

Parashat Bereishit, Rabbi James Proops

The resurgence in the number of Covid cases and deaths around the world is increasingly worrisome and cause for alarm. However, in the Jewish world, many have been preoccupied and distressed by the actions and behaviours of certain groups of Orthodox Jews in New York. The debate of religious freedom is a crucial one, as is the discussion of the rhetoric and policies unfairly impacting Orthodox Jewish communities (*see the excellent article by our member Professor Avi Helfand on the JTA website*), however many of us are left bewildered by not only the protests but the continued non-compliance of safety protocols. This is not a new topic but one which continues to resurface amid the regulations regarding social gatherings and mask wearing, and how they affect our ability to live an active Jewish life.

When trying to understand the perspective of those who refuse to adhere to the laws or even the safety recommendations, I am certain that for many people it comes from a place of only the best, yet in my opinion misguided, intentions. The burning desire to *daven* in a suitable indoor *Makom Torah* is commendable and one which many of us share yet sacrifice in order to comply with the county. The drive to celebrate a *simcha* in the ‘proper’ way, surrounded by family and friends with music, *ruach* and dancing is something we can all empathize with, yet resist due to the dangers that gatherings of this nature pose. We can understand and share the disdain for the comments and policies of New York politicians while nonetheless embarrassed and shocked at the nature of the protests. This week’s *Parasha* can shed some light on a possible explanation of how, while motivated by otherwise noble intentions, we can nonetheless engage in uncondonable actions.

We read that before eating from the *Eitz HaDaat*, the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Chava were וְלֹא יִתְבַּשְׁשׁוּ, not embarrassed, by their apparent lack of clothing. It is only after eating from the *Eitz HaDaat* that we are told וַיִּתְפָּרוּ עָלֵיהֶם תְּאֵנָה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם - and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves clothing”. *Rashi* comments that before eating from the *Eitz HaDaat* they were not ashamed because וְלֹא הָיוּ יוֹדְעִים דְּרֶךְ צְנִיעוּת לְהַבְחִין בֵּין טוֹב לְרָע - they did not know what modesty meant, so as to distinguish between good and evil”. Here we see an intriguing use of the word צְנִיעוּת which is translated as modesty. צְנִיעוּת, according to *Rashi* is the

way in which we behave and how we decide if our actions are good or bad, if our motivations are pure or tainted.

Rav Shlomo Wolbe in his *shiurim* on the *parasha*, asks how we can ever know the true motivation which underlies our actions. He answers by citing Rav Yerucham Levovitz who would say that “a person has to familiarize himself with the many faces and colors of the *Yetzer Hara*”. There are times when we will be driven to perform a *mitzvah* or to undertake an action, but we are required to pause and reflect on where this desire is coming from. Are we acting in accordance with our positive inclination or are we being spurred on by the *Yetzer Hara*, the negative inclination? We are often warned that while the performance of a *Mitzvah* is commendable and should be our default priority, it should “never come at the expense of a more timely Torah obligation”.

When learning in Yeshiva, I remember we were largely encouraged to learn in the *Beit Midrash* long into the nighttime hours. This is in keeping with the many places in the *Gemmara* which praises one who learns Torah at night and the *Rambam* who states (Talmud Torah 3:13) that although the *Mitzvah* is to learn Torah both day and night, the majority of one's wisdom is acquired at night. However, we were starkly reminded that if learning at night causes one to oversleep and miss *Shacharit*, then we must seriously analyse our motivations. If one's learning is to bring one closer to Hashem, then is missing *davening* an appropriate consequence? In a similar vein, it is said in the name of Rav Yisroel Salanter that “The *Yetzer Hara* does not mind if one says *Tehillim* all day, as long as he does not study Torah”.

The *Gemmara* in *Makkot* (24a) discusses the verse in *Micah* “וְמָה-הִיא דוֹרֵשׁ מִמְּךָ • כִּי - אִם-עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת הַחֵסֶד וְהַצְנִיעַ לְכַת עִם-אֱלֹהֶיךָ - What does Hashem request of you but to 'do justice, love kindness and walk **modestly** with your God”. To “walk modestly with God” is explained to refer to our participation in funerals and weddings which are both public events. The simple understanding is that when in public we must behave in a traditionally modest manner, however if we apply the comment of *Rashi* regarding Adam and Chava, we can understand the *Gemmara* a little more deeply. We have explained that to live a life of modesty and to act with צְנִיעוּת means to reflect on one's motivations in order to help us decide if our

actions are right or wrong. How much more so must this principle be applied when we are “walking with God” and living a religious life in public?

It can often be appropriate to make stand based on our religious principles, yet we must always remember “וְהֵצַנְעַ לְכַת עִם-אֱלֹהֶיךָ” - to walk modestly with God”. To make sure we remember the line between what is right and wrong and not to confuse appropriate behaviour and inappropriate behaviour. We are living during a time when we have all, to differing degrees, been called upon to reflect on our priorities when making decisions as to how we will act. For each individual those priorities may differ, however living a life imbued with צְנִיעוּת, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, must never be called into question.

Shabbat Shalom