

My first observation of the whole contraption was that actually learning to stand on it without falling and breaking my arm was going to be the hardest part. A few years ago, I bought a hoverboard. Not one of those a la Michael J Fox in Back to the Future, but the ones that are sort of like a Segway without handlebars. They have a board platform attached to two robust wheels. Like a Segway, the rider controls it with a slight forward motion to accelerate and a slight lean to go into reverse. It was a fad admittedly and I was totally hooked.

Once I got over my initial fear of actually getting on this thing, I soon was “cruising” my way on the streets of LA without a care in the world...until I saw the potholes. It felt like every time I'd see a

pothole my brain would take over and steer my body directly toward it. It made no sense.

My eyes would recognize this threat and my brain would send me right at it. It was counterintuitive until I learned about target fixation. This is a concept that occurs with cyclists, motorcycle riders, and even surfers.

It is described as loss of normal control in response to overwhelming emotion. In my case, it was the fear of the hazard. This fixation was so intense that it overrode my normal ability to veer out the way. While I don't imagine there are so many motorcycle riders here, I do think the same thing happens to a lot of us in normal life situations in regard to the literal and metaphorical potholes.

The brain science behind this helps us understand why we fall prey to this. The neural pathways are programmed such that every time we remember a past mistake or a vice that always knocks us down, the brain heads back down the previous pathway. The logic is that when left to ponder a mistake, the brain is compelled to slow down, and dwell longer and harder on why we messed things up.

Our brains are so preoccupied with untangling the semantics of the mistake or vice that it never quite reaches the solution part. In other words, we overly focus so much on the “thing” that all we do is head right back toward it.

Getting so hellbent on something like this puts us into an all or nothing type of mindset. I am either going to go cold turkey away from “the thing” or I am going to succumb to it again. It’s not a

great strategy. All or nothing rarely works: in vices, diets, or general error prevention.

The beginning of our portion this week dabbles a bit into this dynamic when it comes to oaths and vows. The Torah understands that there are things in the world from which we might want to solely refrain or wholly take on. In comes vows and oaths respectively.

The 2nd verse (Numbers 30:3) in our parshiyot today say the following:

“If a householder makes a vow to God or takes an oath imposing an obligation on themselves, they shall not break their pledge; they must carry out all that has crossed their lips.”

Vows are a complicated topic in the Torah as it does not clearly state its position in terms of its value. Is a vow laudable? It is spoken about in an after-the-fact manner: "If a person vows a vow." Does this imply that there is no *mitzva* to take a vow, and that we are dealing here a chastising directed at one who has already taken a vow that they should not break it, or is it being alluded here that a person is encouraged to take a vow? There are two whole tractates in the Talmud devoted to these topics but for the sake of this d'var torah, we are going to assume that taking a vow to refrain from something is negative.

This particular view is channeled through the *Meor Eynayim*, *Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl*, the great chassidic rebbe

who lived during the 18th century. He's operating from the assumption that every aspect of the world has godliness in it.

Obviously the beautiful, awe inspiring, and meaningful things have that but counterintuitively at least in the modern mindset, so too do the negative things.

In his world view, it is those things that have fallen as broken pieces from the earliest moments of creation, what is described as *shvirat ha'keilim*, the breaking of the vessels. When God created the world, these pieces fell to us. Every person has the obligation to raise those things up and bring the sparks of divinity that are hidden within them into the revealed world.

He speaks about this in a broad sense, the actions we have undertaken that have diminishes us, namely our errors and vices; he

also talks about it as regular mundanities of life: food and drink.

When a person vows to wholly abstain from these things, “they are called a sinner” because not only are they causing pain to themselves but they are explicitly taking away an opportunity from themselves to take something that has been lowered and lifting it up. It’s why he says the verse adds “לֹא יִהְיֶה דְבָרָו,” often translated above as “one shouldn’t break their pledge.” Instead he riffs on the root of the word being profane instead of break. One shouldn’t make themselves profane thinking they have control over everything.

When I read his take on this, I couldn’t help but think about vows as a sort of all or nothing type of mentality. Here is this thing that has plagued me and I am just going to remove it from my life. I am so focused on it that all I can do is steer myself straight at it and try to remove it.

Most of us can point to a time in our lives where we've come to this decision. Maybe it's a food or a person or a type of situation that we try to fully eliminate. More often than not it doesn't work. Not only that the *Meor Eynayim* would say, but also you've lost a chance to learn, grow, and reveal something new. Part of the solution also comes from the *Meor Eynayim*. He points to this dynamic in our prayer and learning practice.

Just do a little bit every day. Grow your routine and ritual with incremental interactions. Don't think you can solve anything in one fell swoop. When you have that problem, vice, or error you need to confront, try to address it in small ways.

The other prong for a potential solution comes from the studies around target fixation. As Samya Kaulia, a journalist wrote,



“if you swerve to avoid hitting a deer and are heading towards a tree, you should focus on the space next to the tree, not the tree. If you focus on the tree, you are more likely to hit it as you are turning all attention and action towards it. Similarly, if you focus on what you did wrong last time you often inadvertently end up repeating it or making a different mistake.”

This is the key. Don't make the pothole, the tree, the error, the vice, or that “thing” as your sole focus. Inevitably, the “all eggs in one basket” strategy fails. As the Meor Eynayim adds, a sacred opportunity is lost. I've gotten rid of the hoverboard. Lauren is happy but I still heed its lessons. When we see that “pothole”, we should gaze just a little bit off to the side. Know that it's there but don't direct all the energy toward it. See if you can make small

changes in your approach. Engage with it safely, learn from it, and turn it into a moment of growth.

Shabbat Shalom,

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