

Is it to Hashem that you do this, O vile and unwise people? (32:6)

Moshe *Rabbeinu* wonders how *Klal Yisrael* could have been so vile and unwise as to sin against Hashem. The words, *Am naval v'lo chacham*, "A vile and unwise people," is translated by *Targum Onkelos* as, *Ama d'kabila oraisa v'lo chakimu*, "A nation that received the Torah who is unwise." Thus, *Onkelos* defines *naval*, which normally means vile or abominable, as, "who accepted /received the Torah." Should it not be quite the opposite? One who rejects Torah should be considered vile, not one who receives it.

The **Kotzker Rebbe, zl**, explains that the definition is relative, with the reality of our receiving the Torah serving as an indication of our spiritual deficiency. When Avraham *Avinu* reached *Har HaMoriah* where he would carry out the *Akeidah*, Binding (and slaughter) of Yitzchak, the Torah writes, "Avraham built the Altar there and arranged the wood; he bound Yitzchak, his son, and he placed him atop the wood. Avraham stretched out his hand and he took the knife to slaughter his son" (*Bereishis* 22:9). Regarding all of the active preparations for the *Akeidah*, we do not find the Torah referring to Avraham's "hands" as actively involved. If it is self-evident that he built the Altar with his hands, arranged the wood, bound Yitzchak and placed him atop the wood with his hands, why, concerning taking the knife for the actual slaughter, does the Torah write, "Avraham stretched out his hand"? Where were his hands until that point?

The *Rebbe* explains that, although the *Avos HaKedoshim*, holy Patriarchs, did not receive the Torah, they observed every *mitzvah*, every *halachah* – meticulously. How did they know what to do and what not to do? Their organs and limbs were sanctified, so that their organs and limbs "knew" what to do on their own. Their *kedushah* was in total harmony with the Torah. Therefore, when Avraham came to carry out the *Akeidah*, his limbs did not require instruction. They acted on their own – until it came to the actual slaughter. Since this was not a *mitzvah*, because Hashem did not want Avraham to go beyond preparation for the act, it required Avraham "taking his hand" and directing it to act. The angel appeared and told Avraham, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad." (In other words: The fact that you had to stretch out your hand to act indicates that this part of the endeavor is not a *mitzvah*. Hashem never intended for you to slaughter your son.)

This, explains the *Kotzker*, is the level achieved by the *Avos*, whose entire physical form was sanctified in tune with the Torah. They did not need the Torah to guide them how to live. We require the Torah, because we are not on that level. Our bodies are not sanctified to the point that they are able to discern between *mitzvah* and *aveirah*. We need direction because we are far from spiritually adept. *Am naval*, a vile nation, requires the Torah in order to know what is right, what is wrong, what one should and should not do, and how one should act.

In his *Bad Kodesh*, **Horav Baruch Dov Povarsky, Shlita**, quotes the well-known commentary of

the *Ramban* to the *pasuk*, *Kedoshim tiheyu*, “You shall be holy” (*Vayikra* 19:2), where he maintains that the concept of holiness is not limited to the observance of any particular category of *mitzvos*; rather, it is an admonition that one’s approach to all aspects of life be governed by moderation. This is especially germane to those areas of life in which specific activities are permissible. *Ramban* writes that one who observes only the letter of the law – observing the technical requirements of the law – yet surrenders to self-indulgence in those areas which are permitted, will become a *naval b’reshus haTorah*, degenerate with the permission of the Torah. He can be a glutton and act licentiously to his spouse, because the Torah does not actually prohibit such activity. He is not acting against the Torah, but he is a *naval* – nonetheless.

According to *Ramban*, had the Torah not commanded us to be holy, one could be a *naval b’reshus haTorah*. Now that the Torah has commanded us to be holy, we no longer have “permission” to be a *naval*. Thus, if one acts without moderation, if he self-indulges to the point of degeneracy, he is a *naval* – without the permission of the Torah. In other words, now that we have received the Torah the *b’reshus (haTorah)* is gone. One who indulges is just a plain *naval*!

Personally, I think *Onkelos* is teaching us that a nation that can disregard all that Hashem gives them is definitely evil. Without Hashem, they would be nothing. Yet, we are human beings, and, as such, we have errors in judgment. Sometimes, one is so obsessed with his own sense of right and wrong that he can look moral turpitude right in the eye and see righteousness, or consider it to be an expression of individuality. We, who have received the Torah, live by a different barometer of right and wrong. Our moral compass is defined by the Torah; our sense of judgment is guided by Hashem’s Torah. When we act inappropriately or with smugness, ignoring all that we have benefitted from Hashem, we become degenerates. A Jew whose ethical/moral behavior is lacking is not simply off the *derech*; he is a *naval*, a degenerate, because he should know better. It is part of his religious DNA.