

Singer-Jordan Edition Shoftim

Perceptions • Elul 4, 5784 • September 7, 2024 • Issue #2062

The difficult thing about reading *Sefer Hoshea* and others like it, is trying to understand how the people of that time could believe in God, know that Torah came from Him, and still completely turn their backs on Him. Were they that suicidal?

Furthermore, they had prophets who spoke to God in their day. Even though some of them were false prophets, they obviously had real prophets too. And I'm guessing that the real prophets were completely righteous and the false ones were not. That should have made deciding who to listen to easier. And yet so many chose to listen to the false prophets and throw caution to the wind, resulting in a disastrous "storm" of Biblical proportions.

Today is different. Today there is so much doubt in the existence of God and Torah from Sinai. It's been thousands of years since we have had any prophets, so we really haven't been directly in touch with God now for the longest time. Today it is amazing that anyone still believes, let alone learns Torah and performs *mitzvos*!

Those people obviously had free will, because they *chose* to worship idols and act faithlessly. If they hadn't, then God would not have been angry at them or punished them. But how, if they were so clear about God and Torah?

The question is even stronger about the Jewish people after Korach's rebellion was an unmitigated failure. We can see, sort of, how Korach might have been able to delude himself and others about the worthiness of their complaint against Moshe *Rabbeinu*. But once their rebellion failed in no uncertain terms, how could the surviving Jews not be contrite and accuse Moshe of unnecessarily killing Korach and his followers?

The answer came to me as I was driving on the highway the other day, though I did not immediately connect it to the questions above. As I watched some very irresponsible drivers risk their lives and the lives of others, by cutting in to a lane where there was barely enough space for a single car, I wondered how they could be so

reckless. Had the driver ahead of them pumped their breaks for a split second, a real possibility, it would have resulted in a deadly multi-car pile-up.

They were playing the odds. Even though they do not really know what they are, since it is highly unlikely that they have researched them, they believe the odds are in their favor. So did all the risk-takers who were either injured or killed from such driving practices, but who thinks about them? In fact reckless drivers act as if they have some kind of supernatural protection, which if true is costing them in the long run. Every time a person relies on a miracle to get away with something they shouldn't have tried, the miracle comes off their reward in the World to Come (*Shabbos* 32a).

The bottom line is that a slim possibility of “success” combined with an illicit desire is a potent combination. The two together can convince a person to ignore knowledge that tells them the smart thing to do, so that they can do the dumb thing they desire to do. As the *Gemora* says, “a person only sins once a spirit of insanity enters them” (*Sotah* 3a), and that is where it comes from. That is the “spirit” of insanity the *Gemora* is warning all sinners about.

Back to the original question. Let's say two people are trying to decide if a certain food is *kosher*; one wanting to eat it and the other able to do without it. It has a *bechsher*, but one they do not recognize. A third person then says, “I'm not sure, but it could be that the *bechsher* is okay.”

At that point, the one who wants to eat the food hears, “It's probably okay and therefore I can eat it.” The one who can do without it hears, “It is questionable at best, so why take the chance?” That is how *ta'avah*—desire—combines with doubt to cause a person to make the wrong decision in life.

There used to be an overwhelming *ta'avah* for idol worship before the rabbis prayed to have it removed (*Yoma* 69b). But as long as they were clear about what God wanted, it gave them the necessary fear of God to fight back their *ta'avah* and not worship idols.

But once false prophets entered the picture, people had room to doubt what God really wanted, or how He really felt about what they were doing. It was only a little bit of room for a little bit of doubt, but that's all *ta'avah* needs to push a person to take terrible risks in life. It's only after God finally lowers the boom that the doubt vanishes, and people can see how their mistaken desires caused them to lose everything. As Yirmiyahu *HaNavi* asked, “*Eichah*—How?” This is the tragic answer.

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