

# Mussar HaTorah

ת"סב

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Re'eh

“AND YOU SHALL OBSERVE TO DO ALL THE STATUTES AND THE ORDINANCES WHICH I SET BEFORE YOU...” (DEVARIM 11:32)

**This will eventually lead to the destruction of his body and soul**

RABBEINU BECHAYE, in his introduction to this *parasha*, discusses the effects of laziness. He explains that one can be lazy in the upkeep of his house. If the homeowner chooses to perform normal maintenance and make minor repairs to his roof in a timely fashion, he can fix it relatively easily and inexpensively. If, on the other hand, he chooses to delay and wait, the situation will usually deteriorate into a much more costly and destructive situation. Similarly, Rabbeinu Bechaye continues, one can be lazy with the upkeep of his soul. If one chooses to put in the effort to improve his *middos*, he will eventually reach his goal. If, on the other hand, one allows his desires to continue on its normal path, this will eventually lead to the destruction of his body and soul. Just as an untended field grows wild thorns and weeds, so too the untended soul will grow unwanted and negative character traits (see Mishlei 24:30-33).

The first two character traits discussed by the Mesilas Yesharim are *zehirus* – watchfulness – and *zerizus* – zealotry. The Mesilas Yesharim explains that one must exercise *zehirus* to avoid committing any wrongdoings, and one must implement *zerizus* to insure that he is doing the positive commandments. It would seem that these are two separate tracks; that one can neglect putting in the necessary effort into the pursuit of the positive, and yet not actively sin. If so, let us examine the paradox of Rabbeinu Bechaye's lazy person – the one who is too lazy to focus on the lofty goals of character improvement. We could understand that he will not perform many positive *mitzvos*. But can't this indolent individual still carefully refrain from sin and avoid backsliding into evil character habits? Why does the Rabbeinu Bechaye say that without a positive program of moral improvement, humans will eventually destroy their souls?

**There are no two tracks**

Rabbeinu Bechaye is offering us a glimpse into the dangerous nature of human desires. Permissible actions of eating, drinking and other pleasures, if done without any regard for restraint or self-control, will lead to prohibited deeds and ultimately to self-destruction. There are no two tracks – rather there are two directions we can travel on a single track: one of upward growth and self-improvement, and one of downward backsliding into decay and degenerate behavior. To slide downhill does not require any effort; merely living without effort to grow, without any moral or spiritual focus in life, with carefree indulgence in one's pleasures and desires – even permissible ones – is a sure-fire recipe for self-destruction. This is the way desire functions. We must exert positive effort – *zerizus* – in monitoring our behavior and guiding ourselves onto a gradual course of step-by-step moral improvement. If we don't put in that effort, then by definition, we will naturally follow the force of gravity, of our material nature, and slide into negative behavior and prohibited desires. If there's no *zerizus*, then we are in violation of *zehirus*.

**We will naturally follow the force of gravity**

There is no field that is just neglected and stays the same; it will grow weeds, thorns and dangerous plants. We, too, cannot go through life on autopilot. We have the tools of *mussar* and character improvement to refine our traits – we need only to make the effort to use them. May we merit to tend the divinely granted field of our soul with care and diligence, and see it flower and bear the sweet fruits of self-perfection.

Based on the talks of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l, Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim – RSA

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