small, from the glamorous to the technical, it made no difference; they were marching in lockstep with Ezra. Thus, in reward, their names got codified for eternity in the most important book in the history of humanity.

### **The Beggar Perspective**

I once found myself in the office building of BP Print Group, a printing company in Lakewood, NJ. Being a large company with well more than a minyan (quorum of ten men) working there, they built a shul inside of their building. What's unique about this minyan is that in addition to the graphic designers, printers, editors and writers that daven there, there is often a large number of meshulachim (charity collectors) from Yerushalayim as part of the minyan. They come to the company to print out their letters of recommendation to attest that they are in need of tzedaka.

What took place during chazaras hashatz (the chazzan's repetition) absolutely amazed me. A man got up with a pushka (charity box) in his hand and began walking up and down the aisles, collecting tzedaka. Like in most shuls, only a handful of people actually put something in the pushka. That is, until the man got to the meshulachim. Without missing a beat, each and every one of them reached into their pockets and placed some money in the pushka. This impressed me so much, because they were actually taking from the very money that they themselves collected, by standing out in the rain, going door to door, and embarrassing themselves. This was the very money that they needed desperately to pay for their wife's chemo treatment, infertility treatments, or the bank that was about to foreclose on their house; and they placed some in the pushka. Not a single one didn't.

For these people are attracted to a currency of a different kind. A mitzvah that comes walking by is too attractive to pass up. They couldn't hold themselves back. Even after a tear-filled Mincha, begging Hashem to save them from their plight, they grabbed the mitzva of tzedaka with a smile on their face, before it passed them by. For them, it was simply too precious not to.

When we realize how each and every mitzvah contains a precious ingredient for a life of goodness, we realize how foolish it is to overlook any of them. Suddenly, each and every mitzvah is prized. Each one is too cherished to step on, and none of them are insignificant. Like puzzle pieces, each make up the ultimate life of goodness, stamped with the approval of Hashem.

Shlomo Hamelech summed it up best: "*Hashomer mitzvah lo yeda davar ra*" – keepers of mitzvos will know no evil (Koheles 8:5). When we realize how fortunate we are to be privy to these mitzvos, we will do whatever it takes to properly fulfill them. And when we do, aside for living life to its fullest, our names get etched in Hashem's heavenly record books for eternity. Ashreinu shezachinu – how fortunate are we that we merited thus. We are the luckiest people on the face of the earth. There is no group of people on earth who have a life path that is even remotely close to ours.