



GROWTH

At The

SHABBAT TABLE

PARSHAT SHOFTIM

The Mistaken Rationalization

"Only he shall not have too many horses for himself, so that he will not return the people to Egypt in order to increase horses, for Hashem has said to you: 'You shall no longer return on this road again.' And he shall not have too many wives, so that his heart not turn astray, and he shall not greatly increase silver and gold for himself" (Devarim 17:16-17).

Chazal famously teach that Shlomo HaMelech, the wisest of all men, rationalized his way towards violating these guidelines, saying that the Torah was suggesting that overdoing it with the wealth and wives would cause a king to stray, and he was confident that his wisdom would prevent him from stumbling in these pitfalls. Yet, as we all know, this was King Solomon's big mistake, and eventually, his numerous horses, wealth, and wives ended in disaster.

In a similar vein, the Gemara teaches that it is forbidden to read by candlelight on Shabbat for concern that it might lead to tilting the lamp for a little more light, thus moving the oil/fuel towards or away from the flame, which constitutes lighting or extinguishing a fire (a Biblical prohibition on Shabbat). As the Talmud recounts, R' Yishmael thought he would be fine reading by a candle, certain that he would exhibit the self-control to withhold himself from tilting the light. However, as he got immersed in his learning and the light dimmed, he instinctively reached out his hand to adjust the position of the flame. It is disputed whether he actually ended up fixing the lighting or stopped suddenly before, but in any event, the Gemara concludes with R' Yishmael's proclamation: "How great are the words of the Sages."

One can't help wondering, what was Shlomo HaMelech thinking? And generations later, what was R' Yishmael thinking? Where, exactly, did they go wrong?

The Torah commands a king not to amass too much wealth, and to not have a large number of wives and horses. Hashem then adds: "so that his heart not be led astray." Shlomo HaMelech read the verse, and his takeaway was that G-d doesn't want a king to chase excessive physical pleasures because it *might* cause him to go off His path. With that

thought, he reassured himself that this doesn't apply to him, and that since he had his head on his shoulders, he would be fine. This was his mistake; he misunderstood the true intention of the *pasuk*. Contrary to its simple understanding, the verse wasn't advising against immersion in physicality due to the *possibility* of being led astray; it is actually telling us the reality of the situation. Hashem was conveying, "If you overdo it, you WILL be led off My path." That's just how it is; that's how the Creator implemented its nature. Thus, Shlomo HaMelech undermined the powerful nature of these words in the *pasuk*, and the cause-and-effect set forth in the verse took its course.

After Shlomo HaMelech's mistake, it became well-known that even the wisest and most righteous are subject to pitfalls set forth in the Torah. So, of course R' Yishmael knew this. However, his reasoning was that it was specifically Biblical matters in which precautions set forth have guaranteed negative realities if transgressed. Rabbinic enactments, on the other hand, were only decreed to prevent possible violation of Torah-commandments. This was R' Yishmael's thought process, and he learned "the hard way" that such was not the case. He ignored the Rabbinic enactment against reading by a candle on Shabbat and ended up coming to tilt (or almost tilt) the flame. At that moment, he learned that it wasn't only true by precautions in the Torah; by Rabbinic decrees, as well, boundaries were set knowing that without them, one WILL eventually come to transgress Torah-level offenses.

This insight sheds light upon the choice of wording as well. After R' Yishmael reached for the candle, one would have expected him to exclaim, "Now I understand why the *chachamim* made such a decree," or something along those lines. Yet, his reaction was a bit more surprising. "How great are the words of the Sages," he said. But now, we understand his intention, because it was then that he realized the inherent greatness in their words and enactments...

(Based on a d'var Torah from R' Refael Brillier)

"The pure righteous do not complain of the dark but increase the light. They do not complain of evil but increase justice. They do not complain of heresy but increase faith. They do not complain of ignorance but increase wisdom." (R' Abraham Isaac Kook)

Refuah Sheleimah, b'toch she'ar cholei Yisrael:

Ariel Ben Frida Miriam Bat Bakol Frida Bat Yaffa Rahamim Ben Shifra
Heleni Orna Bat Chen Chana Yitzchak Ben Naama Chana Bat Malka
Ariel Ben Olga Yehudah Ben Tzivvia Esther Bar Frida Zilpa Bat Simcha
Nir Gutman Ben Miriam Noah Yisrael Ben Victoria Yaffa Sara Bat Tzipora