

| GUESTLINES |

THE ROUTE TO DIFFERENT

By **Rabbi Aaron Lopiansky** | APRIL 5, 2020

We need to make conscious decisions, and take realistically small, but very consistent, steps

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nd when it's all over, when corona finally recedes, we will be different people — very different, totally changed people.

After weeks of not being able to enter a shul, we will enter with awe and trepidation, knowing that davening in a shul is a privilege. We will eagerly await *chazaras hashatz*, anticipating the opportunity to say Kedushah. We will wait for that final Kaddish so that we can answer yet another "Amen, yehei Shemai rabbah."

After weeks of aimless *patchkening* we will make sure that every minute of every day is accounted for. After weeks of no business and precarious market swings, we will realize that the money we have made is not due to our genius and effort, but granted by G-d; therefore we owe Him a reckoning for every penny spent.

We will now realize the beauty of a Pesach made by the sweat of our brow, spent in the company of our family, asking ourselves what's expected of G-d's People. We will acknowledge that a wedding is binding even if performed in a backyard, with two witnesses and ten people; one need not go into debt or stress oneself to one's limit to marry off a child.

We will understand the stresses our wives face at home and the challenges of our children; we will realize the debt of gratitude we owe their rebbeim and *mechanchim*. We will understand what it means to be lonely and alone, and we will allocate time to reach out to the lonely, especially the less pleasant ones. And we will... and we will...

And we will do none of the above!



Is it that we don't feel that way? No, those *are* our sincere feelings.

Is it a lack of sincere desire to learn lessons, to improve ourselves? No.

It is because we do not understand well enough human nature, and what it takes to engender change in ourselves. HaKadosh Baruch Hu took Klal Yisrael out of Egypt with the most spectacular display of miracles. We were moved to the ultimate levels of emotion — *shirah* being the expression of that deep feeling.

Yet the Jews who had witnessed these miracles weren't ready to receive the Torah. The Baal HaTanya (*Likutei Torah Shir Hashirim*) explains that the events at Yetzias Mitzrayim were sudden, expressed as "*dilug*," and therefore totally out of sync with Klal Yisrael's character at the time. Their salvation was imposed on them from an outside Source, and therefore could not truly effect any change within them.

It was therefore necessary to introduce Sefiras Ha'omer, a day-by-day methodical process of internal work, so that they could be worthy of receiving the Torah. (Although Sefiras Ha'omer in its mitzvah format was not given until later, the waiting period of seven weeks until the giving of the Torah was conceptually the same.)

This process included three critical elements: a) it called for our effort rather than a Divine revelation; b) it took time; c) it was a methodical approach, each day representing another element of our person (a concept expressed as "Sefiros").

Reb Tzaddok HaCohen m'Lublin (*Tzidkas Hatzaddik* 1) alludes to the same idea. He says that just as Yetzias Mitzrayim was a total and sudden break with the Jewish Nation's past (alluded to by the word *chipazon*), so too every person's first step toward change needs to be sudden and sharp. But after that initial directional shift, he must work slowly and methodically to become the person he needs to become.

Perhaps no one expresses this idea more powerfully than the Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:32). The Rambam, in his famous explanation for korbanos, says that the obligation of animal sacrifices was meant to gradually wean us off idolatry (note: this explanation has been debated by many Rishonim, and that debate is not within the scope of this article). Human nature, he says, is such that deeply ingrained behavior can never be eradicated by sudden change. In

P response to the argument that Hashem could have given the nascent Jewish Nation a mitzvah to “instantly” change them, the Rambam states strongly that Hashem’s desire is that human nature change from within, not from without.

He proves this point from the fact that Hashem took the newly liberated nation on a circuitous route out of Egypt, because they did not yet have the necessary courage to face the inevitable battles to be fought along the way. “Why,” asks the Rambam, “could He not have just ‘injected’ them with bravery, instead of taking the longer route and forcing them to build up their stamina naturally?”

As a matter of fact, the Rambam points out, all of Torah is a long and arduous process meant to change a person’s character. Because Hashem does not change a person’s character by external acts (note: the Rambam adds that obviously He has the ability to do so if He wishes to); rather, He wishes that people bring these changes about internally.

Understanding this point does away with the genre of questions along the lines of “If Israel saw all these extraordinary miracles, how could they have done x or y or z?” This type of question is based on one of two faulty premises: The first is that human beings act in a totally rational manner, i.e. “if A is true and B follows from A, then I must do B.” The second is that a “life-changing event” actually engenders permanent change.

I once heard Rav Mordechai Gifter *ztz”l* recount a personal experience that brought this point home to him most vividly. During a boat trip from America to Europe, where he traveled to learn in the Telshe Yeshivah, Rav Gifter took a stroll on the deck to get some fresh air. The deck was filled with other passengers who were hanging out, engaged in the minor vices of a cruise: drinking, gambling, and the like. Then a sudden storm hit the boat, and people were tossed about. Panic gripped them and they fell on their knees yelling, promising, and praying.

As Rav Gifter put it, it would be hard to imagine a more intense religious moment. People were promising to give up their vices and to devote the rest of their lives to good deeds.

A while later the squall passed, and calm returned to the ocean. A sigh of relief passed through the crowd... and it was business as usual, with the raucous carefree drinking and gambling.

Rav Gifter was very disturbed by this experience and when he arrived in Telshe, he asked the Telsher Rav, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Bloch, to explain the phenomenon. “Now you understand how a person operates,” the Rav told him,

We see the same dynamic when, *l’havdil*, a young and well-meaning *bochur* learns 18 hours a day for two or three days and then crashes and sleeps for a week.

But this phenomenon does not apply solely to religious matters. The same lack of self-awareness is at play when we “diet” by starving ourselves for a few days and then binging with a vengeance — or when a person is told that he must exercise, and he overdoes it and never comes back to the gym.

All of these examples show a lack of understanding of our basic human nature. We confuse adrenaline with endurance.

So is it as bleak as I’ve painted it? Will no good come out of so profound an experience as the fear, loss, and isolation of coronavirus?

It really depends on us. If we understand how a life-changing experience (or speech, or book) can change one’s life, then it certainly can become that. We need to make conscious decisions, and take realistically small, but very consistent, steps.

The night of Pesach is described as *chipazon*— an unnatural, extreme break with the past, an abrupt acceleration. And then the Torah tells us that “on the *morrow* of that day — *mimacharas haShabbos*,” we start counting. Methodically, deliberately, consistently; no more than one count and no less than one count per day.

The seven weeks during this counting period are described as “*temimos*— whole and complete.” The initial surge in all its might and force has been harnessed to become a steady and productive force, a faithful engine taking us to our destination.

“Hashem has taught us to count our days, and thereby we will attain a heart of wisdom” (Tehillim 90:12).

Yes, we can take all of the tremendous emotional turmoil we’re experiencing and focus it toward a goal we can realistically attain. Then we can take small but very consistent steps, and with Hashem’s help we will get to the destination that Hashem has in mind for us.

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