

The son of a Yisraeli woman went out and he was the son of an Egyptian man ...they contended in the camp... and he pronounced the Name ... and he blasphemed. (24:10,11)

It was a truly tragic ending to a sinful relationship that had begun years earlier in Egypt. Shlomis bas Divri was a woman of ill repute, whose immoral behavior led to a relationship with an Egyptian that produced a son who later blasphemed the Name of Hashem. It might take time, but a relationship that is prohibited, that is not meant to be, will not bear good fruit unless the poison is expunged. Love conquers all – but Torah. Having said this, we quote *Rashi*, who explains, *Mei heicha yatza*, “From where did he (the blasphemer) go out?” Apparently, he came to pitch his tent in the camp of the tribe of Dan (his mother was from that tribe). The members of the tribe asked him what he was doing there; i.e. what was his connection to the tribe of Dan? He replied that he was one of the sons of Dan [he belonged]. They said that a tribal son was defined by his paternal lineage, not maternal. His father was not a Jew, thus excluding him from pitching his tent among them. He took his case to Moshe *Rabbeinu*, who found his claim wanting. As a result of losing the case, he “lost it” and blasphemed.

The blasphemer was no ordinary person. He had witnessed the miracles in Egypt, and stood at *Har Sinai* amid the *kolos*, loud sounds, *kolos u’berakim*, loud sounds and lightning, that accompanied the giving of the Torah. He had heard Hashem’s voice. Yet, in the space of a moment, this individual lost it and descended from his spiritual perch to the nadir of depravity, during which time he blasphemed the Name. How does such a tragic downfall occur in such a short interval of time? *Horav Shimshon Pincus*, *zl*, explains that it all began when, *Va’yeitzei*, “He went out” from Moshe’s *bais din*, court, feeling that he had been deprived of justice, that he had been wronged. He felt justified in making his claim for a place among the tribe of Dan. Moshe told him, “Sorry, you are not a member of the tribe. Your mother’s lineage does not count.” That is *halachah*. One’s disagreement does not alter the *halachah*. *Halachah* is immutable. It does not change just because a person finds it difficult to accept. The moment that the judge (Moshe *Rabbeinu*) decided against him, the *megadeif*, blasphemer, went out of his mind and spiritually threw his life away. He became angry, and he blasphemed the Name of Hashem!

It happens all the time. A person may be driving for hours; everything is going smoothly; the weather is perfect and traffic is moving; he is listening to an inspiring CD; all is well, until someone cuts him off, and he loses it. In that ten-second interval, spurred on by anger, he makes a decision to speed up and chase the offender, to pay him back for destroying his moment of calm. That is when he loses control and spins out...Ten seconds of anger can destroy a lifetime of achievement.

As this is true in the physical world, it applies equally to *ruchnius*, spirituality. One can be a devout, G-d-fearing, fully-observant Jew – *davening*, learning, *tzedakah*, *Daf Yomi* – all of the good and holy endeavors until one day, one moment, during which he does not come out on top, when the fellow with whom he does not see eye-to-eye emerges triumphant. He loses it and voices his

opinion in the most degrading, demeaning, profane manner. Gone! All his spiritual achievement just went out the window. That is what anger will do to a person.

V'haseir Satan milfaneinu u'meiachareinu "And remove *Satan* from before us and from behind us." Before us – illicit desire; after us – anger. There you have it. We must pray to be spared from the effects of anger. We cannot do it alone. We require Heavenly assistance. For that, we must pray.

In the *sefer*, "*Maane Rach*," an inspiring compendium on the evils of anger and ways to protect oneself from it, the distinguished author, *Horav Moshe Levinson, zl* (grandfather of *Horav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, zl*), lists in detail all the Rabbinic statements that pertain to anger. He also provides advice and strategies on how to circumvent falling into the clutches of anger. Of the twelve suggestions/strategies that he gives, I would like to focus on the last two.

Middah k'neged middah, measure for measure, plays a pivotal role in how Hashem responds to our actions – both good and bad. In other words, what goes around comes around. The way we act toward others sets the barometer on how Hashem will deal with us. When we are demanding and nit-pick everything that our fellow does concerning us, so will Hashem act towards us. (He will not nit-pick, but our behavior and demanding attitude short-circuit his usual magnanimity.) People mess up; they make mistakes; they forget to pay compliments, act decently and graciously. When we forgive, we can hope that we, too, will be forgiven. When we retaliate, execrate and demand vengeance, we can expect the same when we befool.

Second, everything that happens to us is Heavenly-manipulated for a good reason. (I say "good" because everything that comes from Hashem – even if we do not see or understand it is good.) If what just happened causes us to become angry, we must realize that Hashem wanted it to happen. He did not want us to become angry, but to accept and live with what happened. He wanted us to exert self-control, but, when we did not, we added "failed" to the test.

Horav Yisrael Salanter, zl, the father of the *Mussar*, ethical/character refinement, movement, was an individual of exemplary character and extraordinary self-control. This was especially true with regard to the *middah*, character trait, of *kaas*, anger. He was wont to say, "Almost all infractions that occur between man and his fellow man are the result of some form of anger." (A person who is overly demanding and refuses to acquiesce, to ameliorate an indignity that occurred.) *Rav* Yisrael was by nature an exacting person with a fiery personality, who, through self-control, was able to expunge from within himself any taint of dissatisfaction with any grievance against him. He overlooked and smoothed over any indignity that came his way. If someone acted callously and offended him, he let it slide and would go out of his way to perform a favor for the one who had acted rudely to him. Nonetheless, at times he acted strongly, never allowing for the honor of Torah or its disseminators to be impugned. Even when he manifested anger, it was merely in order to prove a point. He would refer to this as "facial" anger, not "emotional" anger. In other words, it was all for show.

One time, however, *Rav Yisrael* “became” angry. In 1859, the cholera plague broke out with a vengeance, devastating Vilna and its surrounding towns. It claimed the lives of many of our brothers and sisters, not discriminating against age or economic background. *Rav Yisrael* organized healthcare and maintenance programs that virtually saved thousands of lives. He himself established a hospital with 1500 beds to serve the needs of the ill. He influenced the physicians to settle for a fee of “zero” for their services. He enlisted the assistance of his students, who traveled from town to town at great risk to their own lives, to ferret out any suspected cases of cholera in order to bring the patient to Vilna to the hospital. These young men, under the specific direction and encouragement of *Rav Yisrael*, transformed *Shabbos* into *chol*, weekday, as stated in *Shulchan Aruch*. (*Orach Chaim* 328 – *Pikuach nefesh docheh Shabbos*. The *Shabbos* prohibitions are set aside in deference to human life.)

One Friday night, the grandson of one of Vilna’s most distinguished families took ill. His fever spiked, and his future appeared be ominous at best. He was a very sick child. *Rav Yisrael*’s students worked through the night, chopping wood for fire to heat up water, bringing medicine and anything else that would save the child. Hashem listened to the accompanying prayers, and their efforts proved successful, to the point that the child pulled through.

A few days passed, and the grandfather visited *Rav Yisrael*’s *Kollel* to pay his gratitude to the *Kollel* fellows who had labored tirelessly and with utmost devotion to save his grandson. All would have been well had he said, “thank you,” and left. Sadly, he felt he must say his piece. He had a problem with the *chillul Shabbos*, blatant desecration of *Shabbos*, that the *Kollel* members had done. He felt that it was too much. [The complaints always seem to come after the fact.] *Rav Yisrael* was concerned lest his students weaken their commitment to saving lives. He acted out of character and declared, “You are going to teach me what is permitted [concerning *Shabbos*] and what is prohibited? I arranged for these special young men to leave their homes and dedicate themselves to saving lives. I guaranteed their families that the contagious nature of this plague would not affect them. [He obviously prayed for their continued health.] Hashem listened to me, and we were able to save thousands without one of our students becoming ill. Can you make such a claim?”

When the grandfather heard this, he realized that he had hurt the feelings of the *gadol ha’dor*, preeminent leader of the generation. He immediately sat down on the floor (which is what one who is excommunicated does, much like a mourner) and begged *Rav Yisrael*’s forgiveness for his insolence. *Rav Yisrael*, of course, forgave the man, but, for the rest of *Rav Yisrael*’s life, he was pained over the fact that once in his life he was compelled to employ anger.