

Ki Sisa

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It is often called a necessary evil. When is evil ever necessary, you may ask. But the answer is, until *Moshiach* comes. We're here to use free will, and that is what necessitates the existence of evil.

But that seems like a no-brainer. Choose evil over good? That's crazy. Yes, it is, which is why the *gemora* says that a person has to be insane to sin (*Sotah* 3a). If so, then who is the Torah later telling to choose life? It's not like you can have a logical discussion with mentally unwell people.

The answer of course is that the Torah is talking to people who are mentally well, but intellectually out of touch. They are not trying to do evil per se and even think that they're doing okay by God. They're wrong, but since no one or nothing is pushing them to see through their rationalizations and admit the truth, they don't.

Because they don't, they do not realize how far gone they have become. When I traveled a lot I used to see all kinds of people in the airports. Most of the time, nothing and no one really stood out, but there was always someone who would catch my attention in amazement and make me ask myself, "Doesn't this person see how they look to others?"

On speaking trips, I also met a lot of people. At first, everyone seemed similar, but after a conversation or two, it would begin to become clear how differently people think from one another. It would also become clear how my idea of weird could be someone else's normal, and as I smiled and politely listened I would think to myself, "Are you kidding me?"

Of course, others could and would say that about me. Everyone has their own set of rationalizations that they allow to influence their way of thinking. We're all fighting the same battle, just on different levels. It's only a question of who is winning and who is losing, and how badly.

So when the Torah later admonishes, “Choose life that you may live” (*Devarim* 30:19), it is talking to all of us who rationalize to make the truth what is most convenient for us, not necessarily what it is. It’s trying to inspire us to wake ourselves up before Divine Providence and history are forced to, as they have so many disruptive times in the past.

Ultimately, it is about not becoming part of the *Erev Rav*—Mixed Multitude. They’re first mentioned back in *Parashas Bo* on the way out of Egypt, but they rise to prominence in this week’s *parsha* with the episode of the golden calf. It is a warning to all generations to come. It is no coincidence, as the *GR”A* pointed out, that *Erev Rav* equals *da’as*—knowledge—in *gematria*.

Shabbos Day

DA’AS USUALLY HAS a positive connotation: “If you want it as you do silver, and search after it like buried treasures, then you will understand fear of God, [and] *Da’as Elokim* you will find (*Mishlei* 2:4). But we need only to go back to the Garden of Eden to recall that the *Aitz HaDa’as* was an *Aitz HaDa’as Tov V’RA*, a tree of knowledge of good AND evil.

We need only to look at the world to see just how true a reality that it is. Thanks to technology, the world has never been filled with more *da’as*. But thanks to all that *da’as*, the world has also probably not ever been more evil, or able to act on it. The hatred of Jews of the Chmielnicki Massacres in 1648-49 was on par with the Nazis’s hatred of Jews. They just lacked the technology to act it out.

The truth is, knowledge itself is neutral. What makes it good or bad is how the person is using it, either for good or for bad. The same technology that surgeons use to perform life-saving operations can be used, in the wrong hands, to hurt innocent people. Even Torah knowledge has at times been used against the Jewish people.

The *Erev Rav* does this all the time. They’re manipulative. They have a way of taking knowledge and subtly twisting it to ensnare less aware minds in their falsehoods and selfish ambitions. They’re psychological terrorists who prey on the intellectually weak and undermine the intellectually strong. They have a way of making deceit look like the truth.

The scary thing is that when the *Zohar*, and then later the *GR”A*, describe the *Erev Rav* and how they act, it is not so shocking. . . which is shocking. It means that we’ve become so accustomed to such levels of behavior that we tend to minimize their destructive ability. We’ve come to accept such miscreant activities as unwanted, perhaps, but also as unavoidable.

It's like saying, "Well, we need politicians, but politicians tend to be corrupt. Therefore, we must need some corruption."

But there is a greater danger than just being at the mercy of *Erev Rav* leaders, as the *Zohar* and *GR"A* foretold would be the case in later generations. It is how the evil of the *Erev Rav* spreads to others who, at one time, would have rejected the *Erev Rav* out of hand. As the expression goes, "The only thing necessary for evil to triumph in the world is that good men do nothing."

And when that happens, the *GR"A* warned, a person de facto becomes one of the *Erev Rav*, and it would have been better if they had not been born at all.

Seudas Shlishis

THIS IS WHY the entire nation was held responsible for the sins of a few thousand people. The golden calf involved very few Jews in the end, just the *Erev Rav* and a bunch of Jewish "stragglers." And the rest of the nation? Sitting at home and nervously shaking in their tents while doing nothing to stop the evil. Instead, they just worried about what would happen once Moshe *Rabbeinu* returned to deal with it. They were "good men" doing nothing in the face of evil.

It's the idea of risk that traps us, what putting ourselves out there might cost us. It could be embarrassing or worse, it could cost us our jobs or some kind of benefit. People who stand up for truth have to be ready for attacks against them, their families, and whomever the enemies of truth can access to try and intimidate their opposers.

It's the world we live in today and will be until *Moshiach* comes and gets rid of the *yetzer hara*. As long as the *yetzer hara* is allowed to wander around, there will be people willing to take advantage of any system they can to get ahead and stay ahead. They have agendas and often devious means, to further those agendas while making it look as if they are honest and reliable.

It's not that there are not a lot of good people left in the world. I believe that they still make up the vast majority of the world's population today. But they are not the aggressive ones, and certainly not the noisy ones. They are content to work hard for what they want, which is rarely excessive.

But history shows that being only a good person is rarely enough for this world. We need to be more.

Melave Malkah

THERE ARE THREE (Hebrew) words that have rung out through history. Well, at least they should have. They are, “*Mi l’Hashem Elai—Whoever is for God [come] to me.*” It was Moshe *Rabbeinu’s* rallying cry to those still loyal to God in the camp below. The party was over—literally—now that Moshe had returned to the camp and caught the perpetrators worshipping the golden calf. It was time to clean up the mess and restore order once again.

Easier said than done. Killing off the guilty was only the first step. Then Moshe had to return up the mountain for another 40 days, to beg God to forgive the rest of the nation for allowing the incident to occur. Then he had to come back down and carve out two new tablets for God to write on to reboot Torah history. It was a long and drawn-out process that left a lot of people worrying for months about their survival.

And all because “good” people didn’t step up when the situation required it. They let their fears hold them back from going out on a limb for God when they had the chance to. As the *Chofetz Chaim* told a young Rabbi Shimon Schwab thousands of years later, “Next time the call goes out, make sure you answer it!”

The problem is that the call is not always a recognizable and reliable voice. Many times, the voice does not come from outside the person, but from within them. It is their sense of right and wrong that nudges them and complains, “Shouldn’t we be doing something about this travesty of justice?”

Of course, if a person does not have such a clear picture of right and wrong, they won’t even care that much about situations that others can’t overlook. They will remain oblivious to problems until they become so big that no one can ignore them. Too late, they will later complain and wonder what they could have done before the problem had gotten out of hand.

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Good *Shabbos*,
Pinchas Winston