

In almost every Parsha there are incredible lessons to be gleaned from the inspiring, yet practical words of the Torah. Although sometimes these lessons are only implicit, rather than explicit, they still can serve as practical lessons to be applied to our daily lives. I believe just an instance of such a lesson is subtly hinted to in the words used to describe the commandment of the Korban Pesach, the Passover offering.

The Torah tells us that when Moshe commanded the Jewish people about the Korban Pesach, he said to them “Draw for yourselves and take for yourselves lambs according to your families, and kill the Passover lamb... And ye shall observe this thing for an ordinance to thee and to thy sons forever.” The wording at the beginning of the commandment seems slightly superfluous. Why does the Torah need to tell us “Draw for yourselves” and also, “Take for yourselves.” The Torah could very simply and succinctly say take a lamb to be sacrificed, the Torah seems to be unnecessarily verbose.

There is a well-known Midrash that expounds on this superfluous language and explains that this phrase is not just referring to the lamb but the emotional and religious state of each person. The Midrash says, “Draw for yourselves, - from idolatry, and take for yourselves, - to service of G-D.” According to the Midrash, this commandment really served as a strong exhortation to distance themselves from the prevalent idolatrous and hedonistic Egyptian society, as a necessary preparation prior to the Passover offering. However, asks the Gerrer Rebbe, this Midrash seems to make no sense in the face of another Midrash. The Midrash tells us that during the three days of the plague of darkness, while the Egyptians were cowering in their anxiety filled darkness, the Jews who had forsaken the faith of their fathers and adopted the new found religion of their host country died. G-D deemed those Jews unworthy of the upcoming redemption and instead used the cover of darkness to obscure the death of many distanced Jews. If that is so asks the Rebbe, who was the intended audience for the scriptural exhortation. The Jews who needed to hear the message of the verse had already died and presumably the remaining Jews who survived the pandemic, were righteous Jews for whom Egyptian idolatry held no allure.

The Gerrer Rebbe quotes the founder of Chassidism, Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov who discusses a troubling verse found in the second paragraph in Shma. The verse reads, “Be careful lest your heart be tempted and you go astray and worship other gods”. The Baal Shem Tov was troubled by the immediacy of the nature of sin. Can one’s fall from Judaism be that swift and dramatic? Just because one turns away from G-D will he immediately proceed to engage in one of the three cardinal sins? Is there not a religious middle ground? The answer is - apparently not. Judaism does not offer such an alternative. The very nature of our faith forces us to declare what sometimes may appear to be polarizing positions. One cannot straddle the fence of faith, either he chooses to believe in G-D and follow his laws or he may fall prey to the temptations of a less demanding faith.

The exhortation of the Passover sacrifice, to draw away from sin and turn to G-D was spoken even to the most righteous of Jews. These Jews may never have expressed any inkling whatsoever of leaving our faith, yet, the message was still delivered to them as a much needed warning, “Draw away from sin and turn to G-D”, because righteousness is ephemeral and may be gone tomorrow. Even in our finest religious moment, we needed to hear this warning, because G-D forbid, one’s fall from Judaism can be swift and dramatic. May we never experience or even witness such a calamitous event

*Shabbat Shalom,
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