

Rabbi Tzadok and Willpower Fatigue

By Rabbi Dovid Markel

The Talmud (Kiddushin 40a) recounts the following story of a woman who wished to convince a certain sage to sin:

“R. Tzadok was summoned by a certain matron [to immorality]. He to her, ‘My heart is faint and I am unable; is there anything to eat?’ She answered him, ‘There is unclean food.’ ‘What am I to deduce from this?’ he retorted: ‘that he who commits this [immorality] may eat this.’ She then fired the oven and was placing it [the forbidden meat] in it, when he ascended and sat in it. She said to him, ‘What is the meaning of this?’ [so he answered] ‘He who commits this [immorality] falls into the other [the fire — of hell]’, to which she replied. ‘Had I known that this sin is so grave, I would not have tormented you’.”

The story expresses a chain of events where initially R. Tzadok acquiesces to eat un-kosher meat and ends with him from refraining from sin.

In the work *Geon Yaakov*—a commentary to *Ein Yaakov*—an interesting question is asked: If R. Tzadok was intent on refraining from sin, why did he, on the onset, agree to eat the un-kosher meat?

He explains this based upon the statement in the end of the tractate of Makot. There (23b) the Mishna states that “the Holy One, blessed be He, desired to make Israel worthy, therefore He gave them much Torah and many commandments.”

Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura explains that the intent of this statement is that because G-d wished to make us worthy, he gave us commandments that we would have done otherwise, such as abstaining from eating certain disgusting foods.”

Had the Torah not been given, although we would have naturally abstained from consuming these foods, we would not have received merit or additional holiness in our souls from our abstention. However, because now, it is a mitzvah not to consume these foods, when a person abstains from them, they receive additional merit.

It is with this in mind that the *Geon Yaakov* explains the above section of Talmud. The sin that this woman desired that R. Tzadok commit was a matter that a person naturally lusts after. Because of this R. Tzadok was not sure whether or not he would find the strength to overcome his natural inclination and abstain from sin.

He therefore requested that he be brought something unclean to consume which he knew that he would be able to overcome. Because he refrained from that sin, he received extra spiritual energy in his soul and was thus able to overcome the grave sin of immorality.

The lesson in this is twofold:

We often think that we must pick our battles. Thinking that if we try to control our every whim we will suffer from willpower fatigue and be unable to win the more important battle. This thought teaches us that the opposite is the case. The very exertion of our energy in ensuring that we do not do a minor sin, is itself what gives us the energy not to commit a major sin.

Which leads to the second point:

The ability to refrain from sin comes from a holiness that we instill in our soul. Self-control is the extension of holiness not vice-versa. Instead of bemoaning that it is difficult to be holy as it is difficult to have self-control, we should keep in mind that the opposite is true. Each mitzvah that we do, and each Torah thought that we learn, instills in our hearts, minds and soul the ability to overcome all things that the evil inclination may throw our way.