

Mussar HaTorah

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Parashas Ha'azinu – Shabbos Shuva

“AND ISRAEL WAXED FAT AND KICKED...” (DEUTERONOMY 32:15)

MOST COMMENTARIES EXPLAIN the above verse that B'nei Yisrael will begin to see their success and accomplishments as, “By my strength and by my might” (Deuteronomy 8:17). These feelings of hubris will eventually lead the Jewish people astray. The Ralbag has an alternate explanation: B'nei Yisrael will receive generous blessings from Hashem. This reward, the Ralbag continues, will cause the Jews to turn to idol worship – not out of arrogance, but in a misguided attempt to receive even more gifts from those gods. They will think that the false gods can supply them with more of these material comforts than Hashem.

The Ralbag's explanation seems to paint the Jewish people as a foolish lot. The blessing and goodness they receive, according to the Ralbag, triggers a thirst in their souls for more and more physical pleasures. This desire causes them to turn their backs on their original provider – Hashem – to find new sources. This reasoning seems completely absurd. Here they have a proven Benefactor who has kept His promises and rewarded the Jews with abundant blessings – enough to make the Jews comfortable and “fat,” implying that their needs are met and then some. However, they aren't satisfied. They demand more, and turn to the unproven false gods in the hope that they will furnish them with these unnecessary luxuries. Any simpleton would be aware of the obvious fact that Hashem will not react in a positive way to their ungrateful and rebellious idolatry. Don't they realize that this grab for more can cause them to lose all they already have? Isn't it irrational for them to show the greatest ingratitude possible to Hashem who has given them so much good?

This attitude is indeed illogical and foolish; but this is the natural outcome of materialistic desires. As the *pasuk* expresses it, “they waxed fat” – a fat which, according to the Ralbag, covers their hearts and minds, completely distorting their thinking processes. Once a person indulges in physical pleasures, a fire of desire is ignited and every further indulgence only fans the flames further. As our sages astutely observe, “No man dies having attained even half of his physical desires.” These flames can melt our common sense and lead us to take actions that we would never take if we had kept our proper perspective. *Ta'avah* – desire – can blind us and totally pervert our logic, causing us to act in a self-destructive and counter-productive manner. In the pursuit of even greater pleasures, our desire can cause us to take actions that prevent us from achieving that very same goal.

We live in a society that has achieved a degree of comfort and luxury far beyond our ancestors. Even families of modest means have a standard of living that their great-grandparents would have only dreamed to reach. But these benefits come with a risk – the danger of falling into a never-ending pursuit of more pleasures and material goods, and compromising the clarity of our intellect. Let us be aware of the dangers that lurk in the comforts and pleasures of contemporary society, and remind ourselves constantly that we are just “passing through” the way station of this world. As the Mesilas Yesharim puts it, the material benefits available here are only to be used as a means to the ultimate goal of our existence: to serve Hashem and perfect ourselves through the performance of His *mitzvos*, and thereby merit the eternal bliss of the only true pleasure – being close to our Creator in the everlasting World-to-Come.

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