

DATA of Plano

Parshas Matos/Maasei | 2 Av 5778 | July 14, 2018

Sermon



When Too Much is a Bad Thing

Friday

Mincha: 7:00

Candle lighting: 8:19 (Earliest time: 7:08)

Shabbos Day

Class with Rabbi Zakon: 8:00

Studying the book of Shir Hashirim (Song of Songs)

Shacharis: 9:00

Latest time for shema: 10:00

Learners' Service: 10:30

Childcare: 10:45

Kiddush following services at 11:45

Mincha: 8:00

Shabbos ends: 9:22

Learners' Service



The Art of Rebuke

From the Desk of Rabbi Yogi

Overcoming the Pull of Instant Gratification (Part 2)



In the last article, we noted the great difficulties human beings have with overcoming the pull of instant gratification, as well as the psychological basis for this human paradigm according to the study of behavioral economics in the existence of present-bias (the discounting and devaluing too strongly of future rewards and the overemphasizing of near-term pleasures). We also introduced the advice dispensed by scholars in the social sciences to utilize our propensity for nearsightedness to our advantage in battle by implementing immediate pains or pleasures that encourage self control and disincentivize succumbing to instant gratification (Eg: I can only listen to my favorite podcast when I workout at the gym and If I smoke a cigarette I have

to give \$5 to the KKK). I was curious what traditional Torah sources had to say about the subject of overcoming the pull of instant gratification and if they were, in fact, in line with the findings mentioned above.

The Torah sources that immediately came to my mind were two *mishnayot* in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers). The first mishna comes at the very beginning of the second chapter.

... weigh the loss [that may be sustained through the fulfillment] of a commandment against the reward [that may be obtained] for

[fulfilling] it. And [weigh] the gain [that may be obtained through the committing] of a transgression against the loss [that may be sustained] by [committing] it. Keep your eye on three things, and you will not come to the hands of sin: Know what is above you: An Eye that sees, and an Ear that hears, and all your deeds are written in a book.

Based on what we have learned, this *mishna*'s advice seems, well, futile. Yes, a proper cost-benefit analysis of any particular sin or mitzva should surely lead to a religiously sensible reaction, but human beings, as we have demonstrated, suffer from a serious inability to properly evaluate different options in the face of temptation. After all, how accurate are your mental determinations when you're a heaping pile of emotions and drives? (It is for this very reason, by the way, that another *mishna* in *Pirkei Avot* [4:23] warns us "Do not seek to appease your fellow man at the time of his

anger, or to comfort him when his dead lies before him." For, as long as someone is shaken and agitated he isn't amenable to rational suggestions.) And thoughts of future divine retribution from an all-knowing G-d? For many of us, that's way too far off in the future to inhibit pleasure seeking in the present.

Here's the second *mishna* on the topic, found at the very beginning of the third chapter:

Akavia ben Mahalalel says: Keep your eye on three things, and you will not come to the hands of sin: Know from where you came, and to where you are going, and before Whom you are destined to give an account and a reckoning. From where did you come? From a putrid drop. And to where are you going? To a place of dust, worms, and maggots. And before Whom are you destined to give an account and a reckoning? Before the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

The problems with the advice given in this *mishna* are similar to the problems introduced with the first *mishna*. Thoughts of one's humble beginning and eventual end, as well as considerations of a future day of

reckoning are distant from life in the present, and therefore infinitely less persuasive. Such thoughts similarly require rational thinking processes, something humans carry in short supply during periods of enticement.

I knew there were vital points of consideration that would open up the gates of wisdom for me, but I didn't know what they were. Luckily, I would soon find the missing link I was looking for in former Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau's, magnificent commentary on *Pirkei Avot*. Rabbi Lau notes most interestingly that these *mishnayot* do not reference methods to avoid "sin" itself. Rather they depict practices that would ward off "the hands of sin," "*li'dei aveira*."



Rabbi Lau: In Hebrew, the word for hands can also mean *handles*. Sin is stored so to speak, in a container whose handles are corrupt personality traits, such as ego and lust. The *more* pronounced these traits are in a person, the more he is prone to sin. When a person

does not possess these handles, he will not come to sin (Vol.II, p. 323).

According to Rabbi Lau, the advice laid out in these *mishnayot* was never meant to aid someone currently in the grips of sin itself. These mental considerations were rather intended for quieter, less turbulent times in one's spiritual life. For in moments of personal calm and quiet, far away from the intoxicating snare of the lesser angels of our nature, soulful contemplation indeed finds its place. And within these calm confines, thoughts of one's purpose and place in this life and thoughts of the consequences of one's actions have the ability to resonate deeply within us and potentially neutralize or at the very least lessen many of our worst personality traits which serve as the "handles to sin."

This, indeed, parallels that which we referenced earlier from the findings of behavioral economics - "When we can hold all alternatives *at a distance*, our evaluations of them remain true to their values in our lives." Like a healthy diet or regular exercise which ward off obesity and the host of physical side effects that come with it, focused soulful contemplation acts as preventive medicine for the spiritual life, keeping the negative character traits which lead to sin at bay.

As far as what might stand-in as curative medicine for the spiritual life, a Talmudic passage (*Kiddushin* 30b) seems to describe a panacea of sorts for the spiritually entrapped: “So says The Holy One to Israel: My children, I have created the evil inclination and I have created the Torah as its antidote.” And as the Talmud continues further on the page, “If this scoundrel (the evil inclination) *accosts* you (seeking to tempt you to sin), drag it to the study hall (and study Torah). If it is like stone it will be dissolved (by the Torah). If it is like iron it will be shattered (by the Torah).”

In this latter passage we find that the evil inclination is close at hand. It has, in fact, accosted you and infected you! Now you need a cure, or an “antidote” as the Talmud calls it. The advice given is notably unlike the advice given in Pirkei Avot. In fact, there’s no mention at all of any sort of silent meditation or contemplation to keep sin at bay. Rather, we are instructed to “*drag*” our evil inclination (nobody said this would be easy!) to the study hall and learn Torah.

Just as the findings of behavioral economics suggest, instant gratification must be met head on with another immediate counterbalance that encourages self control. In this case that immediate counterbalance is Torah study, a spiritual shot in the arm and a bit of G-dliness to dispel the powers of negativity and sin. In this emotionally charged space we are told to meet negative emotion with positive emotion and unholy passion with holy passion. An immediate antidote indeed! A power great enough to dissolve stone and

shatter iron!

On a deeper level the Torah study functions as a positive channeling of the passionate desires once focused on sin, now refocused and directed on a passion for G-d and His Torah. Not only, then, do we have an immediate counterbalance to instant gratification, but even the satisfaction of fulfilling one’s fiery passions! (See *Afikei Mayim* Shavuot p.228 which explains that this is the deeper meaning behind Maimonides’ oft quoted dictum: "A person should always turn himself and his thoughts to the words of the Torah and expand his knowledge in wisdom, for the thoughts of forbidden relations grow strong solely in a heart which is empty of wisdom.")

As we’ve seen, there is a place for mindful meditation as spiritually preventative medicine, and a place for prompt reaction in the form of Torah study as spiritually curative medicine. Both strategies are needed for any long-term success in the spiritual life, and both beautifully parallel the modern findings of behavioral economics.

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SAVE THE DATE!

- ☑ **Fast of the Ninth of Av** | Sunday, July 22
- ☑ **Champions Camp** | August 5 - August 10
- ☑ **Jewish Night at the RoughRiders** | Sunday, August 5 @ 7:05 P.M.
- ☑ **Community End of Summer BBQ** | Sunday, August 19