

## But he adamantly refused... how then can I have perpetrated this great evil and I have sinned against G-d. (39:8,9)

Above the word *va'yima'en*, "but he adamantly refused," are two cantillation signs/notes, a *shalshelas* followed by a *p'sik*; the *shalshelas* is a rarely used sign. Together, they underscore the word *va'yima'en*, indicating that Yosef's refusal was emphatic and unequivocal. It was a definitive "No!" which offered Potifar's wife no question about her ability to entice Yosef into committing a sin with her. He asserted that there was no room whatsoever for negotiation. It was only after he emphatically said, "No!" that he explained his reasons to her. From this *pasuk*, **Horav Shlomo Amar, Shlita**, derives the Torah's approach to dealing with the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination: no discussion; no negotiation; just plain emphatic, "No!" Once one enters into discussion with the *yetzer hora*, he has already lost. Even if he ultimately wins, he has lost.

One must realize that we do not triumph over the *yetzer hora* with logic – only with strength, and that strength is derived from an ability to overcome its wiles by refusing to give in, regardless of its blandishments. Discussion leads to compromise, and we cannot compromise with the *yetzer hora*. Compromise is a diplomatic term for failure to succeed. One triumphs over the *yetzer hora* by not giving it the time of day – as Yosef did.

The **Ohr HaChaim Hakadosh** (commentary to *Vayikra* 18:2) writes that discussion with the *yetzer hora* causes the prohibition to lose its nefarious nature in his eyes. The more he analyzes, "if, maybe, possibly, perhaps a little," the *aveirah* becomes much less of an *aveirah*, as his emotions become desensitized to the sin. One should not – for any reason – enter into negotiations with the *yetzer hora*. A sin remains a sin, regardless of what image is presented.

I am going to relate a well-known inspirational story, which is well worth reviewing due to its compelling message in buttressing the concept of non-negotiating with the *yetzer hora*. **Horav Yitzchak, zl, m'Vienna**, was one of the major *Ashkenazic Tosafists*. Counted among his many students was the **Maharam, zl, m'Rottenberg**, who was later considered to be the leading *posek*, *Halachic* decisor, in Ashkenaz/Germany. In his magnum opus, *Or Zarua*, *Hilchos Rosh Hashanah* 27b, **Rav Yitzchak** cites **Horav Ephraim, zl, m'Bonn** (who was of the *Baalei Tosfos*, and who lived two centuries prior to **Rav Yitzchak**), who writes that **Horav Amnon, zl**, of Mainz authored the *Tefillah U'Nesaneh Tokef* as the result of a terrible incident which he had experienced. At the end of the story, mention is made of the individual who received the text of *U'Nesaneh Tokef* from **Rav Amnon** in a dream. This was **Horav Klonimus ben Horav Meshullam**. Based upon the names involved, we must adduce that the story took place in 1020, about seventy years before the First Crusade. Thus, the *Or Zarua* recorded an event which had occurred two hundred years before his time.

This is neither the place nor the forum to describe Jewish life in Germany at that time. Let it suffice to say that we lived at the mercy of the barbarians who called themselves human. Guided by a

religion whose maniacal fanatics were urged on by the sadistical populace to avenge the death of their lord, one can only begin to imagine the terror which engulfed the Jewish communities at that time.

The church ruled the land with the help of kings who obsequiously deferred their land to the church, so that their sins would be pardoned. (So much for any spiritual aspect to their religion.) The kings, in turn, considered the church sacrosanct, and anyone who did not ascribe to the Catholic dogma was reviled as an enemy of the church. The kings appointed governors who were also bishops, thus serving as managers of the land and its religious leadership. While most of these people were simple folk who had been elevated to power by currying the favor of the ruling kings, some were intelligent men who sought to attain wisdom. It was this attribute which they most envied of the Jews, who were erudite and wise, cultured and refined.

The governor of Mainz sought the friendship of the city's most illustrious Jewish leader, *Rav Amnon*. He was the generation's leading Torah sage, wealthy, of illustrious lineage, an individual whose handsome countenance greatly impressed the ministers and governors with whom he came in contact. The governor of Mainz wanted a relationship with *Rav Amnon* so that he could learn from his wisdom, and because, in the back of his mind, he wanted to convert him to Christianity. This would be his greatest prize. At first he was subtle, but as time went along, he became more and more emphatic in his request that he convert. Finally, *Rav Amnon* replied, "Let me take counsel and consider the matter for three days." He did this in an attempt to repel the governor. He never for one moment considered abandoning his religion.

Once again, I must underscore that the only reason their discussion went this far was in consideration of the security and safety of the Jewish community. These people lived at the whim of their church leaders/kings. As long as the Jews eschewed their religion, they were still not secure. After all, their godhead (in their small minds) was a Jew. How could they accept him if his own people ignored him? Thus, their doctrine demanded that Jews were tolerated only until they were forcibly converted or murdered – whichever came first. *Rav Amnon* had heretofore played along with the governor, having discussions and maintaining friendship, all to protect the small Jewish community of Mainz. This time, however, the governor had shown his true colors, and they were not very friendly colors. *Rav Amnon* was in a serious predicament, confronted with a quandary that might very well cost the Jewish community their lives. If *Rav Amnon* would agree to the governor's request, he would himself become the leader, the governor of the Jews, thereby allowing them to thrive. On the other hand, if he rejected the governor – he would probably be killed – but quite possibly the Jews would survive – in their dismal state, but, at least, they would be alive.

There really was no question. A Jew cannot live as a *goy*! He might assimilate, i.e., talk, dress, think, act as they do – in all areas he would be a *goy*. Biologically a Jew, but actively a *goy*, was not a choice for our forebears. They would rather die, and they did. This is why we are alive, thriving as observant Jews, because our forebears chose death over conversion or assimilation.

*Rav Amnon* had a much deeper problem. The *Or Zarua* writes: “As soon as he parted company with the governor, he reflected upon his having voiced his uncertainty, expressing to the governor that he needed counsel to ruminate over the question of disavowing the living G-d.”

How could this be? His Judaism was his complete essence, his entire being. How could he have made such a vacillating statement? True, physical existence is important – but at what expense? Is it even possible that someone in his right mind would even for one moment consider taking counsel or consideration concerning this subject?

The *Or Zarua* continues: “*Rav Amnon* returned home – miserable. He could neither eat nor drink, subsequently becoming feverishly ill. His relatives and friends came to comfort him, but he refused to be consoled, ‘I will go down to my grave mourning because of what I said.’ He cried incessantly and became even more morose. ‘How could I have given the impression that serving Hashem was negotiable?’ he wept. On the third day, the governor sent for him. *Rav Amnon* refused to come. The governor sent a number of messengers to ask *Rav Amnon* to appear. *Rav Amnon* refused. Finally, the governor forced him to come. ‘Why did you not come on the designated day, as originally agreed?’ the governor asked *Rav Amnon*.

The governor was intimating that adhering to Judaism was a waste. He could convert and have it all: fame, wealth and power. Why was he being so obstinate?

*Rav Amnon* replied, “I will determine my own sentence. I had no intentions of coming to you, because I have no intention of converting. I misled you, giving you false hope that I, a Jew, faithful to the Almighty, would even consider reneging his faith – Heaven forbid. I am to blame for this and I will determine my punishment.

“The tongue that spoke and misled you shall be cut off!” Having this punishment carried out on his tongue would also convey a message to the Jews of Mainz: A Jew who promises someone that he will abandon his faith will ultimately disappoint. No Jew will renege his faith. It is useless forcing Jews to convert. They would sooner die than convert.

The governor now showed his true sadistical self, “No, the tongue will not be cut off, because you spoke well. You expressed a willingness to consider relinquishing your faith for Christianity. Your body which did not come to me will be tortured. We will keep chopping off limbs until you finally give in and convert.”

Twenty times the ax was raised to sever another limb. Each time they asked him if he had recanted his decision. Would he now be willing to convert? Each finger and toe was mercilessly cut off amid indescribable pain.

When the evil sadist finished his business, he placed the dismembered fingers and toes at *Rav Amnon*’s side, and he sent him home. In those days of infections, blood poisoning, swelling and abscesses, with limited hygiene and no medicine, *Rav Amnon* became mortally ill. He lay in

excruciating pain until *Rosh Hashanah* arrived, and he asked to be carried to *shul*.

During *Mussaf*, prior to returning his holy soul to its Heavenly abode, *Rav Amnon* recited his poignant prayer, *U'Nesaneh Tokef*. This prayer has become an accepted inspirational prayer during the *Yamim Noraim*, High Holy Days. We now understand the deeper meaning of the prayer. A Jew does not negotiate with the *yetzer hora*. He brooks no compromise concerning his faith in Hashem. He would rather give up his life than swerve one iota in his commitment to Hashem. It is because of this sense of fidelity to Hashem that we are all still here today-vibrant, committed and strong.