

Retaining our Sensitivity

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Based on a talk given by

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A story is told of two students who wanted to join the yeshivah of the Chasam Sofer in Pressburg, Slovakia for the winter semester. Walking together through the courtyard, on their way to take their entry exam, they passed a pile of schach lying on the ground. The Chasam Sofer watched the first bochur walk around the pile, making sure not to step on any leaves, and the second bochur disregard the schach, stepping directly on it. Seeing this, the Chasam Sofer accepted the first bochur and turned down the second, even though he was more scholarly. This bochur continued on to a different yeshivah where eventually his negative nature came to the fore. Although the bochur had not done anything contrary to Shulchan Aruch, his action revealed a lack of sensitivity towards kedushah, which later became apparent.

In truth, every Yid has an innate, natural sensitivity, as Chazal define the inborn character traits of every Yid, "merciful, bashful and kind." Throughout the ages, Yidden were known to be refined and aidel, having an intrinsic aversion to coarseness and vulgarity.

Being attuned to this sensitivity is important in all areas of the service of Hashem. It ensures that one remains true to Torah's objective and agenda, and does not treat Torah as just a set of restrictions. A person may follow all the halachos outlined in Shulchan Aruch, yet still miss their underlying meaning. They are following the "letter of the law," yet ignoring the spirit, which is the true intent of the law.

Kedusha of Mitzvos

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos (3:11) lists a number of behaviors which cause one to forfeit his chelek in Olom Haba, such as someone who dishonors Yomim Tovim or embarrasses a person in public. The meforshim explain that these deeds undermine the very essence of the kedushah of Torah, Yidden and Yiddishkeit, even in those scenarios when they do not contradict a specific halocho in Shulchon Aruch.

Those who eat or dress in a weekday fashion on Chol Hamoed may not have committed an "aveirah," yet they have demeaned the kedushah of the yomim tovim and thus have weakened the basis of all mitzvos. Such conduct expresses an under-appreciation and lack of sensitivity towards mitzvos.

Prior to doing something special and meaningful, one prepares appropriately, and exhibits care and concentration during the actual fulfillment. Then the experience is felt in its true measure. So too, when a mitzvah is done with advance preparation and proper involvement, the mitzvah shines and the kedushah is truly felt.

There are many details we add on to mitzvos to enhance and beautify them. We make sure to acquire a mehudar'dike mezuzah, a magnificent leichter for Shabbos and an esrog that shines with splendor. This hiddur mitzvah shows our love to Hashem and expresses our feelings of joy and gratitude that we are Yidden.

The way we speak also affects the way we feel.

Speaking of Torah and mitzvos with reverence reminds us of the kedushah involved. We do not allow seudas Shabbos to become another “lunch,” or a sefer, another “book.”

Tznius – The spirit of a Yid

This applies, all the more so, when dealing with the subject of tznius. Tznius is not a set of halachos like hilchos Shabbos, netilas yodayim and brochos. Rather, it is way of life comprised of a bashfulness and sensitivity to eidelkeit and holiness.

There are some things which are so degrading that, no matter the circumstance, we would never do them. Even a person who would do anything for money would never agree to go undressed in the street. A sense of shame still exists; it just needs to be honed and broadened.

For one to truly be tzanua, it is vital to develop this sense of right and wrong. This innate sensitivity instinctively guides one through the maze of contemporary society’s lifestyles. Without an underlying appreciation towards modesty, it will be necessary to ask whether each piece of clothing is kosher or not. Therefore, developing this sensitivity is a necessary prerequisite to being tznius’dik. Once a person has this sensitivity, they themselves can discern between what is eidel and tznius’dik and what is not.

For example, one may know that Shulchan Aruch specifically forbids wearing a red garment, yet fail to apply this to other flamboyant colors that are eye-catching. Someone who is sensitive to what tznius is all about will not have this misunderstanding.

For several reasons, it would be impossible for hilchos tznius to address every possible scenario. First of all, in order to record every specific detail, an entire Shulchan Aruch, with numerous volumes, would have to be compiled. Additionally, the halachos would have to be updated daily, for

styles constantly change and new details would need to be included. Furthermore, a rov cannot always know whether a garment is tzniusdik, for it depends on how it is worn and the individual fit etc.

Most women have a sensitivity on one level or another, which holds them back from certain behaviors. All we need is to reclaim the added dimension which differentiates between tznius’dik and un-tznius’dik conduct according to Torah.

Keeping up Our Standards

The Gemara says, “One who sees a sotah in her ruination should abstain from drinking wine,” since wine was what brought about the sotah’s committing of such a grievous aveirah. Wine causes one to loosen one’s standards of modesty and refinement. Therefore, when someone witnesses the eventual results of wine, one should refrain from drinking it. This idea extends to all situations where one sees a deficiency or decline in a specific area; it is necessary to carefully guard oneself and go to the opposite extreme.

The word “sotah” means “veering away,” even only slightly, from tznius’dik behavior. The ultimate aveirah that the sotah committed began with something small and insignificant. Therefore, it is necessary from the outset to set extra boundaries for oneself and family so that they do not eventually indulge in serious transgressions. Strengthening even minor details of tznius’dike behavior ultimately frees a person from falling prey to more serious transgressions.

Nowadays, this safeguard is especially relevant. The Yidden in Mitzrayim, surrounded by immodest behavior, were exceedingly careful to retain their way of dress and manner of speech. Similarly, nowadays, when we are more exposed to goyishe ways of life, we must add in our protection. A Yid must maintain the ways of his ancestors,

thereby ensuring generations of ehrliche Yidden in the future.

Protecting ourselves on Shlichus

This principle, that one must go to the opposite extreme when there is a lack in a specific area, especially applies to those on Shlichus. It often happens in a Chabad House that due to circumstances, it is necessary to relax certain standards, although for ourselves, as chassidim, we would never consider behaving in that manner. Obviously, we are not referring to halachic matters, but rather to manners of conduct that are expected of a chossid. Furthermore, there are halachos that have differing opinions, and for ourselves we maintain the stricter view, yet in a Chabad House we rely, with the guidance of a Rov, on a more lenient opinion. When on Shlichus and interacting with non-frum people, this is not only permissible but it is the rotzon Hashem. As Dovid Hamelech says in Tehillim, *“Eis la’asos la’Hashem.”*

Chazal say, *“Ovar veshonah na’aseh lo k’heter.”* (Once a person becomes accustomed to a certain transgression, it becomes permissible to him.) It is possible that after constant exposure to a lower standard, one will become comfortable and not be bothered by such behaviors and such an environment. Therefore, it is imperative to take caution and ensure that, in our personal lives, chassidishe standards do not lose their meaning and become insignificant, even though they are constantly being threatened. This is accomplished both by personally keeping to higher standards, and by instituting them in the Chabad House whenever the circumstance allow.

In our own lives, we must not neglect the chassidishe code of conduct, constantly reminding ourselves of who we are. Our children will then succeed in differentiating between the exception and the rule, and they will understand that the leniencies are b’dieved, only a result of unique

circumstances. This is achieved when the highest standard of yiras shomayim and chassidishkeit are upheld, except in conditions of necessity.

To illustrate: on Shlichus, when giving a shiur, it is often necessary to seat men and women together, without a mechitzah. Otherwise, many people might not show up. In such a case, it is permissible to hold the shiur without a mechitzah (see *Shaarei Halachah Uminhag*, vol. 3, p. 243). However, when giving a shiur to balei batim who are already mekurovim, one must carefully assess whether it is possible to erect a mechitzah without affecting the attendance. Just because a day previously, a shiur was given without a mechitzah, it does not mean that today it should be left out as well.

When one is conscientious of such matters, these leniencies won’t be taken for granted, not by the Shliach himself nor by his family. When a Shliach is mindful to keep to the chassidishe way of doing things whenever possible, he will succeed in retaining the correct balance, both for himself and for his family.

Someone shared with me the following: In an out of town community, a bus was arranged to transport community members to a Sheva Brachos held in another location. Two bochurim, children of Shluchim, unobtrusively excused themselves from joining the bus ride, and found other means of transportation. Despite their attempt to remain inconspicuous, someone noticed and later asked them the reason for their declining to join the bus ride. At first they tried to get out of responding, but when the questioner persisted, they explained that there were many girls on the bus, and they did not deem it appropriate to travel with them. Such behavior was the result of a proper chinuch. Although they had grown up in a Shlichus environment, where at times it was necessary to be lenient, their personal standards had not been affected at all.

Focusing on the easier things

Everyone has nisyonos, situations where we find it especially difficult to live up to our potential. Indeed, the Torah was given to fallible human beings, not to perfect malochim, and Hashem doesn't have unrealistic expectations from us. However, He does expect us to search for ways to overcome our nisyonos. It is taught in seforim that one of the methods to go about this is to strengthen the areas where one doesn't have a strong nisayon.

The Gemora describes the yetzer hara as a "master of his trade"; he ingeniously convinces a person to be lax even in areas where he has no nisayon. The yetzer hara persuades the person that Yidishkeit is "keep all or keep nothing."

A person may say to himself, "I know that at this point I am incapable of totally removing the internet from my home. Why, then, should I bother limiting myself in the sites I visit, or restrict the amount of time I spend on the internet?" The truth is that there is infinite value in every bit of self control a person exhibits. The fact that a person tells himself and his family that "not everything goes," is already a good beginning. It stresses that although I may not be perfect, I still have standards.

Furthermore, when faced with a nisayon, a person should not discard everything related to that nisayon. When Yidden first came to America, it was extremely difficult to find a job that allowed them to be shomer Shabbos. Unfortunately, many succumbed to the temptation and began working on Shabbos. Davening and making Kiddush then appeared to be a hypocritical act, for it seemed contradictory to acknowledge Shabbos and then desecrate it. But the truth is, it is not a contradiction. Failing one nisayon should not be a deterrent to fulfilling other matters where one has nonisayon. Thus, the specialness of Shabbos would not have been forgotten, and once the temptation to work on Shabbos would be

overcome, there would still be a Shabbos to keep. Additionally, the children, who may not have the same challenges as their parents, will recognize Shabbos and its importance, and they will keep it in its entirety.

The same can be applied to all areas of avodas Hashem. There is infinite value in every minute aspect of Yidishkeit. When the Rebbe instituted mitvza tefillin, many questioned the purpose of doing a single mitzvah with someone you may never meet again. The reality is that every time a Yid fulfills a mitzvah, he is serving as a conduit to reveal Hashem's will in this world. Just as Hashem's will is eternal, so is the mitzvah eternal.

In addition, Chazal tell us that one mitzvah leads to another. This can be further understood through the comparison of mitzvos to the limbs of the body. Just as a sick limb can be healed through strengthening the general health of the body, so, too, we can get rid of anisayon by strengthening ourselves in those areas in which we have no nisayon.

For example: someone has strong urge to know what's going on in the world, and feels ignorant when he doesn't know what some person said about another person in Africa. So he brings newspapers, magazines or internet into his home. This does not mean that he must now read everything the magazines or internet have to offer, and excuse himself, "Now that I'm already reading, I might as well expose myself to more..." Once he's heard the news, he should turn it off. As such, he saves himself from a few aveiros and fortifies his commitment in avodas Hashem (aiding him to rid himself entirely from this nisayon). Furthermore, this will let his children know that a higher standard exists, to which they can aim.

May we merit the coming of Moshiach, when we will no longer be concerned with eradication of evil. Rather, we will be totally immersed in the knowledge of Hashem, speedily in our days.