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אור ישראל

Living Life Deeper

PARSHAS
EIKEV

BY RABBI NETANEL NAAMAT
RABBI NAFTALI ZIONS
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STIFF-NECKED OR STEADFAST?

While describing the sins of *Klal Yisrael* throughout the desert, Moshe *Rabbeinu* refers to the Jewish nation as a “stiff-necked people.”¹ This negative characterization of the *Bnei Yisrael* is found many times in the Torah, and it is used to explain why they continued to sin despite all that Hashem had done for them.² This, though, raises the question - are the Jewish people forever doomed to sin based on this national attribute?

Actually, we find in the *Medrash*³ the exact counterpoint to this idea. The *Medrash* states that this is not a negative trait - or at least, it doesn't have to be! “Stiff-necked” depends on how one uses it. One can be stubborn, inflexible and rigid, or one may be determined, persistent and tenacious. In fact, says the *Medrash*, this quality has allowed the Jewish people to cling to their faith for so many years, despite having their homes stolen from them, their countries expelling them, and even their lives taken from them. In the words of the *Medrash*, “Either Judaism or death!”

Though it is true, when the Jewish nation is enticed by the blandishments of the world, it can be difficult to convince us to turn away from them. However, when a Jewish person clings to Hashem, to Torah, and to *Mitzvos*, they can use this quality to enhance their connection to Hashem and withstand the challenges of life.⁴

There are areas in our own lives that we may feel ‘stuck.’ Perhaps we are even convinced that we don't have what it takes to change! While we may be prone to our habits, we can use our understanding of this trait to move us out of whatever rut we may be in. And in regards to the good habits that we have developed, we can use our ‘stubbornness’ to remain dedicated to our Torah and *Mitzvos*, and not allow ourselves to be swayed from our convictions.

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Mind the Gap - Taking the Next Step

The stubborn person is resistant to even the most amazing miracles.¹ How, then, can a stubborn person change?

Instead of attempting to become more easygoing, it may be wiser to focus on changing one's value system. We are all easygoing when it comes to things that don't matter to us, and when the stakes are high, it is hard to get us to budge.

Changing one's value system will channel one's energy into things that truly matter - studying a difficult area in Torah, working on challenging *Middos*, etc.

But how does one change their value system?

The great news is that most of us already truly value a connection to Hashem, we just get caught up in the daily grind of life. As an exercise, think about what you want your friends to say about you - that you know the best pizza place in town, or that you go out of your way to help others?

If we spend a couple of minutes a day to remind ourselves what we truly value, and what it takes to get there, we will direct our natural tenacity in the right direction.

1 *Akeidas Yitzchak*, *Shemos* 32:9

1 *Devarim* 9:6, 13

2 *Daas Torah*, *Devarim* p. 169

3 *Shemos Rabbah* 42:9

4 *Eshed HaNechalim ibid.* s.v. אתה סובר, *Eitz Yosef ibid.* s.v. ג', חצופים

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Just as a master chef uses each ingredient in precise measure to produce an exquisite dish, one must always take care to use each Middah in precise measure to cultivate a radiant Torah personality.

- *Sefer Orchos Tzadikim*, Introduction

AN UNEXPECTED CHANGE

I* had just gotten married, and was still savoring the 'newly-married' feeling when my wife approached me with a frown on her face. "Baruch," she said, "I don't feel comfortable bringing this up, but I was wondering... Well, I've noticed that you don't go to every *Minyan*, and I'm trying to understand, why not?"

The truth is, I didn't really have an answer. "It's just not my thing. Look, I know *Davening* is important, and I do *Daven!* It's just very difficult for me, it's not something I look forward to, and I just don't feel connected.

"There are those people who have these streaks, hundreds of days without missing a *Minyan*. I hate to say it, but I just don't think I'll ever be one of those people."

My wife didn't say a word, but gave me the saddest look I had ever seen. It broke my heart, and I knew that I needed to do something. I spent the next couple of days working out a system, using various rewards for goals met, and tracking my progress on a pocket calendar. I presented it to my wife, and told her that in addition to this, I plan on studying about the importance of *Tefillah* to make it more meaningful to me. With this plan in my pocket, I felt ready to tackle the coming days.

It was not easy. There were times where I was already in bed when I realized I hadn't *Davened Maariv*, or when I had to wake up very early to make sure I could go to *Shacharis*. Many times I dropped everything to make it to *Mincha* in the middle of the day. But I did it. Over the course of a year, I only missed *Minyan* four times. Four times!

I still can't believe how I did it. It took thought, planning, and a supportive spouse. But most of all, it took some good old-fashioned perseverance. By working at it, I became someone that I'd never thought I'd be able to be!

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**Based on a true story, name has been changed.*

DID YOU KNOW?

- No one is born good or evil. We may be predisposed towards a particular attribute, but only we determine how it is used.¹
- Sometimes it takes a terrible scare or trauma to wake a person out of their stubborn behavior. For this reason, Moshe *Rabbeinu* destroyed the *Luchos*, to shock *Klal Yisrael* into *Teshuvah*.²
- Peer pressure can cause people to do things that they truly do not want to do. One can, and should, use their innate tenacity to overcome the social pressures.³
- Though Avraham *Avinu* is known as the paragon of kindness, he was particularly stubborn when the need arose.⁴

1 *Shabbos* 156a, *Maharsha ibid.* s.v. מוהלא אי

2 *Michtav M'Elياهو* Vol. 2, p. 602

3 *Orchos Tzadikim, Sha'ar Ha'Azus*

4 *Peleh Yoetz*, Chap. אבירת לב