

We Can Be Great

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

Parshas Ki Seitzei opens with the *halachos* of the *aishes yefas to'ar*. *Rashi* quotes the *Sifri*, who explains the reason the Torah permits an act that violates Torah norms. “*Lo dibrah Torah ela keneged yeitzer hora.*” This is commonly translated to mean that the Torah understood that man cannot withstand the temptation presented by this circumstance and therefore permitted it. In sanctioning the *aishes yefas to'ar*, the Torah makes an allowance for the limitations of a man’s self-control in the face of great temptation.

In fact, *Rashi* concludes, “*She'im ein Hakadosh Boruch Hu matirah yisa'elah b'issur,*” if Hashem would not have permitted marriage with a *yefas to'ar*, the average person would defy the Torah and marry her anyway, living a life of sin.

The problem with this explanation is obvious. Wasn’t the Torah meant to provide a moral code to govern our behavior and to empower us to tame our base desires? How is this outlook consistent with the Torah legalizing improper behavior due to a person’s lack of self-control? Is the argument that “people will do it anyway” a valid rationale?

We arrive at the answer by understanding that our Torah is a *Toras Chesed* and a *Toras Emes*. It represents the ultimate truth and the epitome of justice. Its precepts were given to human beings – not angels – to faithfully uphold. Because the Torah is perfect, it contains nothing that can be dismissed as too difficult for us to observe. There is nothing in the Torah that is not attainable by mortal men.

The words of *Rashi*, “*lo dibrah Torah elah keneged yeitzer hora,*” can be understood in light of this axiom that no *mitzvah* in the Torah is above the reach of the average Jew. “*Lo dibrah Torah elah keneged yeitzer hora*” can be understood to mean that the Torah speaks to the *yeitzer hora*. The Torah was given to enable us to overcome the evil inclination, which constantly seeks to entrap us. Thus, since Hashem determined that in the case of *yefas to'ar* we wouldn’t be able to overcome the *yeitzer hora*, it is permitted.

By permitting the *yefas to'ar*, the Torah is acknowledging that the *yeitzer hora* that tempts a person during battle is so powerful that even an extremely *ehrlische Yid* who is normally always able to triumph

over his physical desires is likely to surrender to them during wartime. That is the reason the Torah made an exception in its moral code and permitted the *yefas to'ar*.

Rashi therefore states that the Torah is speaking to the *yeitzer hora* and informing him that this single exception itself serves to highlight the obvious inference regarding all other Torah laws – that all are accessible and within the scope of a Jew's abilities.

It also speaks to man and says to him that there are no grounds to claim that any of the Torah's laws are too difficult for small or average people and are only applicable to *tzaddikim* and holy men. It is possible for us, with our limited abilities, to adhere to every single *mitzvah* in the Torah. If not, those that are supposedly beyond our grasp would not have been mandated.

By contrast, man-made law is not always thought-out or sensible. Many laws have been written and passed just to make a point, even though its authors were under no illusion about their applicability or relevance. Many such laws are regularly and habitually broken – generally with impunity.

Not so the laws of the Torah. Each one is timeless and eternally relevant. By observing them, we demonstrate our belief in the Creator, Who knows and understands man thoroughly. In fact, it is from the Torah itself that we can acquire the truest understanding of human psychology.

As an example, the year is broken into seasons because Hashem knows that people cannot maintain the same level of intensity 354 days of the year. We need a break from the continuous stress we are under. We just experienced such a restful break with summer and *bein hazemanim*.

How strange that it feels as if the summer just started, and yet it's already over. Just when we began to relax and enjoy life and all that it has to offer, it's back to work, back to school, back to the city, and back to all that we seek to run away from during the summer.

We wait an entire year for the summer. Through those freezing cold, snowy, icy months, people keep themselves warm by looking ahead to the summer. There are entire industries built on the summer season. People buy summer homes and invest untold amounts of money planning vacations. Then, in the blink of an eye, summer ends.

And on its heels comes *Elul*.

Elul closes the door on everyone's favorite season, as if to teach us that life is not really made for summers. Life is not meant for lounging around the pool and taking it easy. That's good for once in a while. Everyone needs a break. But as we have come to know as we age, life is essentially very serious business.

If the purpose of life was to have fun, *Hakadosh Boruch Hu* would have set up the world and the seasons of the year differently. The sun would always shine and the weather would always be spring-like and comfortable in all four corners of the earth. Instead, most of the civilized world goes through seasons of cold and hot...spring, summer, fall and winter.

We are meant to live a full and varied life, a life of Torah and *mitzvos*, a life of challenge and accomplishment. If we spent our days uniformly in vacation-mode, nothing of importance would be accomplished. People might think that they are enjoying life to the hilt, but at the core, there would be emptiness. A person would realize that he has nothing to show for his time.

When summer and vacation end so quickly, when it begins to feel as though not just days and weeks but *years* are passing by in a flash, we realize the fleeting nature of life itself. Just as we are thinking these sobering thoughts, *Elul* arrives. Just as we are reminded that there has to be a higher purpose to life, just as we come to that realization on our own, *Elul* arrives to help us channel those solemn thoughts properly.

Some people get depressed when vacation time is over, when the season they so longed for seems to slip through their fingers. *Elul* consoles us. "Don't be depressed or upset that the summer has ended so quickly," it says. "Use the lesson you have just learned to help you progress in life. Learn that lesson and you will be happy later on. Instead of being depressed when the summer ends, you will greet the upcoming months with a sense of purpose."

That lesson can enable us to live a more fulfilled life, brimming with accomplishments. The joy that it will bring will not be transient, but rather of the type that fills our body and soul. The joy will last much longer than the brief summer months. It will last longer than the four seasons of the year. It will last us throughout our lifetime.

Elul is a month that is meant to be used to reassess our priorities. *Teshuvah* flows from that reassessment. *Elul* reminds us that the Torah was not given to *malachei hashoreis*, but to *bosor vodom*.

Parshas Ki Seitzei and *Elul* coincide to remind us that “*lo dibrah Torah elah keneged yeitzer hora.*” Our obligation in this world is to subdue the *yeitzer hora* and withstand the temptations that confront us daily. *Parshas Ki Seitzei* and *Elul* remind us that we can be better than we are, that Hashem created us with the ability to be great people.

We were born with 248 limbs with which to carry out the 248 *mitzvos asei*. Far from being a random coincidence, this is a powerful testament to the Torah’s exquisite planning that matches a human being’s spiritual resources with his physical makeup.

During this period of *Elul*, let us resolve to use our strengths to improve our observance of the *mitzvos*. Let us resolve to overcome the temptation to feel that we lack the capacity to be as pure and holy as the Torah expects of us. With this renewed embrace of our purpose in this world, we will greet the *Yom Hadin* with the confident prayer for Hashem’s blessings for a year of health and happiness for ourselves, our loved ones, and all of *Klal Yisroel*.