The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

Sho-f'tim 5779

When the Jewish army went to war against the enemy, the Torah enumerates certain circumstances under which a deferment would be granted (20:1-7). The last of these exemptions reads as follows: "Who is the man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house and let him not melt the heart of his brothers like his heart" (20:8). The Talmud (Sotah 44a) records the dispute between R. Akiva and R. Yosi HaG'liili as to the nature of this dispensation. R. Akiva claims it means exactly what it says: A person who cannot contend with the tensions of battle is allowed to return home. R. Yosi HaG'liili, however, maintains that the verse refers to a person who is frightened because of the sin "in his hand".

In understanding the view of R. Yosi HaG'liili, it is rather clear that the guilt of transgressing Gd's Will can rob a person of the courage and confidence necessary for victory in combat. Such a soldier should be relieved of battle. As to the nature of the sin, it would certainly seem that it would have to be of sufficient severity for its violation to carry that degree of humiliation which would warrant the person's discharge from the army.

What is then quite puzzling and strange is the example given by the Talmud (Menachot 36a) of such a sin. No doubt picking up on the phrase of R. Yosi HaG'liili, "because of the sin in his hand", our Sages propose: "If one speaks between donning the arm tefillin and the head tefillin, he has committed a transgression, and he returns because of it from the battlefield." The question is obvious. Why should this rather minor infraction be a reason to generate such remorse and shame and thus disqualify the person from combat? Why not simply confess and repent of this violation - a sin which does not require Yom Kippur to effect forgiveness - and remain and fight?

The great Rav Shalom Schwadron zt"l, offers this insightful explanation. Chazal specifically refer to the sin as being "in his hand" to hint that the person has yet to relinquish and discard his improper actions and is still figuratively holding on to them, "in his hand". In other words, the transgressor may be fully cognizant of his misdeeds and may even confess as to their impropriety, but he is unable to muster the determination and resolve to change his behaviors and mend his errant ways. In the Talmud's iteration: there is a disconnect between the tefillin of the head and that of the arm. The "head" knows full well of the delinquency, but the "hand" cannot let go of the sinful behavior. It is this awareness of weakness, this depressing recognition of an inability and failure to measure up to what is right and good
that would have fatal consequences if such a person would place himself in the dangers of war.

On Yom Kippur, one of the Al Chets states: For the sin we have committed before You by verbally confessing." What exactly is the sin here? Isn't the confessional a fundamental component of repentance, if not the essence of teshuva (see Rambam, Hilchot Teshuva 1:1)? The answer, of course, is clear. If our repentance consists only of confessing our sins and stops there, if we mistakenly console ourselves by feeling that in our admission wrong-doings - our mouthing of the sins - we are somehow absolved and need not engage in the arduous and often formidable effort necessary to change our behavior, we are guilty of this AL CHEIT.

Decades ago (8/82), the brilliant and much-lamented political commentator, Charles Krauthammer, penned an essay entitled, "Full Responsibility now means Cover-Up." In it, the author exposes the utter emptiness of the assertion, often by political leaders, who, when in the wake of some scandal, self-righteously intone: "I take full responsibility for ..." What does this taking of responsibility actually mean? Answers Krauthammer: "Nothing. It was a way of admitting error - a mere rhetorical device - without accepting any of the penalties traditionally reserved for those held responsible for the error."

Our Sages understood the sheer vacuity of his "responsibility ritual" quite well. Ethically, it is bankrupt, and spiritually, it offers no absolution. Vidui (confession), without the genuine commitment and dogged earnestness to translate that admission of misdeed into serious character renovation, is self-deception at best and self-defeating at worst.

The opening verse in our Parsha speaks of the obligations to "Set up judges and officers in all your gates" (16:18). The Sh'lah (16th-17th c.), among others, sees this commandment as applying quite beyond the Jewish collective as such. It is also addressing each and every individual, insisting that they not only be unflinching in self-judgement, but also that they be "officers" over themselves, courageously making sure they act upon that judgement.

The month of Elul beckons us to prepare for our rendezvous with the Almighty on the Day of Judgement. This preparation requires that we engage in a "war", but, as the Ohr HaChayim HaKadosh (18th c.) reminds us (see 20:1), the battle here is not just against an external foe, but against our ever-present internal enemy, our Yetzer Hara (evil inclination). It is that unrelenting antagonist who inexorably acts to impede any real amelioration of our delinquent conduct. One of the clever strategies of the Yetzer Hara is to tempt us to "speak between donning the arm tefillin and
head tefillin," to keep the "sins in our hand" and make certain our confessions go nowhere. We must never surrender to this blandishment, allowing ourselves the immoral comfort of doing nothing. We must stay in the fight, emerge triumphant, and in so doing ensure that Gd will grant us all a year of blessing and success.

In a word, Elul is that time every year when we dare not just talk. We dare not put off acting upon our resolutions until tomorrow.

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb tells of a preacher who, in admonishing his congregation against the dangers of procrastination, shares with them the following story. "The group in charge of increasing the enrollment in gehenom (hell) was discussing ways to get more people to sin. One suggested encouraging them to steal, but the others all protested that the laws against theft were too strict and not enough people would sin by stealing. Another suggested encouraging people to lie. Again, the others protested that lying would make people feel too guilty. Finally came the suggestion with which everyone agreed: 'Let's encourage people to do good deeds, acts of loving kindness, acts of charity, acts of courage and justice. But let's tell them not to do those things today, but rather, tomorrow!" (Torah Tidbits #1338)

This Elul, let's make our tomorrow, today!