



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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“A Gentler Message”

For the past several weeks, in anticipation of the upcoming Days of Awe, I have devoted this column to the topic of *teshuva*, repentance.

Many of us find this topic quite scary. Confessing our sins of the past year and committing ourselves to improving our religious conduct threatens to undermine our self-confidence and self-esteem.

For my most recent columns, I have focused on the teaching of that sector of the Mussar Movement known as Nevardek. One of this movement’s major adherents was Rav Yosef Yoisel Horovitz *zt”l*, who established his *yeshiva* in the town in Lithuania by that name. Popularly, he was called the *Alter*, or “Old Man,” of Nevardek.

He and his numerous students and followers advocated a relatively extreme program

for attaining ethical and spiritual perfection, particularly with reference to *teshuva*. I was first exposed to the Nevardek methodology when I studied with a tutor in my adolescence. I was later influenced by another Nevardek alumnus named Rav Chaim Zeitchik whose lectures I was privileged to hear and whose copious writings I still study, especially at this time of year.

Suffice it to say that Nevardek demands a lot from those who choose to follow its path. It expects its adherents to have great self-control, meticulous conformity to halachic stringencies, and absolute *bitachon*, trust, in the Almighty.

Several of you have given me feedback after reading those recent columns of mine. They felt, understandably, that the examples I presented of the Nevardek approach set the bar too high. Some insisted quite vigorously that Nevardek’s standards were too harsh and unrealistic for most.

So, in today’s column, I will present several examples of Nevardek’s “gentler” messages, drawn from two of Rav Zeitchik’s essays on this week’s Torah portion, *Ki Tetzei* (Deuteronomy 21:10–25:19).

As a first example, I suggest that we focus on a passage in this week’s *parsha* that is, at first glance, quite harsh. It reads:

“If man has a wayward and defiant son, who does not heed his father or mother and does not obey them even after they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the public place of his community.



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They shall say to the elders of his town, ‘This son of ours is disloyal and defiant; he does not heed us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Thereupon the men of his town shall stone him to death...” (ibid. 21:18-21).

Rabbi Zeitchik is troubled by the extreme punishment meted out for what seems to be minor delinquency. He is somewhat encouraged, however, by the ruling cited in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 88b), which insists, “The wayward and defiant son whose parents wish to forgive him may do so.” Thus, they can prevent his terrible punishment.

Rabbi Zeitchik then shares a powerful question raised by the Chassidic Rebbe of Sochachov, author of *Shem MiShmuel*: We are taught that the wayward son is not punished merely for disobeying his parents. Rather, he is punished so severely because of what his behavior will ultimately lead to. *Al shem sofo*—because of his eventual end—his seemingly minor misconduct is expected to turn him into a murderous bandit and a danger to society. If the purpose of the punishment is to protect society, what right do his parents have to forgive him?

Rabbi Zeitchik’s response is nothing less than delightful! He argues that the parents forgive him because they know their son better than anyone else. They believe he can change. They see his better self—his capacity not only to overcome his waywardness and defiance, but to grow into an exemplary adult, perhaps even a blessing to society.

The “gentle” message here is twofold, with implications for child-rearing and with a theological teaching as well. For child-rearing, Rabbi Zeitchik makes us aware that parenting involves not only knowing the child as he or she is at any given moment. Rather, it entails the ability to see, and to help shape and direct,

the child’s potential. Don’t judge your children as who they are, but rather as who they can become.

The theological teaching is Navardek’s gentle message for those of us who, especially at this time of year, struggle with the process of *teshuva*. We are often paralyzed by guilt, by the recognition of our shortcomings and failures, which lead to despair, to the surrender of the possibility of self-improvement.

Rabbi Zeitchik assures us with these words: “Only the merciful Holy One Blessed Be He, who created and sustains the human heart and knows its dark secrets, who searches out our hearts on the Day of Judgment, who uncovers our hidden strengths, who spies hidden potential, can thereby acquire ‘servants’ of whom He can take pride.”

A second example of Nevardek’s “gentler” message in this week’s *parsha* is drawn by Rabbi Zeitchik from these two passages:

“You must fulfill what has crossed your lips and perform what you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God, having made the promise with your own mouth (ibid. 23:24).”

“For this applies to all mankind: that God will call every creature to account for everything unknown, be it good or bad (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).”

Rabbi Zeitchik eloquently expresses what he



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derives from the above two passages. He writes:

“Just as the Lord judges Man for the evil that lies within him, unconscious motivations and passions of which he is unaware, so too does the Lord consider the good which lies within Man, the suppressed light which he does not reveal, the great potential which he fails to develop. Man is responsible to ferret out his evil propensities, and, perhaps even more so, he must search in himself for the good within him of which he is barely aware and never activates.”

The second “gentle” message, as I understand it, is this: Each of us has both a *yetzer hara* and a *yetzer tov*—dark urges and motives, as well as noble and compassionate ones. We are often unaware of their presence, let alone their influence on our conduct. *Teshuva* calls for introspection and self-searching: uncovering the hidden forces within us, including those that are undesirable or even harmful. But even more important is the task of discovering the hidden resources that can help us grow ethically, morally, and spiritually—for our own fulfillment and for the benefit of others, perhaps even all humankind.

A New Year is approaching. Let us greet it with these gentle messages in mind. Many more are available, if only we open ourselves to hear them. *Shana Tova!* ■



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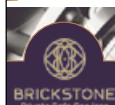
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