

The Challenge of Sin

By Rabbi Dovid Markel

The Talmud (Pesachim 113a) makes the following statement about people who do not sin although faced with challenges:

“R. Yochanan said: Concerning three does the Holy one, blessed be He, make proclamation every day: a bachelor who lives in a large town without sinning, a poor man who returns lost property to its owner, and a wealthy man who tithes his produce in secret.”

When G-d sees the almost insurmountable hurdle that these individuals are faced with that they nevertheless overcome He issues a proclamation about their awesome accomplishment.

If your life isn't difficult, perhaps it can be said that you aren't doing it correctly. Life—no matter who you are—is supposed to be incredibly challenging.

Indeed, Ivov (5:7) makes the following juxtaposition when explaining the difficulty of life: “Because man is born for toil, but flying creatures fly upward.” While the correlation between man and bird seems curious, Rashi explains that it eludes to the contrast between man and angel.

Angels soar heavenwards effortlessly reaching higher and higher heights, but it is eventually the lack of the drama of challenge and of internal evil that excludes them from playing the central role of creation.

When Moshe ascends Mt. Sinai for the purpose of receiving the Torah, the Talmud (Shabbos 88b) tells us that the angels were appalled that G-d would give His most precious possession to mere mortals. When G-d asks Moshe to reply to their challenge, he tells them:

“The Torah, which You give me, what is written therein? I am the Lord, your G-d, which brought you out of the Land of Egypt. He said to them [the angels], ‘did you go down to Egypt; were you enslaved to Pharaoh: why then should the Torah be yours? ...Again, what is written therein? Thou shall not murder. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shall not steal; is there jealousy among you; is the Evil Tempter among you? Straightway they conceded [right] to the Holy One, blessed be He.”

G-d does not give us the Torah in spite of our challenges, but because of them. The greater the challenge, the more awesome the victory.

Often, we hear people asserting that because they were created with certain “natural tendencies” that they have a great urge for, their actions cannot be judged or deemed wrong. Because their desires are natural they exclaim that they cannot possibly be expected to never act on them while other individuals have permission to find fulfillment in this area.

This though is expressed in the Talmud's statement that G-d issues a proclamation concerning “a bachelor who lives in a large town without sinning.” When a person has tremendous challenges—

that they can hardly be judged for—that they nevertheless overcome, it is there that they have done something so awesome that even G-d is proud of them. These accomplishments are what make the whole creation worthwhile and these are the true heroes of the world¹.

Indeed, as Rabbi Sadia Gaon asserts in his philosophical work on faith²—it is not the challenges and suffering that prove that there is no value to mitzvos, but the reverse. Because in this world, even the righteous man goes through tremendous challenges and suffering, this expresses that surely he will eventually be tremendously rewarded for his efforts in the world to come.

¹ Avot, 4:1, “Who is mighty? One who overpowers his inclinations.”

² Emunot VeDeot, 9:1