

## Parshas Ki Sisa 5771

### AL TISYA'EISH (DO NOT DESPAIR!) SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

In the aftermath of the *cheit ha'eigel* (sin of the golden calf), Hashem made known His displeasure with the Jewish people. One of the repercussions of this act was the loss of their special crowns. These had been bestowed on them in response to their prior exuberant acceptance of the Torah at Har Sinai (*Shabbos 88a*). But having since corrupted their ways, they were told, “And now, remove your ornaments from yourselves,” (*Shemos 33:5*).

R' Moshe Feinstein notes that there is something seemingly peculiar about this directive: namely, they were so instructed *after they had already done so on their own*. The previous verse states, “And the nation heard (of Hashem’s displeasure)... and they mourned, and each person refrained from donning his ornamental crown.” How are we to understand exactly what transpired here? Did they take it off themselves (as the *pesukim* seem to indicate)? Then what was the purpose of issuing instructions that they should remove these crowns?

Based on R' Moshe’s explanation (*Derash Moshe, vol. II, parshas Ki Sisa*), a powerful message emerges from this episode. It seems that the subsequent directive to remove their crowns was actually a punishment for what they had done on their own. In other words, they took the initiative to remove their crowns in the first place, but this act further incurred Hashem’s wrath. As a result, He decreed that – having already been removed – the crowns must stay off permanently.

This is the vital lesson being imparted here, one that bears relevance to us all. One might not have viewed the Jews’

voluntary relinquishing of their crowns in a negative light; on the contrary, it appears to be a noble act of contrition, reflecting recognition of their misdeed and lowered stature. The Torah seeks to correct this misimpression: this act was deemed worthy of reprimand. Expressing true remorse in the wake of sin is indeed a necessary and praiseworthy step in the repentance process. But the Jews’ removal of their crowns signified something else: it showed that they had “given up.” Instead of seeking to improve, they were entirely immersed in bemoaning their downfall. This attitude only served to earn them Hashem’s further displeasure. To make clear to them and all succeeding generations that such an attitude was unwarranted, counterproductive, and even dangerous, He punished them for their mournful display. The intended message is that – no matter how grievously a person or group may have sinned – they must never submit to feelings of *yi'ush* (discouragement). It is always possible to return to pre-sin levels of spirituality; but once one has given up the fight, then all is lost.

This sentiment is succinctly expressed in Pirkei Avos. The Mishnah there states (*I:7*):

נתאי הארבל אומר... אל תתנאש מן הפרענות.

“Nittai of Arbel says: ... Do not despair in the face of punishment.”

The *Medrash Shmuel* explains this Mishnah in line with the abovementioned lesson. Even if a person should find himself in the midst of a spiritual decline, marked by continued failings and subsequent retribution, he should never assume that he is beyond hope. This is a tremendous mistake! Hashem’s mercy has no limit; so long as there is still a breath of life, one can always make

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by Dr. and Mrs. R. Shanik, Lakewood, NJ

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amends and recapture Hashem's favor, no matter how "far gone" he may view himself.

### **THE CHOFETZ CHAIM AS A KIRUV (OUTREACH) FIELDWORKER**

In the course of his many travels, it once happened that the Chofetz Chaim found himself at a particular inn in Vilna. A stout, boorish-looking man arrived and through his subsequent behavior soon revealed his unsavory character. The man ordered goose and whiskey, which he promptly devoured without any *brachah*, all the while treating the one serving him with extreme disrespect. The Chofetz Chaim was horrified at this spectacle and decided that this brazen and contemptuous individual could use a good talking-to.

The innkeeper tried to dissuade the Chofetz Chaim from making an attempt. He proceeded to explain to the sage exactly who this ruffian was. He was an unfortunate victim of the dreadful Cantontist laws, whereby young Jewish children were forcibly taken from their homes and inducted into the Czar's army, to serve there for a period of decades. "This man," the innkeeper warned, "is totally estranged from Torah. He was seized at age seven and shipped to Siberia, where he spent the next twenty-five years as a soldier in the Czar's army. With such an 'upbringing,' no wonder he behaves as he does! The poor wretched fellow was deprived of any Jewish education and was 'raised' in the company of unscrupulous men in the wilds of Siberia!"

But the Chofetz Chaim was undaunted. He felt that he knew just the right way to address this man.

After approaching the brutish-looking man with a warm greeting, the Chofetz Chaim began: "Is it true what I heard about you – that you were forced to undergo the most horrific tortures? That you were whisked away as a small boy, deprived of any Jewish education and raised among gentiles in a far-away land? I can only imagine what you have been through; no doubt, they tormented you endlessly for years on end, coercing you to eat *treife*

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and subjecting you to *Gehinom* on earth, all for one purpose: to make you leave Judaism. And yet, you stood firm; you did not convert to their faith, but remained a Jew! You are truly counted among the spiritual heroes of the Jewish people; how I envy your merits! Imagine what stature you would achieve if you would only keep the precepts of a Jew and live out your years in the ways of the Torah..."

The outward facade of this hardened soldier melted away at the Chofetz Chaim's impassioned plea. His eyes filled with tears, as he was shaken to the core. From that moment on, the man attached himself to the sage until he became a full-fledged *ba'al teshuvah* (penitent) (*HaChofetz Chaim, Chayav U'Pe'alav*).

It seems that the Chofetz Chaim knew the secret of our *parshah*: no matter how low one has sunk, it is never too late to resurface – and climb even higher.