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*With
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ב"ה

Parshas Ki Seitzei

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The Great Glacier Chase

If you were to rank the mitzvos of the Torah in order of most dramatic and seemingly inexplicable, the mitzvah of the ben sorer (the wayward son) would certainly be on the top of your list. The Torah commands parents to drag their overly gluttonous son to beis din (the Jewish court), at which point he is warned to stop his gluttony and lashed for not doing so. If the son refuses to change his ways, the entire town convenes and stones the boy to death.

This mitzvah is strange for a plethora of reasons. All the son did wrong was overindulge. He stole some cash from his father to maintain his habit of excessive eating. True, he isn't exactly squeaky clean, and he probably won't end up marrying the local rabbi's daughter, but how does this warrant his death? Doesn't stoning a thirteen-year-old boy who likes to sit around all day and eat seem a little harsh? Isn't that what teenagers do — sit around and eat? Doesn't the rule book of teenagers consist of only three rules: Stay out of trouble, survive puberty, and eat? So, this boy got a little carried away. So, he'll be obese like the rest of the world. What is the great spiritual sin?

Secondly, why does the Torah go out of its way to say that the entire town should be there watching his death; when, as we know, the Torah doesn't require such communal involvement in almost any other punishment? If the Torah wants the whole town to watch a sinner get punished with the hopes that the onlookers will be inspired, why does it require it here more so than other places?

Thirdly, the Torah, according to Sanhedrin (71a), requires the parents of the ben sorer to be exactly the same height and have exactly the same voice, conditions that are not physically possible. Why does the Torah require this?

Fourthly, the Gemara says that this food-crazed boy doesn't actually deserve the death sentence, but since we see that he will lead an iniquitous life in the future, we kill him now while he is still innocent. We put him to death under the pretext that better he should die now merely as an overly gluttonous person rather than later as something worse.

Since when does the Torah command us to play God and determine who is beyond repair and who is not? What happened to repentance? What happened to the concept of people changing their ways? The law of a ben sorer only applies to thirteen-year-olds. The last time I checked, most people don't act the same way when they are thirty-five as they do when they are thirteen. Why are we killing a gluttonous thirteen-year-old for the sins he might one day commit, when it's far more likely that he is merely demonstrating teenage immaturity and will one day smooth himself out?

Intellectual Food

But the cherry on top of this surprising mitzvah is the bold and puzzling statement in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 71a), which makes the entire subject scream for a deeper explanation. It states that a real ben sorer never was and will never be. The criteria required to put a wayward son to death are an impossibility, and the Torah merely wrote the mitzvah for us to learn and receive reward for learning.

Huh?

What is that supposed to mean? The Torah wrote mitzvos that are impossible to fulfill just to give us something to learn? Don't we have enough things to learn? Does that mean the Torah, for the same token, could have written a recipe for pumpkin pie merely for us to learn and get reward? Obviously not.

There is clearly something embedded in the mitzvah of ben sorer, that despite being a practical impossibility contains a practical lesson of great importance. So great, that it is one of the only places in the Torah that the entire community is charged with taking notice (Sanhedrin 89a). The question is: what is that lesson?

Teenagers Forever

There is a passage in the Zohar which changes our perspective on the ben sorer entirely. The Zohar in parshas Balak (3:197b) says that when the Torah talks about the wayward son, it is actually a parable for the Jewish people as a nation falling away from Hashem. It is Hashem giving us a loud and clear warning that if we fall too far into gluttonous and indulgent behavior, He will see fit that we are removed from the midst of the Jewish people. Hashem is the parent and we are the wayward son.

The Zohar is saying that Hashem is warning the entire Jewish community of the dangers of overindulgence and the catastrophes it could bring. The Torah doesn't mean that there will be a thirteen-year-old boy who has identical parents, who have the same voice and the same height, who drag him off to court and have him killed for overindulgence. It means that we as a nation should be extremely cautious to avoid excessive boorishness, and we should take note that it is something that Hashem from early on in our lives wants us to have no part in.

The question now becomes what, in fact, is so terribly bad about food obsession and indulgence? There is no overt sin that one does by engaging in such behavior. One is fulfilling all 613 mitzvos. Why is this the one sin the Torah singles out as the pitfall the entire community needs to avoid? Aren't there other sins which are far worse, like murder, idolatry, or adultery? And aren't there other character flaws which are more pernicious, like anger, laziness, or lust?

The Inaction of Distraction

When thinking about our lifelong battle with the yetzer hara (evil inclination), we often conjure up thoughts of getting tempted to say something we shouldn't, or look at something we shouldn't, or close our Gemaros, or badmouth our competitors, and so on. Rarely do we think of the tactic that is used by the yetzer hara far more often with far more success. The vast majority of Torah Jews do not struggle whatsoever with holding themselves back from murdering someone. The same is true with bank robbery or idol worship. The yetzer hara doesn't waste his time exerting energy trying to claw us away from Hashem by tempting us with those sins.

The yetzer hara uses a far more successful tactic to claw us away from G-d. It's called the power of distraction.

The average Torah Jew has a pretty solid defense mechanism against sin, but few of us have one against distraction. The yetzer hara exploits this greatly. He makes us so focused on anything and everything, that we design our lives leaving little time left for Hashem.

Sinning is not the opposite of getting closer to Hashem. Not getting closer to Hashem is the opposite of getting closer to Hashem. The way to have a great relationship with Hashem is not by merely living life sin-free. The way to have a great relationship with Hashem is by having a great relationship with Hashem. By thinking about Him. By talking to Him. By crying to Him. By learning His wisdom.

Much like the opposite of a great and loving marriage is not a scandalous one riddled with abuse and leading up to a messy divorce. The opposite of a great marriage is a distracted marriage where each spouse is distracted by all the glittery things in life that relegate one's spouse to second fiddle.

Likewise, there are several ways to distance oneself from Hashem. Sinning is one of them. But chief among them is giving up our mental space to anything but G-d. Taking the precious real estate in our minds and giving it out to the buzz of the world.

The majority of us are good people. Some of us are great people. But we also like food. Most of us love it. We also love our homes. We love remodeling them, talking about the renovations, and then remodeling yet again. We love sports, so we talk about them and listen to them. We love swimming and working out. We love clothing. We love keeping up with the music world. We love the seemingly never-ending stream of increasingly fascinating news.

All these things are inherently harmless and can actually be used at times as great outlets refreshing ourselves to remain energetic in our service to Hashem.

But, sadly, they can also become huge distractors in our spiritual climb, often hindering our growth without us even realizing it. The danger of obsessive indulgence is that it masquerades as innocent, permissible activities. It is precisely the permissibility that makes it so dangerous, for far too often the obsession becomes an addictive monster that chokes a person's G-dliness right out of him. Not that it makes us have a bad relationship with Hashem; it just makes us not have one at all.

It is extremely hard to focus excitedly on spiritual pursuits when one has Yankees tickets in his pocket. It is immensely hard to carve out space for Hashem in one's mind if one is far more interested in food, clothing, home improvements, or vacations.

One can make a good argument that more than the damage done to the Jewish people by overt sin is the damage done by well-meaning people letting life get in the way of life, and allowing the indulgences of the world to pull them down from the spiritual mountain that they could have been on.

The Covenant of Focus

This idea is so hugely central that it is literally ingrained into our bodies.

A primary covenant which exists between us and Hashem is forged through the bris milah, our circumcision. Ever wonder how we know where to perform the bris milah? Nowhere in the entire Torah does it say where this circumcision must be performed. Perhaps it should be on our pinky. Maybe we should circumcise our left ear lobe.

The Ramban in parshas Lech Lecha (Bereishis 17:9) cites the Radak, who says that the reason why a bris milah is performed in its true location is because Hashem wants us to take the place on the human body that is most associated with indulgence and pleasure, and make a covenant between ourselves and Him specifically there. We are thus establishing for the duration of our lives the preeminence of spiritual pursuits, and to this end, we circumcise our greatest symbol of pleasure.

Why is the act of taming our thirst for indulgence the greatest representation of the covenant between us and G-d? Why, precisely, is that what's first and foremost in the life of a Jew?

The answer is that the desire for pleasure gets in the way of our dynamic relationship with Hashem more than sin gets in the way. We get so caught up in the pleasures of this world that Hashem becomes second fiddle. Of course, we show up to daven, we learn, we give tzedakah, we shake the lulav, and we light the menorah, but we often get far more excited about the shul's kiddush, the Chanukah donuts, the summer pool party, the mid-winter vacation, getting a new couch, or getting an even newer couch.

Hashem wants our relationship to be about taking this awesome, exciting, wondrous world that He created for us and fill it with Him. Uplift it all. Not to shy away from enjoying the world, but doing so as a means to develop a relationship with Hashem. To be focused on spirituality to the point where one finds it wherever he goes. It is what should occupy our minds the most. Allowing worldly indulgences to creep in can sink the ship entirely.

The Ferrari

A wealthy businessman was once driving his new Ferrari down the street when an old, dilapidated Pontiac sped along and crashed right into him. The impact was so great that the doors of the Ferrari blew right off. The businessman, furious, scrambled out of the car and angrily screamed at the other driver.

"You idiot! Look what you did to my car!"

The driver of the Pontiac looks at the wealthy man with a face of shock.

"Sir, sir, we can worry about your car later. Your entire left arm has been ripped off."

The businessman looked down to see blood dripping from his elbow, and gazes at where his left arm used to be. He then lets out a heart-wrenching cry:

“Noooooooooooo! My Rolex, my Rolex is gone!!!!!”

The mitzvah of the ben sorer reminds us to put spirituality back into spirituality. To place Hashem at the forefront. To take Purim, Chanukah, and Pesach, and elevate them from being days of hamentashen, donuts, and brisket, to days of bonding with Hashem. To take Shabbos and ensure that our relationship with Hashem is what’s dominant, and not the crazed search for another piece of potato kugel.

When we internalize the lesson of the ben sorer, we begin rethinking our priorities. Perhaps we don’t spend enough time on spirituality. Perhaps our quest for pleasure and adventure takes up too much mental space. When we rethink our priorities, we can change. We can become more wholesome people. We can then realize how foolish most of our worldly pursuits are and how much more meaningful the pursuit of Hashem is.

Alaska: The Greatest Water on Earth

Ever since my youth, I had a desire to try real glacier water. Water that didn’t have to travel through any pipes. Water that needed no filtering. Water in its most pristine form. One year I took a trip to Alaska. With unparalleled magnificence and natural wonders, the likes of which are found nowhere else, it is truly one of the most beautiful places on planet Earth.

On one of the days of my trip, I finally got to do what I dreamed about — hike on a glacier. Wearing special shoes, I ascended the behemoth mountain of ice and was in utter awe of its sheer beauty and uniqueness.

Then the moment of truth occurred. The tour guide brought me to a little hole in the glacier that was shooting out a small stream of water. The tour guide looked at me and said:

“You see that water over there? That is pre-Industrial Revolution water. That is water never affected by the ozone layer. That is water which people from all over the world come to try. Would you like to try it?”

“You better believe I wanna try it!” I excitedly told him.

I bent down, cupped my hand, lifted it to my mouth, made a beracha and took a drink.

And do you know what it tasted like? Do you know what this water — water that I dreamed about since I was young, water that I was told was the greatest-tasting water on Earth, water that people from all over the world come to taste — do you know what it tasted like? Like the water that comes out of the tap in every kitchen in America!

All of us have a choice. We can either spend our lives chasing pleasures that dominate our every move, or we can stop and drink from the fountain of G-d that is flowing all around us.