



PARSHA ENCOUNTERS

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Parshas Bo ✍️ Rabbi Yisroel Langer

Omens

The Torah commands us not to be mindful of omens and superstitions, as it says, “Lo Sinachashu” (Vayikra 19:26). The Chinuch (Mitzvah 249) explains that the reason behind this mitzvah is that it’s inappropriate for people from the holy nation of G-d to make decisions based on utter foolishness and lies such as omens. Moreover, to believe that an omen has some power and affect detracts from one’s belief that Hashem is in complete control in all situations. The Shulchan Aruch (Y.D. 179:3) based on the gemorah in Sanhedrin (65b) gives various examples of omens which should not be acted upon. For example, if bread falls from one’s mouth or a stick from one’s hand, or if a deer crosses in front of one’s path, it is forbidden for one to cancel his planned activities for the day based on these omens. Similarly, it is forbidden for one to tell his creditor or a tax collector that he does not wish to pay money at the beginning of the month as this may be a bad omen for him (i.e. it may cause him to incur many losses throughout the month).

Stipulating a “Sign” in Advance

We find two righteous people in Tanach who acted based on omens, Eliezer the servant of Avraham, and Yehonason the son of King Shaul. It is inconceivable that these righteous individuals would sin by making a decision through the use of an omen and then be successful in their missions. If they had sinned in any way, Hashem would certainly not have let them attain their goals. The Radak (Shmuel 14:9) explains that the only time it is forbidden to act based on an omen or sign, is if the sign wasn’t stated beforehand. Eliezer stipulated **prior** to meeting with the potential wife for Yitzchak that the girl who gives he and the camels to drink will be the girl for Yitzchak. Since Eliezer

did this ahead of time, he did not violate the prohibition of Nichush- acting based on omens or signs. (The Radak gives the same answer to explain the conduct of Yehonason.) However, the Rambam and other rishonim disagree with the Radak and hold even when one makes a siman (sign) in advance, he has violated the prohibition of Nichush. (Other rationales are given to explain the conduct of Eliezer and Yehonason, see Chidushei Haran and Tosfos in Chullin 95b, see also Bach Y.D. 179.) Both of these opinions are brought by the Rema in Shulchan Aruch (Y.D. 179:4.)

Good Mazal

The Gemorah (Chullin 95b, based on the Chidushei Haran’s understanding of Rashi) says that although one may not rely on an omen, there are three instances that one may use one along with other factors, to help him make a decision. When a person gets married, builds a house, or has a child and shortly afterwards has three good business deals, it is a sign that he is in a state of good mazal and it may do him well to increase his business activity. However, if the opposite is true, and he has three bad business deals he may want to “lay low” and decrease his business activity as his mazal may not be that great at that time.

Flip a Coin

If one cannot make up his mind about what to do, he is permitted to flip a coin to make a decision. When one flips a coin and makes his decision based on the results, he does not feel that his decision is necessarily the right thing to do. Rather, he was undecided, and he is leaving his decision up to “chance”! (Heard from Harav Yisroel Belsky Shlita)

HALACHA ENCOUNTERS

Divine Intervention

The following sheilah was brought to Hagaon R' Yitzchak Zilberstein Shlita (Borchi Nafshi, end of parshas Mikeitz). There was a couple having difficulty with shalom bayis. Both parties felt that it was time to divorce. The divorce process was taking an unusually long time. After a number of years, they finally made it to beis din where the get (divorce document) was being written up. Right after the sofer (scribe) finished writing the get, before the husband had a chance to give it to his wife, a cup of coffee spilled on the get deeming it posul (unfit). At that point, the wife called out, "This is all b'hashgacha (Divine providence), I no longer want the divorce." She felt Hashem was sending them a message not to go through with the divorce! The husband agreed with his wife, and the divorce was off. The beis din wished them a mazel tov and complimented them on their high level of emunah. The next day, Harav Zilberstein Shlita was asked if this was a violation of the prohibition of Nichush- making a decision based on an omen or sign. Although Harav Zilberstein brings a ruling from a gadol hador that would seem to indicate that there is a concern of "nichush" in this situation, however the actions of the Chazon Ish and Chasam Sofer would seem to indicate that they did not view this as "nichush".

The Chazon Ish was once sitting down to eat when he was interrupted by visitors. After they left, his wife had to warm up the food again. Again visitors disturbed him, and again his wife was going to have to warm up the food. The Chazon Ish told his wife that this is a siman from shamayim (heaven) that there is something forbidden about the food, and he would no longer eat it. Likewise, the Chasam Sofer once wrote a teshuvah (response). Upon completing the teshuvah, a bottle of ink spilled on it rendering it illegible. The Chasam Sofer took this as a siman from shamayim not to publicize his psak. (see sefer Borchi Nafshi ibid, for the rest of the details of the story.)

In response to a similar sheilah to the above cases, Hagaon R' Binyamin Zilber Shlita (Az Nidbru) also ruled that these situations are not nichush. The rationale as to why these cases differ from the cases of nichush mentioned in Shulchan Aruch is as follows. When one has bread that falls from his mouth, that has no connection to a business

deal that will take place later that day. To believe that falling bread will bring bad luck is superstitious and is therefore prohibited. However, if one sees a direct link between a siman (sign) and an act that he intends to do, one is permitted to view the sign as a message from shamayim. In the words of Hagaon R' Chaim Kanievsky (in his commentary to the Yerushalmi Shabbos —end of Perek B'meh Isha) it's like a "bas kol" (voice from heaven) telling you how to proceed. Therefore, in the situation of the "get" that had coffee spill all over it, the couple had a right to view this as a sign not to go through with the divorce. In the case of the Chazon Ish, since he kept being interrupted from eating his food, he was allowed to view this as a siman not to eat it. This is not superstition, rather one is being sent a message from above. However, it should be added, that one may want to discuss the matter over with a gadol before acting upon "messages", as we are not always capable of properly interpreting them.

Segulos

The Chochmas Adam (klal 89:3) says that any remedy that a person follows which can be understood according to the wisdom of medicine\science, or "segula" is permitted. Anything else that a person does to help a situation is nichush. In order to differentiate between nichush and "segulah", one must know the origins of the segulah or at least have some "tradition" related to it. There are some activities that the poskim dispute as to whether they are nichush or segulahs. For example, some people wear a red string to ward off ayin hara (see Halacha Encounters parshas Vayechi). Although this is condoned by some poskim as a segulah, others (Darchei Teshuvah Y.D. 179:21- quoting the Reishis Chochmah) maintain that it is nichush. Before one takes on such practices, they should consult their rav. All agree that the best remedy in all situations is to increase one's limud hatorah, tefillah, sincere teshuvah and overall Avodas Hashem.

Rabbi Langer learns full-time at the kollel.