Jewish Tribune – Tazria

**Theory and Practice**

The Medrash Tanchuma (Vayikra 13:2) in this week’s sedrah tells the story of an impoverished kohen who intended to leave his family and home in Eretz Yisroel to seek a better living abroad.

He revealed his intentions to his wife and began teaching her the laws of tzara’as so that she could substitute for him during his absence.

“Check the hairs of the afflicted person,” he explained, “each and every hair on a person’s body is nurtured by its own follicle, a wellspring that Hashem has created for it. If the hair has withered, you will know that its source beneath the skin has dried up.”

Upon hearing this, his wife declared, “If Hashem created every hair with a wellspring to drink from, wouldn’t Hashem provide sustenance for you, a human being with children to support!”

The kohen changed his plans and remained in Eretz Yisroel.

How did the kohen’s wife enlighten him? He obviously knew, even before she spoke, that Hashem provides sustenance for all and even taught her this fact himself!

And yet, he somehow had not internalised this message and felt that the proper course of action was to leave Eretz Yisroel to earn a livelihood. What persuaded him to change his mind?

Rav Henoch Leibowitz ztl, Rosh Yeshiva of Yesivas Chofetz Chaim for close to seventy years, and an outstanding bearer of the legacy of Slobodka, cites this Medrash to teach a powerful lesson.

The Medrash illustrates one of the fundamental principles of mussar. We can acknowledge a basic truth as being correct and even teach it to others, but fail to internalise the message. At the same time as preaching a message, we can overlook its full application in our lives and actions.

The kohen knew that Hashem sustains every living creature yet did not absorb the message properly or apply it his own situation. Had he done so he would not have planned to move overseas to seek a livelihood and it was his wife that reminded him that Hashem would surely sustain him in his homeland.

The story is told of a yeshiva bochur who had a problem. He loved “Shoko”, the popular Israeli chocolate milk drink and kept some in his yeshiva dormitory fridge. The problem was that other boys liked it too, and despite his best efforts to alert his friends that this was his personal bottle, the delicious drink was regularly consumed – and not by its owner.

He got hold of a thick black marker pen and wrote in large letter on the botte “private property”.

No luck – it was still being drunk. He went a step further and wrote “Lo Signov” on it. Theft! A Torah prohibition! Still didn’t work.

He decided on a more dramatic course of action. He wrote “cholov akum” on the bottle, pretending that his precious drink was not cholov yisroel. And it worked! No one touched his drink!

Sometimes we know information but fail to internalise it. The yeshiva bochurim of course knew that it is prohibited to steal somebody’s else’s private property but failed to connect this knowledge with the reality of taking someone else’s delicious, sweet beverage without permission.

A message from parshas Tazria is to make the connection between theory and practice. Sometimes we need a mentor, a good friend or a spouse to remind us.

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