Denial…

…Doesn’t Mean There Are No Consequences

by

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*Denial is not a river in Egypt*

A small child believes that by closing his eyes, the “monsters” he fears cease to exist.

When Moshe foretold of the plague of *barad* (hail), he warned Pharaoh that any person or animal left in the fields would be killed. “Whoever among the servants of Pharaoh feared the word of Hashem chased his servants and livestock to the houses. And whoever did not take the word of God to heart – he left his servants and livestock in the field.” (Exodus 9:20-21)

 Who were these Egyptians who, after witnessing six *makos* – plagues – of the Lord still ignored Moses’ warning? With ample evidence that Moses’ warnings were to be heeded and with the “price” for ensuring their workers and livestock so low – simply bring them in for the night – why even risk such catastrophic loss? Unlike Pharaoh they had no pragmatic reason to be so stubborn. For his part, as an absolute ruler, Pharaoh could ill-afford to appear weak before his nation. His sovereignty was at risk. Without the Hebrew slaves, his economy and his country could be lost to him. He might very well have understood the power of Hashem, but he was determined to endure whatever punishment befell him, certain in his arrogance that he would not only withstand God’s punishment but overcome it. However, it was not callousness nor foolishness nor arrogance nor pragmatism that held the servants of Pharaoh at bay; it was the simple human tendency to deny the reality before them.

There are many times – too many times – that we each make mistaken choices. Based on limited understanding or knowledge, we make a decision that turns out badly. It could be as simple as choosing a place to eat out. Perhaps we have heard recommendations from people at work. Maybe we have read a positive review. Yet, after the meal we shake our heads in amazement that a meal could be so poorly cooked, and service could be so frustratingly bad. It could also be that our decision is more significant. Perhaps we invest in a business opportunity which, despite our research and the honest efforts of all involved, results in a loss of money.

There are an infinity of examples of decisions which don’t turn out the way we might have wished. Despite the outcome, however, they were made thoughtfully and considerately. Our mistakes, and the consequences of them, are not the result of the very real human tendency toward denial.

The Steipler Gaon teaches that denial is not the result of ignorance or thoughtfulness. It is not a mistake or of a determination to fail. It is, rather, the result of a lack of will. Denial is a distortion of one’s thinking based on his physical desires (*ta’ava*). It is the process of distorting reality to conform to what we *want* it to be.

It is closing our eyes and believing that by doing so the realities before us cease to exist. Conceptually, it is like forcing a square peg into a round hole – we *want* the peg to go in the hole so, no matter how compelling the evidence that it won’t, we ignore the evidence and continue forward. That is, when faced with a situation we *want* to be a certain way, we irrationally but quite convincingly create the sense that the situation is *in fact* what we want it to be.

We insist that we live in the world that *should be* rather than the world of *what is*, trying to ignore the truth that consequence flow naturally from what is not from how things should be.

We are deceived by our denial by the *yetzer ha’ra* which is much more convincing to the poor *schlemiel* who is determined to sin at any cost than any amount of rational evidence or argument. The *yetzer ha’ra* can twist rational thinking, can distort honest evaluation and undermine good judgment.

The *yetzer ha’ra* can convince us that there are no ill consequences that will result from our denial. As if life would be somehow improved if there were no consequences!

Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt wrote about such a world in a *drash* on *Parashat Ki Tavo*, published on Aish.com. In his brief discussion, Rabbi Rosenblatt imagined a world without consequences, a world in which one can have relationships outside of marriage without it affecting feelings within the marriage, where showing up to work (or not) has no bearing on one’s monthly salary or job security, where driving recklessly is fine, and he asked if we would crave such an existence. He clearly responds that we would not. Without consequences, life would be sapped of meaning.

Life is not, and *should not be*, a *hefker* – a free for all, helter skelter, chaotic enterprise. Yet, for the denier, the lack of consequence is the ultimate justification for his denial. Denial, in fact, makes him so deaf and dumb to consequence that he is comfortable doing as Pharaoh’s servants and “leaving his workers and livestock out in the field” where they are sure to be killed by the falling “hail” of God’s judgment.

The Talmud (Yoma 38b) captures exactly how denial happens; captures how a perfectly intelligent, normal human being can fall into a convoluted and distorted abyss – and deny it is so! This is particularly true in matters of faith, morality, and ethics. The Talmud describes that we each have an internal GPS; we enter the destination that *we* want to reach. With that destination settled, the route is a formality. “If one wants to become contaminated (li’tameh) Heaven allows him to do so; if he wants to purify (li’taer) himself, Heaven assists him.”

If your destination is spiritual truth, your route will take you along Torah, Halacha, Hashkafa, Mussar and you will surely arrive at your destination. By the same token, if you choose to be in denial of all values, morals, tradition, ancestral teachings your route is less certain, but you will just as surely reach your destination.

One cannot get to Heaven by traveling the road to Hell. There are consequences.

In ancient times, denial drove the most foolish and demeaning beliefs, from the worship to inanimate objects to the sacrifice of human beings. In modern times, the denier worships at an altar of sexual perversion and substance abuse and prays to a god of insults and demeaning behavior.

Denial now, just as in ancient times, has the power to confuse rational, intellectual examination of any matter and invite a ruach tumah, a spirit of self-indulgence, of physicality to take hold not only of the body but the mind and spirit as well.

Once one is on such an immoral path, it is imperative that the *denial* itself be recognized and addressed to change directions. This was pointed out to me by my son Zev when I asked him for examples of denial in modern life. He noted that when those struggling with addiction seek to turn their lives around, the first step of recovery is *admitting* one has an addiction and overcoming the denial that inhibits healing.

He gave me two other examples that are helpful for all of us to consider when it comes to recognizing and addressing the power of denial in our lives. He noted that many people fail to write a will – despite the absolute, one hundred percent certainty that they will one-day die. The other example was very interesting. He wrote that he’d always found the *Mesilas Yesharim’s* statement concerning how *ra* (evil) is so powerful that it is even able to appear as *tov* (good). Often, he observed, there are people who focus on doing *chesed* outside their homes even as the need *within* their homes is great. They are, in effect, in denial about the right place to focus their *chesed*!

This last observation is particularly interesting. Denial need not only be negative! Doing *chesed* is always a positive and good thing. But failing to recognize where and when *chesed* is most needed is a form of denial. So too a recent suggestion from a high profile Open Orthodox activist, that we “change” the Haggadah on Pesach night “in light of current events.” Rather than asking God *Shfoch Chamatcha,* to “pour out His wrath upon the nations of the world” we are asked to pray for strength and peace, justice, love and healing. The rationale being that asking for God’s wrath on the nations was justified in the past but in the times, we live in now we should be more “positive”.

I would never suggest that we not pray for strength and peace, justice, love and healing. These are good and wonderful things. But to live in denial of our past and the potential of the future, to turn away from history and tradition, places us on a path of blindness. That is, denial, the consequences of which could be disastrous.

Because there *are* consequences, we cannot close our eyes and have evil disappear. Denial is not an option.