

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XXIX: Acharei Mot (Lev. 16:1–18:30)

Essay 6. Distancing ourselves from sin in private as well as in public

שַׁבָּת פָּרַק א' תָּנָא דְּבֵי אֱלִיָּהוּ: מַעֲשֵׂה בְּתַלְמִיד אֶחָד שֶׁשָּׁנָה הֲרַבָּה, וְקָרָא הֲרַבָּה, וּמַת בְּחֻצֵי יָמָיו. וְהִוָּתָה אִשְׁתּוֹ נוֹטֶלֶת תְּפִילִּין, וְכוּ'. לֹא הָיָה אָדָם מְחַזְרֵה דְּבָר. פַּעַם אָסַת נְתַאֲרְחִיתִי אֶצְלָה, וְכוּ'. בִּימֵי לִיבּוּנָהּ, מַהוּ אֶצְלִידָ? אוֹכֵל עִמִּי, וְשׁוֹתָה עִמִּי, וְיֹשֵׁן עִמִּי בְּקִירוֹב בְּשָׁר, וְלֹא עָלְתָה דַעְתּוֹ עַל דְּבָר אַחֵר. וְאָמַרְתִּי לָהּ: בְּרוּךְ הַמְּקוֹם שֶׁהֲרַגּוּ, וְלֹא נִשָּׂא פָּנָיִם לַתּוֹרָה ע"כ.

Tracate **Shabbat**, the first chapter:

A Baraita is taught in the school of Elijah:¹ [There was] **an incident of one student who studied much** [Mishna] **and read much** [Torah], and served Torah scholars, **but died at half his days** [i.e., midlife]. **His wife** [in her bitterness] **would take his Tefillin** and go around with them to synagogues and study halls, and she said to [the rabbis]: It is written in the Torah: “For it is your life and the length of your days” (Deut. 30:20). [If so,] my husband who studied much, and read much, and served Torah scholars extensively, why did he die at half his days? **No one would respond to her at all.**

[Elijah said]: “**One time I was a guest in her** [house], and she was relating that entire event. And I said to her: ‘My daughter, during the period of your menstruation, how did he act toward you?’ She said to me: ‘Heaven forbid, he did not touch me even with a little finger.’ [I asked:] ‘**In the days of your white** [garments, after the menstrual flow ended, and you were just counting seven clean days] **how did he act toward you?**’ [She said to me:] ‘**He ate with me, and drank with me, and slept with me with bodily contact, but it did not enter his mind about something else** [i.e., conjugal relations].’ **And I said to her: ‘Blessed is the Omnipresent who killed him** [for this sin], **as he did not show respect to the Torah.**’ ” The Torah said: “And to a woman in the separation of her impurity you should not approach” (Lev. 18:19) [i.e., even mere affectionate contact is prohibited].

- Shabbat 13a-b

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¹ Ketubot 106a explains that the prophet Elijah appeared to Rabbi Anan and imparted a number of teachings to him. These included a number of Baraitot that are found in the Talmud. The teachings are also compiled in a separate work entitled Tana D'vei Eliyahu.

קשה מפני מה היתה אשתו נוטלת תפיליו ולא דברים אחרים, ועוד מאי טעמא לא הנה שום אדם מחזירה דבר, ומה רצה לומר שלא נשא פנים לתורה?

Question 1: **A difficulty is why did his wife take his Tefillin and not other things?**

Question 2: **Also, what is the reason that no one would respond to her at all?**

Question 3: **What does Elijah want to say, by telling her that [her husband] did not show respect to the Torah?**

וגיש לומר שהאשה הזאת היתה באה בטענה משום דכתיב "פי הוא חייך וארץ ימיה". וכי היכי דלא תימא דאין הכי נמי שהיה לומר הרבה, אבל לא היה לבו שלם, ומשום כך נפל בחטא. וקרא ד"פיה היא חייך" היינו במי שמקנים ולא במי שלומד, כמו שכתבו התוספות בקידושין (דף ל"ד, ד"ה גברי בעו חיי וכו') ועיי"ש. משום הכי היתה נוטלת תפיליו כלומר שלעולם לא הלך ארבע אמות בלא תפילין, ואם כן אי אפשר שהסית דעתו ונפל בחטא, שהרי מצנת תפילין היא שלא יסית דעתו מהם. ועוד שקשאדם עושה כל מאמצי פחו לשמור עצמו מהחטא, מן השמים מסייעין אותו ומשמרים אותו, כדכתיב "צופה רשע לצדיק" וכו' "ה' לא יעזבנו בידו". ועוד כתיב "ה' ישמרך מכל רע" וכו' "רגלי חסידיו ישמר", ולא היה שום אדם שידע לו שום חטא.

Answer 1: **It can be said that this woman was coming with the claim because it is written, "Choose life—if you and your offspring would live— by loving the L-rd your G-d, heeding His commands, and holding fast to Him. For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure" (Deut. 30:19-20). How is it that no one said, "Yes, it is indeed so that [your husband] would say much Torah, but his heart was not whole, and because of this, he fell into sin"?** Scripture [says]: **"It is your life"** (Prov. 4:13) regarding one who fulfills G-d's commandments, and not for one who only learns the Torah without observing the commandments, as the Tosafists wrote in tractate Kiddushin (page 34a, the words starting "a man needs life"), and see there.

Because of this possibility, to counter any suggestion that her husband had fallen into sin, she would take his Tefillin with her, as if to say that he never walked four *amot* without wearing his Tefillin. If so, it's impossible that he would become distracted and would fall into sin, for the mitzvah of Tefillin is that one shouldn't become distracted from them. In other words, one shouldn't forget that he is wearing Tefillin, and should therefore conduct himself in a holy manner as long as he is wearing them.

Furthermore, when a person makes "all his powerful efforts"² to guard himself from sin, from Heaven they help him and they guard him, as it is written, "The wicked watches for the righteous, seeking to put him to death. The L-rd will not leave him in his hands; He will not let him be condemned in judgment" (Ps. 57:12). It is also written, "The L-rd will preserve you from all harm" (Ps. 121:7), "He guards the steps of His faithful" (I Sam. 2:9), and there was no man that didn't know any sin.

² Cf. Job 36:19, "... all your powerful efforts" [וכל מאמצי-כה].

ומשום הכי לא היו יכולים להשיב לה דבר עד שנתארחתי אצלה וכו', ברוך המקום שהרגו וכו', כלומר הואיל שהיא הנה מתקרב עצמו אצל החטא, אין עוד סברא לומר שה' ישמרהו, שאדרבא הוא הנה לו להרחיק עצמו מן העבירה ומן הפיעור והדומה לו. והשתא שלא עשה משמרת למשמרתה של תורה, ואדרבא נתקרב אצל החטא, בנדאי שאין הקב"ה שומריו עוד, שהרי אינו נכנס בגדר החסידים ואין הכי נמי שאפשר שגפלה באיזה חטא.

Answer 2: Because of this proactive defense on the wife's part, no one was able to respond to her at all, until "I was a guest in her [house] . . . and I said to her: 'Blessed is the Omnipresent who killed him [for this sin].' " That is, no one else thought to ask about his conduct when he wasn't wearing the Tefillin, until Elijah came. Since he drew himself near to the sin, by sleeping in the same bed with his wife and touching her during the seven clean days of her monthly cycle, there is no longer any logical understanding to say that G-d will guard him, for to the contrary, he should have distanced himself from the transgression and "from unseemliness and the like."³ But now that he didn't "establish a safeguard for the prized possession"⁴ of Torah, and to the contrary he brought himself near to a sin, certainly the Holy One, Blessed be He, will not guard him further. For he did not enter into the fence of the pious, i.e., he did not carefully observe the rabbinic enactments that are designed to keep a person from violating a Torah law, and it is indeed so that it's possible that he fell into some sin.

כדאמרינו בגילקוט על פסוק "כרחק מזרח ממערב הרחיק ממנו את-פשעינו", לא ליבעי לאיניש למימר רחמנא רחיק יתנא מן החטא, אלא רחמנא רחיק חטא מינו. דשמע מינה שהחובה מוטלת על האדם להרחיק עצמו מן החטא, והקב"ה מרחיק החטא שלא יתקרב אל האדם הואיל שגבר הרחיק עצמו. ואף על פי שהיה לומד הרבה, מכל מקום לא נשא פנים לתורה לשומריו מן החטא, הואיל שלא עשה משמרת ונתקרב במה שהיה לו להתרחק. ועוד דעבר אדרבא וקעובר על דברי חכמים חייב מיתה, דכתיב "ופרץ גדר" וכו'.

Answer 3: As it says in the Yalkut (Shimoni on Nach, remez 859:5) on the verse, "As east is far from west, so far has He removed our sins from us" (Ps. 103:12), Rav Yirmeyah said, it is not appropriate for a person to say, "The Merciful One should distance us from the sin," but rather, "The Merciful One should distance sin from us," as it says [in the conclusion of that verse], 'He has removed our sins from us.' " We hear from this that the obligation is imposed upon every man to distance himself from sin, and then the Holy One, Blessed be He, will distance the sin so that it won't come near to the man, since he has already distanced himself from it.⁵ Even though [the woman's husband] learned much, in any event he didn't show respect to the Torah, to guard himself from sin, since he didn't establish a safeguard, and he drew near to what he should have distanced himself from. Also, one who violates a rabbinic decree and who violates the words of the sages is deserving of death,⁶ as it is written, "he who breaches a fence will be bitten by a snake" (Eccl. 10:8).

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³ Chullin 44b.

⁴ Cf. Yevamot 21a, "Establish a safeguard for My prized possession" [משמרת למשמרת].

⁵ See also Chapter LVII: Kinnot, Essay 6.

⁶ One who violates a rabbinic law is also in violation of the Torah law of Deut. 17:11, "You shall act in accordance with the instructions given you and the ruling handed down to you; you must not deviate from the verdict that they announce to you either to the right or to the left."