

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Yosef Mordechai *ben Avrohom a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Dangerous Davening

PARSHAS VA'ESCHANAN 5777

Anyone even remotely acquainted with the *davening* (prayer) experience is familiar with the recital of Shemoneh Esrei as being from the most solemn aspects of the entire event. After the (hopefully) fervent humming of the preceding prayers, a hushed silence suddenly descends, as the assembled stand quietly, feet together, in united devotion.

Keeping One's Head About Them

One indication of the gravity Chazal accord this solemn moment is the stringent protocol to be observed while involved in this prayer. The Mishnah (*Berachos 5:1*) makes clear the extent to which one must go to avoid interruption of any sort while in the middle of its recital:

אָפּלוּ הַמֶּלֶךְ שׁוֹאֵל בְּשִׁלוּמוֹ לֹא יִשְׁיָבֵנוּ.

“Even if a king inquires about his welfare, he should not respond.”

Before delving into the parameters of this ruling, it would be edifying to cite here a poignant illustration of the situation described above. In the following narrative related by Chazal (*Berachos 32b*), one of the principals stakes out a position based on a verse from this week's *parshah*:

An incident occurred in which a certain pious individual was praying along the wayside. A nobleman came by and extended a greeting to him, but the pious man did not return the greeting. The nobleman waited for him to complete his davening. When he did finish his prayer, the nobleman said to him: “Empty one! Does your Torah not state the following...: וְנִשְׁמַרְתֶּם מְאֹד לְנַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם – ‘And you shall be extremely protective of your souls’ (*Devarim 4:15*)? When I extended a greeting to you, why did you not respond to me? If I were to sever your head with a sword, who would lay claim against me on behalf of your blood?” The pious man said to him: “Indulge me for a moment such that I may appease you.”

He continued: “If you were standing before a flesh-and-blood king, and your friend came along and extended a greeting to you – would you respond to him?” “No,” answered the nobleman. The pious man asked further: “And if you would (interrupt the king to) respond to your friend – what would be done to you?” Answered the nobleman: “They would sever my head with a sword.”

The pious man thus concluded: “... If this is how you would conduct yourself before a king of flesh and blood – who is here today and in the grave tomorrow – how much the more so should I conduct myself accordingly (refusing to interrupt when speaking) before Hashem, the Supreme King of Kings, Who exists forever and ever!” Immediately, the nobleman was appeased, and the pious man returned to his home in peace.

Certainly an intriguing account; however, it does seem, at first glance, to run afoul of the actual *halachah*. While the Mishnah had indeed stated that one should not interrupt his davening even to respond to a royal greeting, the Gemara (*ibid.*) quantifies this statement. The Mishnah was referring to a king of Yisrael, who could appreciate the solemnity of Shemoneh Esreih and not become perturbed to the point of inflicting harm. But where potential peril may arise, one may – and hence, *should* – interrupt to preserve his well-being (as per the dictum of “*V’nishmartem me’od l’nafshoseichem*”)!

All’s Well... as Long as it Ends Well

This matter is taken up by the classic commentators. The *Menoras Ha’ma’or* (*ch. 18*), after citing this narrative, concludes: “While such miracles were wrought for the pious men of earlier times, we ourselves should not rely on a miracle. As such, upon finding oneself in a situation of potential danger, he should interrupt his prayer.”

So what, exactly, was the rationale of the pious man from the story? How did he deign to act stringently at risk to his life? The Magen Avraham (*104:1, as explained by the Machatzis Hashekel*) asserts that, in fact, the pious man did not really place himself in any jeopardy. He seemed to have already been familiar with that particular nobleman and his temperament, and knew he would allow for and be receptive toward a rational explanation. The Maharsha (*Berachos, ibid.*), however, contends that the pious man did not necessarily know this particular nobleman. Nonetheless, he did not judge the situation to be one of mortal danger. Had the individual involved been of the rank of a monarch, he would surely have been more wary; given the nobleman’s lesser status, however, the pious man felt his avoidance of interruption would not constitute a grave affront to authority. (This, at least, is how he initially evaluated the situation.)

The Pele Yo’eitz, however, takes a completely different tack. Until this point, we have been working under the assumption that the pious man’s actions were sanctioned. He seems to have been vindicated by the happy resolution to the situation. But the Pele Yo’eitz disagrees with this supposition. In fact, the exact wording of the Gemara at the conclusion of the narrative is “*niftar oso chasid l’beiso*.” This is usually rendered in the manner cited above: “The pious man returned to his home.” However, as we know, the word “*niftar*” can carry another connotation, one much less benign – namely, that of passing away. The Pele Yo’eitz thus understands that this was precisely the fate of that pious man: Divine retribution was visited upon him for his disregard of the Torah’s commandment of “*V’nishmartem me’od l’nafshoseichem*.” In the end, then, he did pay for his deed with his life.

(The above is based in large part on a compilation contained in the sefer K’motzei Shalal Ray, parshas Va’eschanan.)

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