

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of  
Tzipporah *bas* Aharon *a"h*  
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

## It Can Happen to the Best of Us      BEHA'ALOSECHA – 5775

Picture a group of wise, elderly scholars poring over their sacred tomes. These sages are the elite of their people, spending their days immersed in the ancient wisdom.

But one day, as they exit the study hall, they come across a group of children frolicking in the mud. The sages are suddenly gripped by a wild enthusiasm. Putting aside their books, they dive happily into the puddles and join the game.

After some time, the children's parents arrive; they are none too thrilled to discover their young charges covered with filth. And so they put an end to the merriment, sweeping away the mud and confiscating their digging toys. The children begin to cry. And so do the sages.

Sounds somewhat ridiculous? Possibly so. But it seems that just such a scenario takes place in this week's *parshah*. The generation that traversed the desert is known as the "*dor dei'ah*," the knowledgeable generation, distinguished for their wisdom and elevated stature. But among them were the *eirev rav*, the mixed multitude of foreigners who would too often stir up discontent. The *passuk* relates what happened when this group lodged a complaint of alleged deprivation: "And the multitude among them asserted their desire... *and B'nei Yisrael wept as well*, crying: 'Who will provide us with meat?'" (*Bamidbar 11:4*). Rashi points out that, in truth, they had plenty of meat already, having brought numerous animals along when they left Egypt. But these people concocted an excuse to vent.

### The Power of Influence

The whole episode might seem amazing. Here they were, the truly greatest generation, who witnessed Hashem's miraculous salvation; they had plenty of food, not to mention the steady supply of the wondrous *man*, which could taste like whatever they wanted. And yet, this sagacious people were able to be persuaded by a rabble of miscreants, who spurred them to complain against Hashem for no real reason at all!

Such is the stunning power of evil influence; it can corrupt even the most elevated souls. R' Leib Chasman (*Yahel Ohr*, vol. 3) identifies the source from which is derived this fundamental notion: It is none other than the Talmudic teaching discussed last week, linking two divergent but adjoining sections in Parshas Nasso: למה נסמכה פְּרִשְׁת נְזִיר לְפָרֶשֶׁת סוֹטָה? לומר: "Why was the section of the *Nazir* (who takes a vow to abstain from wine) placed next to the section of the *Sotah* (suspected adulteress)? To teach you that whoever witnesses the *Sotah* in her disgrace should abstain from wine" (*Sotah 2a*).

Here we are confronted with the same phenomenon, as implied by Chazal's precise wording. They did not state simply הַרְוֵאָה סוֹטָה בְּקִלְקוּלָהּ – "One who sees a *Sotah* in her disgrace," but rather כָּל הַרְוֵאָה סוֹטָה בְּקִלְקוּלָהּ – "All who see a *Sotah* in her disgrace." The emphasis on "*kol*," explains R' Leib, is intended to include even those individuals of extraordinary spiritual stature. A person could have thought that he would be effectively immune from

negative influence, given his heightened spiritual fortitude. This is especially so in light of the fact that he was witness to the debasement and demise of the *Sotah* – a gruesome sight for anyone to behold. Nevertheless, even such a person is enjoined to take precautionary measures for the future, having been exposed, however minimally, to the incidence of sin. In the end, no one is entirely inured from evil influence; the Mishnah (*Avos* 2:4) warns that no one, ever, may rest on his laurels:

אל תאמון בְּעַצְמְךָ עַד יוֹם מוֹתְךָ.

“Do not be assured of your spiritual status – until the day of your passing.”

## Cold Turkey

R' Ya'akov Neiman (*Darhei Mussar, Parshas Ki Seitzei*) relates a real-life example of the above. A great man underwent a spiritual downfall, and another sage, upon learning about his fate, decided to put Chazal's exhortation into practice.

It began with a commotion in the street; a gaggle of gawking children were gathered in a circle. As children are wont to do, they were engaged in raucous behavior, hurling stones at something in the middle of the circle. The object of the children's scorn was a man, stone-drunk, lolling around on the floor and murmuring incessantly. What was most surprising (or disconcerting) about this scene was that the statements issuing forth from his mouth were neither imprecations against his attackers or even regular drunken drivel. Rather, he was mumbling *divrei Torah*, sacred and scholarly thoughts and statements.

Word of this incident reached the ears of R' Simchah Zissel Ziv, the great *mussar* figure known as the Alter from Kelm. Upon looking into the matter, he learned, to his chagrin, that the man was indeed a formidable *talmid chacham* (Torah scholar) who of late had fallen into some extremely bad habits.

R' Simchah Zissel was shocked and appalled by this first-hand demonstration of the power of (being under the) influence. Here was a man, a great Torah scholar, whose stature and life were destroyed through an addiction to alcohol.

On the spot, he took Chazal's teaching to heart – “*yazir atzmo min hayayin*” – he should abstain from drinking wine. Referring to the offending alcoholic beverage, R' Simchah Zissel pronounced: “It will never again appear on my table” (*Peninim Mishulchan Gavohah, Parshas Nasso*).

The above reveals to us the immense danger inherent in sin, how its very existence can draw in even the most elevated people. And this can occur even when the disastrous consequences of transgression are on full display. What yet remains to explore, however, are the precise mechanics. What, indeed, is the source of this power? How does it exert such a forceful pull, even in the midst of such adverse circumstances? This issue, *b'ezras Hashem*, will be addressed more fully next week.