

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Ki Teitzei

This week's parsha is a collection of what at first glance seems to be a random assortment of mitzvahs. For example, the parsha begins with a discussion of how to treat a captive woman. It continues with the rights of the firstborn despite the father's feelings toward the mother of the firstborn. Then, it discusses how to punish the wayward son.

The Midrash teaches that there is a very real progression being described here. Understanding this progression will help us prepare for the high holidays.

The Torah starts with the Jewish soldier away from his country on the battlefield. He is tempted by the beauty of a captive woman. The Torah describes the process of what she must do before he may marry her.

Bring her into your home; she shall shave her head and let her nails grow. She shall remove her nice clothes and sit in your house and weep for her father and her mother for a full month.

(Deut. 21: 12-13)

Rashi comments on these verses:

She should grow her nails so that she will become repulsive.

She must sit in the house that he uses so that he encounters her as he comes and goes. He should see her crying so that he will become disgusted with her.

It seems that although the soldier is permitted to marry her, there is a strong push against it. The Midrash warns that if he does not heed this message he will hate her in the end. Ultimately, the child born from that union will be a "wayward son" who, as the parsha explains, is killed at a young age before his sins become too severe.

The Torah is teaching us that there is a system of cause and effect in the spiritual world, beyond what we see in the physical world. There are actions that are permitted, and those that are flatly prohibited. But even among the permissible actions, there are many that, while allowed, are nonetheless inappropriate. And when one acts in inappropriate ways, a spiritual cause-and-effect can lead to downward spiral affecting both the actor and those around him.

The Midrash cites King David as an example of a great man whose questionable actions ultimately led to the suffering of many people. He married a captive woman and as a result bore Avshalom who would consort publicly with his concubines, attempt to kill his own father and cause thousands to die in the rebellion (cf. Samuel II chapters 16-17).

A Mishnah from Pirkei Avot suggests to us how both our positive and negative actions impact on us (chapter 4, Mishnah 2):

Ben Azzai says: Run to perform (even) a minor mitzvah, and flee from sin; for one mitzvah leads to



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continued ...

another mitzvah and one sin leads to another sin. For the consequence of a mitzvah is a mitzvah, and the consequence of a sin is a sin.

The Mishnah teaches that not only is our behavior habit forming in a physical sense; there is a spiritual reality that leads a person from one mitzvah opportunity to the next. This positive manifestation of this chain reaction is also hinted to in our parsha this week.

If you have fulfilled the mitzvah of sending away the mother bird (before taking the eggs) you will build a new house and fulfill the commandment of making a fence (for safety) because one mitzvah leads to another. You will come to own your own vineyard and field (to fulfill the mitzvahs specific to crop growers) and own clothes (to fulfill the Mitzvahs that are related to clothing.) That is why these verses are juxtaposed.

(Rashi Deut. 22:8 citing the Midrash)

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski (1930 -present) points out in his commentary to Pirkei Avot that this concept of one act leading to another is an element of the laws of nature in the spiritual world. Just as a magnet will attract iron, a sin will attract another sin even if the former was inadvertent. In such a world no action can be seen as insignificant. Appropriate actions lead to more opportunities to make a greater positive influence on the world. Conversely, inappropriate actions lead to more difficult and compromising situations.

As we start to look ahead towards Rosh Hashanah, we can sense the Day of Judgment coming. We may not have spent the past year focused on making the best decisions. The time has come to stem the tide and to break free of the negative trends we are stuck in. But how are we to re-orient ourselves when our future actions are tied to our past actions through such powerful and pervasive forces of nature?

Our natural inclination is to do it with broad strokes. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (1810 – 1883) explains that although people get excited by big revolutions, there must be a starting point. It is very difficult to start with big strides. Attempting to do so, often leads to failure and disappointment.

He suggests that the proper approach is to identify a small aspect of life that would be easy to improve on and to act on it. With these small steps we will create new, positive trends of behavior. Rather than vowing never to speak negatively (lashon hara) about anyone ever again, perhaps try to get through one hour each week.

When we start on this path, the Talmud in Yoma 38b guarantees that “those who come to purify themselves, God will assist them.” Further proving that “one small step for man” can turn into “a giant leap for mankind.”

Shabbat Shalom

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