

A Constant Battle

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

Just last week, we experienced Purim, a time of great joy and hope. This week is Parshas Hachodesh, signifying that chodesh Nissan – the month of redemption – begins next week. Last week, we celebrated our people’s delivery from the hands of Haman and almost certain destruction. This Shabbos, we proclaim, “Chazak!” before being reminded that our people are blessed with the ability of renewal. Regardless of how low we fall, and how bleak life seems, like the moon we can rebound from utter darkness to full glory.

The yeitzer hora seeks to depress us and cause us to be pessimistic about rejuvenation and re-growth. He distracts us from our goals and aims to cause us to slip and flounder. He convinces us that we cannot raise ourselves after we fall.

Adar and Nissan lead us to the geulah of Pesach and the geulah sheleimah with Moshiach, as they proclaim that there is no reason for despair and surrender to the evil designs of the yeitzer hora.

We know that all that happens in the world is for us to learn from. Take a look at what has changed worldwide since a weak president was chosen to replace a very strong one. This has nothing to do with politics, but with making a point and learning a lesson.

The world went from a four-year period of no new wars to tensions breaking out everywhere. Russia’s Putin, who had been sitting quietly and peacefully, declared war on neighboring Ukraine once he no longer feared America. Western European countries were admonished by the former president to play their part and

contribute appropriately to their defense. Now they are free to sit back and watch America bear the major cost of fighting the war, financially and diplomatically.

China has become increasingly emboldened in its bid for world domination. It is increasingly threatening its neighbor, Taiwan, as it feels that with weak American leadership, it can realize its goal of swallowing the island nation, just as it did to Hong Kong. China is buying up large parcels of property in the US near military installations, as well as farms and food producers, preparing for the day it dominates the US in every way it can.

China is spreading its tentacles across the world, strengthening relationships with countries the US has ignored or been spiteful to. Just last week, they scored a major coup, bringing Iran and Saudi Arabia together as they spat in the face of the US. Its adversary was brought into a peace deal with a longtime US ally, which sought revenge on the US president for his attempts to sideline it. Well, those chickens have now come home to roost.

Iran has been unleashed, spreading terror, suppressing its citizens, supplying Russia, and getting more involved in general worldwide troublemaking, because it knows that it will not pay a severe price, as its main adversary is weakened and incompetent.

This country was humming along economically, resurging from the Covid downturn, when the new administration entered and began engaging in actions guaranteed to cause inflation. Weak leadership and weak policy conspire together to bring weak results.

Why am I telling you all this? It is to show what happens when we let down our guard against the yeitzer hora, who always schemes to take advantage of man's

weakness. He begins by causing a small crack in our armor and then drives in a wedge, increasingly weakening our ability to stand up to him and his mission to cause us to slip, fall, and sin.

The way to beat him and not become encumbered by sin is by being strong when he initially seeks to goad us to do things we shouldn't. It is a constant battle and we always have to be on guard, but it is much easier if we don't succumb to him even when it relates to small things. He approaches people with a proposition to do a small aveirah and offers arguments, such as that it is only a minhag, it's not really a halacha, everyone does it, and it is no big deal.

If his target is not able to overcome the temptation and his arguments win over the person, he senses that the person is weak and chips away, bit by bit, until he overtakes the person and entices him to sin repeatedly. He then convinces the baal aveirah that he has sunk too far and cannot repent and return to the proper path. He causes the person to give up on himself and become depressed, ensuring that he won't attempt to climb back up to the pedestal upon which he had stood for many years until he began to show weakness.

The world turns tipsy to demonstrate to us what happens when we show weakness. As long as we demonstrate strength, the yeitzer hora is not able to drag us down. He's not able to weaken us unless we allow him to.

This week marked the yahrtzeit of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. In his honor, we repeat this story.

One Shabbos, Rav Shlomo Zalman, then a very young boy, walked with his father, Rav Chaim Leib, from the Shaarei Chesed neighborhood of Yerushalayim, where

they lived, to Meah Shearim to participate in a Kiddush. As the two were walking, something caught Rav Chaim Leib's attention.

To his astonishment, he saw a man dressed in pajamas standing on his porch on Rechov King George smoking a cigarette.

Rav Chaim Leib turned to his son and said to him in Yiddish, "Close your eyes. Don't look at that sheigetZ."

However, the sheigetZ spoke Yiddish and overheard the conversation. He became very upset and called down to Rav Auerbach in Yiddish, "Are you calling me a sheigetZ? How can you call me a sheigetZ when I personally had a discussion with Hakadosh Boruch Hu?"

He continued: "You heard correctly. I asked Hashem a question and He answered me. I'm no sheigetZ."

He put down his cigarette and shared his story.

"I was born in Russia to Jewish parents. My father died when I was very young. I grew up with goyim, went to school with them, and was eventually drafted into the Russian army. One night, we were fiercely attacked. Everyone around me was killed. I looked out at the battlefield and was shaking with fear. I was the only survivor. I began to wonder why I was chosen to live.

"I crawled into a foxhole and began to talk to Hashem. I said, 'I don't know if You exist. I was orphaned as a young child. I grew up with goyim. I was never in a shul. I don't know anything. But if You are really out there, please show me a sign. I will stick my hand out of the bunker, and if a bomb or bullet comes and shoots off one

of my fingers, I will know that You exist. I will begin going to shul, studying your Torah, and living the life of a proper Jew.'

"And that is what happened. I stuck up my hand, a bullet whizzed by, and it blew off my finger."

He held up his hand and said, "Take a look. You'll see that I am missing a finger."

"Do you hear what I'm telling you? How do you call me a sheigetz? I am a Jew Hashem has spoken to."

After asking him mechilah, Rav Chaim Leib asked the pajama-clad man the obvious question: "So tell me, how is it that you are smoking on your porch on Shabbos in Yerushalayim ihr hakodesh? What happened to you that you ended up like this?"

"I'll tell you," the man answered. "For months, while I was in the army, I looked for a shul, but I was unable to find one. Then the army discharged me and I went to live with my mother. I felt bad for her and stayed with her. There was no shul in her town. And so it was, until eventually I forgot about fulfilling my vow."

Rav Shlomo Zalman would repeat the story and say that he remembered it his whole life. He would add that in life, there are

times of great inspiration, and when they come, we must immediately act upon them. "That man must have had a great neshomah for such a story to happen to him. Had he immediately run to daven and learn, he would have become a great man," Rav Shlomo Zalman said.

Instead, the man procrastinated and kept finding excuses not to do teshuvah. Every day, he pushed it off to the next, until the inspiration to improve was totally gone and forgotten.

That is the power of the yeitzer hora to take a person who has reached a great height and seeks to place himself on the path of Torah and turn him around, keeping him locked in a sinful path his entire life. First, he caused the man to procrastinate, much the same as he does to us. For example, if we resolve to undertake a certain good practice, he will say to us, "You don't have to start today. You can start tomorrow." Once we give in to him and push off doing the mitzvah until the next day, he has won. Then he takes it one day at a time, each day giving you another reason why it would be better to begin the practice tomorrow, until eventually we drop the idea altogether.

Or, we go to bed late one night and the alarm rings to wake us to go daven. The yeitzer hora senses an opportunity and quickly recommends to us that we shut off the alarm. Then he whispers that we'd be better off remaining in bed a little longer. If we permit him to get the better of us one day, he will return the next day with another excuse to turn off the alarm and roll over. He'll tell us things like, "It's almost the end of the zeman anyway. Nothing will happen if you sleep an extra half hour." And before you know what happened to you, you become a habitual late riser. Each day, it becomes progressively more difficult to get up on time.

Every day, we say three times in Shemoneh Esrei, "Selach Ionu Avinu ki chotonu," asking Hashem to forgive us for our sins. We say to Him, "Hashiveinu Avinu leSorasecha, return us to your Torah, vehachazireinu biseshuvah sheleimah lefonecha, and return us to You through complete repentance." And then what happens? Most of the time, regrettably, nothing happens.

We finish Shemoneh Esrei and it is all forgotten. Then we say Tachanun and twice a day we beg our heavenly Father to forgive us for our sins. Before we have a chance to do further teshuvah, the yeitzer hora rushes in and puts all types of ideas in our head about where we have to go and what we have to do. It is then all forgotten until the next time we daven and the cycle repeats itself.

We read the story about the man standing in the center of the Holy City smoking on Shabbos and we pity him. We wonder how it could be that he veered so far from his kabbolah. How does he live with himself never walking into a shul, not observing any mitzvos?

Not to cast aspersions on anybody, and his story is an extreme case, but it wouldn't hurt if we would look in the mirror sometimes. We should think about that man and make sure that we aren't acting like him. We must make sure that we are demonstrating power through strength to the yeitzer hora and to ourselves.

Let us pay better attention to davening. Let us make kabbalos and keep them. Let us make pledges and pay them. Let us not fall behind or slacken off in our observance of mitzvos.

And when an organization such as Shuvu, which brings thousands of neshamos aboard the Torah train and needs our help to continue their holy work, is holding a dinner this coming Sunday, we should show up and write a check even if we don't know the people who are being honored. We should go there to show support for the cause, to show that we care about Torah and about Yiddishe kinder.

At a time when hundreds of thousands of our Jewish brethren are demonstrating every Shabbos in Israel and in cities around the world against the right of religious people to have laws enacted in their favor, it wouldn't be an avlah if we would go to

the Shuvu dinner to demonstrate that Torah and its causes are important to us. And the same goes for the dinner for Yeshivas Mir the next Sunday.

Let us begin chodesh Nissan with a hischadshus, so that we will be able to witness the fulfillment of the Chazal, "B'Nissan nigalu, b'Nissan asidin lehigo'el," that in Nissan we will be redeemed. Let it be this year. Amein.