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Parshas Acharei Mos - Kedoshim, 12 Iyar, 5785

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Chizuk - Inspiration

The year was 1844. The notorious Nicholai the First was the Tsar of Russia. Count Sergei S. Uvarov (the "Count") was Nicholai's minister of education for the entire Russian Empire. The Count's goal and mission? To implement a malevolent scheme aimed at converting Jews to Russian Orthodoxy – the first step of which was to order the teaching of the Russian language in all of the schools in Russia. Russian Jewry was in a quandary. Would they relent and begin to teach Russian in Yeshivas? What else could be done? Perhaps a trip to St. Petersburg, the Russian capital at the time, to directly appeal to the Count to rescind his order could work. Perhaps a substantial bribe could be offered. Perhaps traveling to St. Petersburg to pressure the Count would not work or even be counterproductive. Jewish leaders gathered in the home of Rabbi Yisroel Salanter ZT"L ("Reb Yisroel") in Kovno to discuss their options.

Reb Yisroel rose to his feet and declared, "We travel to St. Petersburg, now!" Now Kovno to St. Petersburg was a trip of about 500 miles. They asked, "Is Reb Yisroel coming as well? Generally, these types of trips are usually undertaken by just us, the Shtadlanim (the advocates who would appeal to the Count)." Rav Salanter answered affirmatively.

When they reached St. Petersburg, Reb Yisroel addressed the Shtadlanim. Everyone thought that Reb Yisroel was about to detail his plan of how to pressure the Count. To everyone's shock, Reb Yisroel said, "Now, let us discuss whether we should put pressure on the Count to rescind his order." The group of Shtadlanim responded, "We thought Reb Yisroel already decided that we should put pressure on the Count when we gathered back in Kovno and that is why, upon Reb Yisroel's direction, we are here in St. Petersburg?"

Reb Yisroel answered, "That is not why I said we should go to St. Petersburg. When we were in Kovno, we could not think objectively and any decisions we would have made would have been colored by bias. St. Petersburg is about 500 miles away from Kovno. In addition, the weather is

rather cold this time of year. Knowing that we had a cold and long journey ahead of us, could have affected our decision making of whether to travel to St. Petersburg to pressure the Count. Accordingly, I said we should travel to St. Petersburg. Now that we are here, any bias we may have had has been removed and we can think honestly and objectively about what to do."

On The Parsha

In Parshas Kedoshim, we find that Hashem commands us to be holy, because He is holy.

The Ramban offers insight into Hashem's command and relates it to a man's integrity. He explains that one could technically observe all of the prohibitions of the Torah and still not be a man of integrity. He calls such a person, a "Naval Birshus haTorah" – a scoundrel within the permissive boundaries of the Torah. Meaning, a person might follow the letter of the law while violating its spirit, indulging in technically permissible activities that nonetheless contradict the Torah's values. Therefore, Hashem says to be holy and observe not only the letter of the law but also its spirit.

Later in the Parsha, we find a fascinating practical insight from the Kli Yakar regarding three specific commandments stated in the following verse: "You shall not steal, you shall not deny falsely, and you shall not lie to one another." (Vayikra 19:11). The Kli Yakar explains that this is a progression:

"Do not steal, do not deny falsely, and do not lie to one another. These are three levels, each one higher than the other. First, one steals another's money, then when confronted by the owner, one denies it, and then when brought to court and made to take an oath, one swears falsely. That is why the Torah connects this to the prohibition 'do not swear falsely in My name.'"

What is noteworthy in the Kli Yakar's commentary, is his explicit identification of the "slippery slope" of moral compromise. He does not identify three separate prohibitions but rather illustrates how one transgression

leads naturally to the next in a dangerous progression. The initial act of theft creates a situation where the thief is tempted to deny his actions when confronted, which in turn creates pressure to commit the even more serious offense of a false oath when brought before a court.

The Kli Yakar teaches us that compromises in integrity rarely remain isolated incidents. Rather, one moral compromise often necessitates another. What begins as a seemingly minor lapse in judgment creates circumstances that tempt us towards increasingly serious transgressions.

This understanding of the slippery slope adds depth to our understanding of integrity. True integrity requires vigilance against even small moral compromises, recognizing that they can be the first step on a path to more serious transgressions.

As we internalize the lessons of Kedoshim and the wisdom of the Kli Yakar, we are reminded that integrity is not merely about avoiding major ethical violations, it is about being attentive to the small choices that either strengthen us, or conversely, weaken our moral resolve.

Halacha – Jewish Law

QUESTION: Our company is based in New York which is an “at-will employment-state.” This means that, unless we have a contract – they can fire us at any time even without two weeks’ notice. Generally speaking, we receive a cost of living raise that ranges from 3% to 5% each year. Senior management told us that this year, the company needed to reign in expenses, and we were told that if we forgo our cost of living raise this year, the company would get back on track and raises would be paid next year. We agreed to forego our raises for the year.

Later, I found out that while raises were withheld from us, Senior Management gave themselves a raise. I feel that we were lied to, and I am really surprised because generally speaking, I find that Senior Management is comprised of good and honest people. I do not know whether to tell my coworkers what Senior Management has done. If I do tell them, and Senior Management finds out that I told them, they will be angry at me. If I do not tell my coworkers, then I feel that I am complicit in Senior Management’s lie and that I am not being honest with my coworkers.

I have two questions: Was Senior Management’s behavior acceptable and should I tell my coworkers about what Senior Management has done?

ANSWER: At first glance, it would appear that Senior Management’s behavior is very disturbing. However, after some reflection, it could very well be that Senior Management was not intending on denying you something that they did not deny themselves. Perhaps in years’ prior, they withheld raises for themselves while they paid you and your colleagues a raise - this year, it is your turn to forgo a raise. In your question, you described Senior Management as being comprised of, “...good and honest people.” We are obligated to judge good people favorably and this is a Torah Mitzvah. (See Sefer Chafetz Chaim, Be’er Maim Chaim in the introduction – Positive Commandment #3). This is not limited to judges as we see that the Mitzvah applies to men and women at all times (Sefer HaChinuch #235). Accordingly, you should give Senior Management the benefit of the doubt that they have not done anything untoward, and that withholding raises from you was warranted - perhaps they withheld raises from themselves the year before. Further, you should not tell your coworkers about what Senior Management has done as it may anger them unnecessarily. We would be wise to remember the Gemorah in Shabbos (127b) “One who judges his friend as worthy, will himself be judged worthy by Hashem.”

*“May I back out of a school carpool that
I have already committed to?”
“Should I report a co-worker who is acting dishonestly?”*

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