

# Acharei

Singer-Jordan Edition

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The power of a moment. One second, life can be going in one direction, and the next, completely another direction. It can start all-time bad and turn into all-time good, and vice versa.

There is always some kind of build-up to the turning point moment that we might or might not have seen. But there is always one moment in particular past which there is no turning back, the infamous and often tragic “Point of No Return.” It’s like throwing a rock into what appeared to be an open and safe space, only to helplessly watch some car’s windshield shatter as a car began to drive through it at exactly the wrong moment.

The *Gemora*, at least in one place, emphasizes the importance of respecting the moment: If a person pushes off the moment, the moment will push them off. If they allow themselves to be pushed off by the moment, the moment will be pushed off for them (*Brochos* 64a).

In other words, if a person impatiently tries to achieve a result before its time, it usually backfires. But if they allow the moment and opportunity to naturally unfold, then they might even achieve more than they bargained for. You may *want* to call again to find out if you got the job while sensing that it is one call too many and end up losing it because you seem too impatient. Or, you may hold yourself back only to receive a call of approval even earlier than anticipated.

Some might call it tempting fate. The truth is, you can’t. A person’s *mazel* is a person’s *mazel* (*Shabbos* 156a). And even though the *Gemora* goes on to say that a Jew can alter their *mazel* through their actions, *Kabbalah* explains that we cannot completely do that. The best we can do is mitigate our *mazel*, temper it so that it is not as bad as it was meant to be, or a little better.

Then who needs *Yom Kippur*? Are we only apologizing for not mitigating our *mazel*, which might have led us to sin in the first place? And if a gentile can’t mitigate their *mazel* at all, a right that comes from living according to the Torah, then why are they

ever responsible for the evil they do?

Because even though this is a world of action, action is not the purpose of the world. Will is. As the *Gemora* says, “All is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven” (*Brochos* 33b), another way of saying: successful actions are *beyond* your control, but the *will* to accomplish them is not. A person may be destined to accomplish an act or to fail at it, but it is only considered a failure to God if the person fails to *will* to succeed.

As *Chazal* say, “According to the pain is the reward” (*Pirkei Avos* 5:23). And by pain, they don’t mean unnecessarily self-inflicted pain. They mean the kind of pain that comes from willing to do something meaningful against the wish of the body, what we call *Mesiras Nefesh*, or self-sacrifice.

That is what we do *viduy* for on *Yom Kippur*, the lack of *mesiras Nefesh* we could have done to avoid sin, but didn’t. This is what the *Gemora* alludes to here:

In the future, The Holy One, Blessed is He, will bring the *yetzer bara* and slaughter it before the righteous and the wicked. It will appear like a towering hill to the righteous but like a thread of hair to the wicked. Both will cry. The righteous will cry and say, “How were we able to overcome such a towering hill?!” The evil will cry and say, “How is it that we were unable to conquer this hair thread?!” (*Succah* 52a)

But which was it, a towering hill or a thread of hair? The answer is, both. For the righteous, it was a towering hill but it became like a hair once they made an initial effort to conquer it. As it says, “If a person comes to purify themselves, Heaven helps them” (*Yoma* 38b).

But for the evil, the people who chose not to even take baby steps to conquer their *yetzer baras*, it remained something too big to overcome. Until, that is, they were later shown how God had been prepared to match their *mesiras Nefesh* to win the battle against their *yetzer baras* with Heavenly help.

Everyone wants success in life, but not everyone gets the kind of success they imagine for themselves. But the success God imagines for us is determined by how much we realize the opportunity in each moment to make a meaningful free-will choice, regardless of the impact it may have on others or history. Realizing this is the first step to even greater success than we could ever imagine for anyone.

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