

# Nitzavim

Monkey See

*And you saw their abominations and their vulgarities – the wood, stone, silver and gold [idols] that they keep with them.*

Dvarim 29:16

The Jews had just seen the idolatrous practices of the nations whose lands they had passed through. The Torah calls these idols, “*shikutzehem*” and “*gilluleihem*.” Abominations. Rashi points out that literally, the word “*gilluleihem*” means feces. The Jews viewed those disgusting practices the way that they would have viewed human waste. And yet, the Torah goes on to warn the Jews that if they are attracted to those forms of worship, they dare not engage in them. The Torah in one breath emphasizes that Jews saw those practices as disgusting, and that nevertheless, there were many who desired them. The Torah warns those people to stay away.<sup>157</sup> Man is incredibly affected by what he sees, and thus, even seeing something that seems as disgusting as feces can, nevertheless, attract a person.

One who witnesses a Sotah in her state of disgrace should steer clear of drinking wine. To teach us this, the Torah placed the laws of Nazir next to the laws of the Sotah. The adulterous act that the Sotah may have perpetrated is something that comes of a frivolous mentality and, more often than not, it is brought on by drinking alcohol. Thus, one who witnesses the depths to which a Jewish soul can sink when it loses the level-headed approach to life that befits it should, himself, commit to not lose sight of what is important in life. It would seem surprising that the man who witnessed the downfall of the wicked person would be in danger of repeating that mistake. If anything, I would have thought that the fellow who has never seen a Sotah explode is more likely to be enticed into sin than the one who saw her stomach burst, and her guts on the floor! The Torah teaches us that one who witnesses evil is affected. He has now seen that the sin is possible. Other people have done it. Once something is in the realm of possibility, it is no longer so foreign, and one is more likely to succumb to his desires.

When the Jews left Egypt, they were at the top of the world. The surrounding civilizations were fully aware that Hashem had stepped in and taken a little nation from the world’s superpower in a show of one miracle after another. There was no question about it. Any suggestion of attacking the Jewish people would have been laughed at. And yet, Amalek went ahead and did it. “They cooled you down in your traveling.”<sup>158</sup> Rashi quotes a Midrash that compares the Jewish nation at that time to a scalding bath. When a man jumps into a scalding tub, he may burn himself horribly, but he also cools that tub off for others. Other nations saw that Amalek was beaten badly, and yet, they had no compunction copying Amalek in the coming years. For once it was possible to attack the Jewish people, the tub was no longer so

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157 See *Daas Torah* to Nitzavim

158 Dvarim 25:18

hot. It did not seem like such a difficult thing, for though Amalek got burned, they nevertheless attacked the Jews, and now that was a possibility that could be imitated.

The opposite is true as well. When we see a good person, we can then see that righteousness is within our reach as well. “On the day that Sarah was remembered by Hashem and conceived Yitzchak, many barren women were remembered by Hashem and conceived, too.”<sup>159</sup> The Taz<sup>160</sup> wonders how these women knew that their fertility was related to Sarah, and not some other reason. He explains that it was only those who knew of Sarah and heard of her miracle who gained the necessary *bitachon* (faith) to trust in Hashem and thus merit bearing children, despite their barren natures! It was only when they saw Sarah that they, too, could relate to that sort of faith.

The great R. Shlomo Ganzfried<sup>161</sup> brings this idea out in another fashion. He wonders why it is that *Akeidas Yitzchak* is considered by the Torah to be a test for Avraham rather than Yitzchak. “And Hashem tested Avraham.”<sup>162</sup> After all – wasn’t Yitzchak’s giving up of his life a great challenge as well? He quotes the *Drashos Haran*, who explains that after the very first time in world history that a challenge is overcome, that challenge becomes far easier for everyone else to overcome, themselves. Avraham, he explains, had already offered his life up for Hashem when Nimrod attempted to kill him in the fiery furnace of Ur Kasdim. It was thus not as great a challenge for his son Yitzchak to give his life for Hashem. But to give one’s child had never been done. Thus, Avraham was the only one legitimately challenged to the ultimate degree, for he was told to do something that had never, ever been done before.

It is amazing to note how after world records that have stood for years are broken, they suddenly are broken many times over. The four-minute mile, or Roger Maris’ long-standing home run record are just two examples. Just after they were broken came a succession of people who broke those same records again, quickly! After one person does something, it is somehow much easier for the rest to follow suit. (This also offers us a deep insight into what our forefathers have done for us. For a Jew today to sacrifice for Hashem, for Shabbos, for kosher food – all these tests have been successfully passed before – and thus, we can and must know that it is within our reach to pass these tests as well. We are privileged to come from such giants.)

On another level, the very fact that we see something wrong is an indication of our spiritual state. The Baal Shem Tov said that one who witnesses a sin can only have seen it if he, himself, has some flaw in that area. When Noah wanted to know if the Flood was over, he sent the raven out to check for him. But the raven did not do the bidding of Noah. Rather, he circled the ark and came right back, for he was concerned that Noah would mate with his raven-wife while he was gone.<sup>163</sup> How ludicrous! Aside from the problem of logistics, for Noah was a

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159 Bereishis Rabbah 53:8

160 R. Dovid b. Shmuel Halevi, in his *Divrei David* to Genesis 18:6

161 *Apiryon* to Bereishis 22:1

162 Bereishis 22:1

163 Sanhedrin 108b

man and Mrs. Raven was a raven – why on earth would the righteous Noah, who had survived the Flood by virtue of his never engaging in *arayos*, suddenly compromise his values for a female bird? On Noah's ark, the animals did not mate with one another.<sup>164</sup> For, the world was in a state of turmoil and even the animal kingdom somehow sensed that cohabitation was inappropriate. The exceptions were Ham, son of Noah; the dog and the raven.<sup>165</sup> The raven was drawn to the physical more than other animals. He thus saw the world through his own eyes. Should someone else have left their mate alone, he would have attempted to mate with her. Thus, he projected that upon Noah. “*Kol haposel bimumo posel*”<sup>166</sup> – when one sees faults in others, that fault is [almost always] present in he himself, the Gemara tells us. Thus, the raven saw Noah as a threat.<sup>167</sup>

We must know that what we see affects us. It can drag us up and down. We can become like Avraham and Sarah, or we can become, Heaven forbid, like other nations, who imitate Amalek to this day. We must take care to see good things, and when we see things that can hurt us, even the destruction of those who sin (like the Sotah), we must know that there is a reason that Hashem had us see it, and that it can affect us badly if we do not respond as the Torah demands.

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164 See Rashi to Bereishis 8:1

165 Sanhedrin 108b

166 Kiddushin 70b; Rambam, *Issurei Biah*, 19:17.

167 *Gur Aryeh* (Maharal) to Bereishis 8:7