Jewish Tribune – Nasso

**Thinking the Unthinkable**

Rashi, in this week’s sedrah (Bamidbar 6,2) quotes the Gemoro in Sotah (2a) which asks:

למה נסמכה פרשת נזיר לפרשת סוטה

Why is the parsha of nazir places straight after the sotah (the woman who is suspected of immorality)?

The Gemoro answers:

לומר לך שכל הרואה סוטה בקלקולה יזיר עצמו מן היין שהוא מביא לידי ניאוף

To teach you that anyone who witnesses the sotah in her disgrace will wish to become a nazir and refrain from drinking wine, which often leads to immorality.

When the onlooker observes the terrible consequences of the sotah – a woman who ignored warnings and secluded herself with another man and is suspected of immoral behaviour – he will undertake self-imposed restrictions of nazirus to avoid falling into the same trap.

Rabbi Pinchos Roberts ztl (The Torah Prism Revisited p206) asks an interesting question. Wouldn’t the opposite be true? Surely watching the sotah in her death throes is a strong enough deterrent without the need to become a nazir?! Watching this woman in her final agony would negate the need for these restrictions? If anything, someone who didn’t witness this should contemplate becoming a nazir!

Rabbi Roberts answered with a fascinating psychological insight.

Amalek attacked Klal Yisroel after leaving Mitzrayim. All other nations were terrified of the young nation who had brought Egypt – the superpower of its day – to her knees. Everyone viewed Klal Yisroel as invincible and indestructible. But not Amalek.

Out of sheer hatred, they attacked Klal Yisroel and lost badly. But the very fact they attacked, took away the sheen of invincibility and “cooled down” the world’s belief that the Jews were invincible.

Of course, for a frum Jew to entertain the possibility of such grossly immoral behaviour is unthinkable. But when he comes into contact with someone who succumbed to this, it enters the realm of the possible. The unthinkable becomes thinkable. The best solution is to strengthen himself by taking on the extra restrictions of a nazir and neutralise the potential harm.

Rabbi Roberts quotes Rav Bloch, the Telzer Rosh Yeshiva to give another example of this concept.

The Torah forbids someone who is hanged by Beis Din from remaining suspended after nightfall (Devorim 21,23). But what’s the rush to remove the corpse? Surely the more people that see the punishment in action the greater the deterrent.

The answer is this. The very sight of the criminal who brazenly defied the Torah is itself harmful. It could possibly encourage others to think the unthinkable. To prevent people from entertaining such thoughts, the body was removed from sight after one day.

If negative exposure can have such a harmful affect, מדה טובה מרובה, a positive exposure how much more so.

A couple of weeks ago, I had the zechus of taking a group of over seventy wonderful 6th formers to Poland. It is a powerful and exhausting trip with countless points of education and inspiration. From standing at the kevorim of the Netziv and Rav Chaim Soloveitchik in the Warsaw cemetery, to learning and dancing in the yeshiva of Chachmei Lublin. From the depths of darkness of Auschwitz, Majdanek and Belzec to the exuberance, power and joy of Lizhensk.

And yet, for one boy, perhaps the most powerful lesson was not in Poland itself, but on the plane on the way home. He was sitting in an aisle seat and one of my colleagues, one of the Rebbes, happened to be allocated the seat next to him.

At one point during the flight, the Rebbe needed to get out and when he returned to his seat, his talmid was fast asleep. Rather than wake him or try to climb over him back into his seat, the Rebbe instead reached over for his Chumash Rashi and stood happily learning from his sefer.

When the boy woke, quite some time later, he saw his Rebbe learning and understood what had transpired. That made a huge impression on him. Perhaps more than the many messages and take homes of the previous five days.

Rabbi Roberts notes that meforshim explain that the above concept lies behind the directive to signpost the way to the ערי מקלט (cities of refuge), to protect the accidental murderer but no such provision is made for people going to Yerushalayim laden with bikkurim.

Why are unintentional murderers helped but people performing the mitzva of bikkurim are left to wander around and get lost?

Perhaps the Torah wants criminals to get to their destinations without the need to contact and be seen by other Jews. The mere sight of transgressors could be negative, whereas the more one observes and rubs shoulders with loyal and observant Jews, the better.

This idea should encourage us all to not just associate with good people but to role model positive and uplifting behaviour ourselves. Not just when bringing baskets of fruit to the Beis Hamikdash, but even thirty thousand feet in the air.

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