

## **When the Aron would travel. (10:35)**

The well-known pesukim, which are recited when the Torah is removed from the Aron Kodesh, are placed in our parsha and are separated from the rest of the parsha by two inverted nuns. Chazal (Shabbos 115b) teach, “Hashem placed a symbol before and following these pesukim in order to underscore that this is not the rightful place for these pesukim to be recorded in the Torah.” The more appropriate place is in Parashas Bamidbar where the Torah records the nation’s masaos, journeys. Why were they placed here? Chazal explain that the Torah seeks to differentiate the first puranios, punishments, from the next ones. Two punishments, one following the other, is not a good sign. Thus, the Torah separates them.

What were the two punishments? Chazal consider the first one to be, va’yisu mei’har Hashem, “They (the nation) traveled from the Mountain of G-d” (10:32). They traveled quickly, fearing that if they tarried much longer at Har Sinai, Hashem might give them more Torah laws. So they “ran” away, like a tinok ha’boreach mibais hasefer, “like a child running away from school.” (Out the door when the bell rings.)

The second punishment was the misonem, vayehi ha’am k’misonem, “The nation was moaning.” The Ramban explains that when the Bnei Yisrael left Har Sinai, they were sent deeper into the wilderness. Had they acted appropriately, they would have had faith in Hashem and followed his call to move with joy and alacrity. Instead, they complained, kvetched and moaned. They worried about surviving in the wilderness. They expressed their fear and lack of faith via their moaning. Hashem became angry and punished them with a fire that consumed some of the complainers.

When we think about the punishments, we wonder what punishment the nation received for “running” away from Har Sinai? Certainly, it was not of a caliber comparable to that suffered by the misonem. The Chasam Sofer explains that leaving the Torah has immediate consequences. Leaving the Torah is in and of itself a punishment. Other sins catalyze punishment in the following manner: the sin is evaluated, and a suitable punishment commensurate with the sin is decreed. Bitul – leaving, wasting time- from Torah study effects punishment immediately. This may be compared to two buckets that hang over a well (or a see-saw). When one comes up - the other goes down. The “reaction” is immediate. Thus, Chazal teach (Pirkei Avos 3:6) that when one carries (upon himself) the yoke of Torah, the yoke of (subservience to) a king, the yoke of working for parnassah, earning a livelihood, are removed from him. On the other hand, whoever rejects and throws off the yoke of Heaven from himself is compelled to carry upon himself the yoke of the secular monarch (who will subjugate him) and the yoke of parnassah. In other words, leaving Torah causes an immediate, automatic reaction.

Furthermore, an individual who is aligned and suffused with Torah approaches life’s emotional and physical challenges – the travail, the uncertainty, the constant issues that comprise contemporary societal life – in a calm, reassured manner. His faith and trust in Hashem, coupled with the support

that comes with Torah study, transform his outlook, and, hence, his life.

The concept of ol Torah, the yoke of Torah, requires elucidation. Torah study is life; it is love. What is the meaning of yoke, a term which connotes being compelled, restricted in a negative manner, rather than something one does out of deep and abiding love? While all of this may be true, one must realize that human nature tends to gravitate to that which appears sweet and pleasurable – while simultaneously disregarding the bitter consequences of falling prey to the allure of sweet, temporary pleasure. In order to have the tools for counteracting the wiles of the yetzer hora, evil inclination, the Jew must live a life of imperatives that restrain him from overindulging and gratifying his immediate desires. The yoke of Torah and mitzvos compels us to live a life of restraint – even if we do not understand why. Temptation is overwhelming; the yetzer hora is wily; we are only human. Our protection is the yoke of Torah. Those who feel that restraint cramps their style have sadly succumbed to the allure of temporary gratification. By the time they realize that the nature of their satisfaction is ephemeral, it will be too late.

The other day, I had occasion to peruse some of the earliest Peninim in the growing series. I came across two vignettes concerning legendary Roshei Yeshivah who impacted thousands of students. Both Roshei Yeshivah were Lithuanian/Polish born and bred, having studied in the European yeshivos under rebbeim who literally breathed Torah. The following vignettes represent their inextricable bond with the Torah.

Horav Simcha Wasserman, zl, was a trailblazer on the American chinuch, Jewish education, scene. His efforts in the field of Jewish outreach laid the foundation upon which others built their spiritual edifices. He had a loving, caring personality, which was his greatest asset. In his quiet, self-effacing, warm and sensitive manner, he was able to bring thousands to embrace the Torah way. He taught that learning Torah was in and of itself the most powerful kiruv, outreach, tool. We should not waste time arguing about Yiddishkeit, since arguing only solidifies the position of the subject of our outreach. Arguing about Yiddishkeit only alienates. It does nothing constructive to communicate to the individual that the life he has been leading is of no value and going nowhere. Such words will only serve to alienate him – forever.

The first step towards transforming the spiritual persona of a prospective “client” is to take out a sefer, Torah book, and begin to learn. “Learn with them!” Rav Simcha would declare. “Learn with them and their eyes will open up as they see what you see.” Once they perceive it the way that we see it, explaining will not be necessary. The yetzer hora does not want to lose this client. The Torah is tavlin, the antidote, against the wiles of the yetzer hora, and, until one studies Torah, he still imbibes the poison. Without the antidote, he will become the yetzer hora’s property until he becomes altogether spiritually extinct. If one works with a prospective baal teshuvah, but does not learn Torah with him, his frumkeit, religious observance, will not endure.

When Rav Simcha wanted to encourage Shabbos observance, he taught the laws of Shabbos. Talking and singing are nice, but without Torah study, the poison has yet to be expunged. It is still

there – waiting for a time when it can flare up and completely destroy the person.

Rav Simcha taught Shabbos – and people began observing Shabbos on their own. When queried how his students became Shabbos observant when he had, in fact, not uttered a word about Shabbos, he replied, “The Torah taught them; the Torah transformed them.”

A young, soon-to-become father asked Rav Simcha, “Rabbi, I am about to become a father. I need some advice.” Rav Simcha told him, “The first thing is to see that your child has a father.” “Does that mean I must close my store on Shabbos?” Rav Simcha told the man, “Start learning Torah.” By learning Torah, he would experience its sweetness and fall under its transformative spell. We cannot force religious observance on the unaffiliated. We can only open up their eyes and, once they see, they will realize what it is they are missing – and return: no forcing of the issue; no imperatives; no arguing – just Torah study, like a blood transfusion that energizes and rejuvenates.

The man started learning Torah, and shortly thereafter, he became an observant Jew, who today enjoys Yiddishe nachas, true Torah satisfaction and pleasure, from his children and grandchildren who are all bnei Torah.

My second vignette concerns the legendary Rosh Yeshivah Horav Mendel Kaplan, zl. Both in Chicago, and later in Philadelphia, he taught a generation of yeshivah students the true meaning of Torah study. It was not a panacea – it was very life itself. He once had occasion to spend the summer at a camp which catered primarily to boys from non-observant backgrounds. The rebbeim and counselors did yeomans’ jobs in their attempts to reach out and inspire these youngsters. Nonetheless, Rav Mendel disagreed with their educational approach. He questioned the need to constantly provide fun-filled activities for the campers. Why not something constructive, such as picking fruit?

One day, as the camp was about to take the boys to a county fair, the Rosh Yeshivah questioned the necessity of the trip. The camp director, who was himself a ben Torah and thoroughly understood where Rav Mendel was going with his question, responded, “This is the only way to bring these children to Torah observance. If we do not give them this trip, we will lose them.”

Rav Mendel countered, “So, you will lose them.” The camp director did not immediately understand the profundity of Rav Mendel’s response. He later realized that the camp’s mission statement and activities were on a collision course. On the one hand, the camp’s message was that Torah study and mitzvah observance are supreme, but, through its activities, it was undermining its own primary message. Instead, they were indicating that fun and pleasure superseded Torah study. At this rate, they might succeed in producing observant Jews, but such Jews that only pay lip service to Torah and mitzvos, while enthusiastically embracing any experience that promotes selfgratification. Our choicest offering, our time, must be dedicated to Hashem – not to ourselves.