

Some time ago, when we were about ten or twenty years ^{younger} ago, there was a whole series of words classified as "unmentionable", words which should not and could not be mentioned in polite society. By today, the number of such words has been severely reduced. In fact, the more such words that appear in a book, the more chance does the book have of becoming a best seller. Inhibitions have been scrapped, and the unmentionables are no longer unmentionable. However, one particular word, previously used in the very best of societies, has in our day become the foremost of the "unmentionables". And that is - sin. No one seems inclined to ever mention that word, least of all preachers and teachers of religion. It sounds hopelessly antiquated and old-fashioned.

All the more the challenge therefore, my friends, to speak to you this morning about sin. No, not about the big sins and the major crimes of the day - those I leave, in this election season, to the tireless political orators of all shades who have been recounting all the big sins since 40 or 50 years ago. I propose, rather, to talk about the small sins, those minor infractions of decency that generally go by unnoticed. I want to discuss with you those small sins which can, ultimately, produce effects and consequences more evil than the biggest of sins; I want to treat of those small and insignificant sins which, when added to each other and taken together, outweigh in rascality and horrible results, the greatest of major crimes.

This week's Bible Reading, according to our Rabbis, conveys to us this very idea of the disproportionate danger of small sins. The "dor ha'mabul", the generation of the flood, was an extremely evil one. And our Sages point out that though they committed the three major crimes known to mankind - incest, idolatry and murder - G-d did not bring the flood upon them. G-d waited patiently. And it was only when they committed robbery that G-d brought upon them the Great Deluge. Now, robbery can be translated two ways in Hebrew, and the two synonyms are "gezel" and "chamass". The Deluge was caused not by "gezel", but by "chamass". And the Sages explain the difference between these two words in a way which makes G-d's actions all the more remarkable. They say that "gezel" refers only to robbery of significant amounts, of "yosser mi'shaveh perutah". "Chamass", however, refers only to petty larceny, to "pachoss mi'shaveh perutah", to robbery of less than the worth of one penny. Imagine! These people were not punished for idolatry, not for murder, not for immorality, not for wholesale robbery. But when they began to commit the very small sins, the stealing of things worth less than one cent, then G-d struck in all His fury! What our Rabbis meant to tell us, obviously, is that the small ^{new} sins are bad enough to bring a "mabul" upon the world. Michelangelo once said: Trifles make perfection, and perfection is no trifle. The Rabbis teach us the converse too: Trifling sins can cause a "mabul" of destruction, and a "mabul" of destruction is no trifle.

Why so? Why are the small sins, in a way, more vicious than the big ones? I think that it is a simple matter of human psychology. Let a normal human being commit a major crime and sooner or later he will repent, and, in a mood of contrition, resolve never to repeat that crime, and he will make amends. But let him commit a minor sin, a sin which is worth less than a "shaveh perutah", and he conveniently forgets about it - it is "nisht gefferlich", and can be overlooked. Let a child viciously insult a parent, and he will soon come crying and asking for forgiveness. Let him, however, copy on an examination, and it will not bother him in the least. Let a normal adult cause a friend to be physically hurt - and he will feel genuine regret and offer to make amends. Let him insult or slander a friend, however, and he feels no regret whatsoever, for it is only a "small sin". So then, the big sins stand the chance of being removed; the small ones are overlooked and, thus neglected, sink their stains ever deeper into the fabric of the mind and heart and soul. The big sins beg repentance; the small sins discourage it.

One need not search for long in the annals of history to prove this contention. 2,000 years ago the founder of Christianity began that movement by committing one small sin - he refused to abide by "netillas yadayim", the washing of the hands before the meal. A small sin, only "mi'drabanen", yet it caused a "mabul" of Inquisition and Crusades which we can never forget or forgive. To cite another example, the citadel of Jewish Tradition was first violated

by German Reformers who wanted merely to commit a small sin indeed. All they did was to eliminate the "Y'kum Purkun" prayer from the Sabbath Service. It is difficult to conceive of a lesser sin. Yet this small sin paved the way for all other breaches of Jewish Tradition which have so weakened the entire structure of Judaism. Indeed, the famed Chasam Sopher applied to them the verse from today's Portion: Vayimach ess kol ha'yekum - He destroyed the entire Yekum (Purkun).

Benjamin Franklin, who usually expressed profound thoughts in his witty sayings, wrote:

"For the want of a nail the shoe was lost,/ For want of a shoe the horse was lost,
"For the want of a horse the rider was lost,/ For the want of a rider the battle was lost,/ "For the want of a battle the kingdom was lost,
"And all for the want of a horseshoe nail."

So Franklin too recognized that the minor oversights, the "pachos mi'shaveh perutah" sins can have tragic consequences. Just think back about two decades ago, when the monster of Hitlerism began raising its ugly head in Germany. The Allied powers committed the small sin of disregarding it. "Just a bunch of crackpots" they said. "Harmless fanatics" was another epithet applied to them. Small, small, small sins. Yet, I ask you, did those sins remain small in their results? Was the small sin insignificant in its consequences? No, no, six million times No! The Mabul of blood and tears testifies to that "pachoss mi'shaveeh perutah" sin.

Coming closer to home

At this point, my friends, I want to speak, as dispassionately as possible, about a "small sin" committed by a great Jewish leader only this week. Let me say, further, that my own political inclinations are of no concern here, and they do not affect my opinion. Last week, the veteran Zionist leader, Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver visited the home of one of the candidates and emerged with a highly partisan statement criticizing the President of the U.S. I will not speak about the major crimes - about the exactness of Rabbi Silver's interpretation of the President's remarks; nor will I speak of the big sin of riding to Morningside Heights on Shabbos - as a spokesman of American Jewry. But I must protest the Small Sin - the sin which is not mentioned in the Shulchan Aruch or quoted in our Civil Codes. I mean the Small Sin, but Sin nevertheless, of the Rabbi turned politician, of the pulpit turned precinct, platform, of religion used for partisan purposes. I fear that this "pachos mi'shaveh perutah" sin can bring on a "mabul"; and that just as a flood erases boundaries and eradicates borders, so this Small Sin can eventually lead to Religion intruding on Government and in Politics invading the sacred precincts of Religion. I say that no matter what a Jew's political affiliation, this Small Sin deserves a Big Protest. We must protest against candidates visiting Cardinals, and against Rabbis visiting Candidates.

And let every man and woman study his own life-history and he will discover that it is precisely these Small Sins which cause most grief and wreck most havoc with his mind. The psychiatrist who wishes to heal his disturbed patient cannot do so with the knowledge only of his major aberrations. He must, by devious methods and intricate techniques, work backwards until he has uncovered the small, insignificant sins buried deep in the subconscious, and which are the original causes of the disturbance. It is our generation's disregard for Small Sins that keeps the psychiatrists so busy.

If, then, we are to prevent the Mabul from occurring in our day, the Mabul of personal grief, of religious degeneration, of social destruction, then we must be aware of the Small, "pachos mi'shaveh perutah" Sins. We must learn the Tragedy of the Small Sins, for, in the words of a forgotten poet:

"One dark cloud can hide the sunlight;/ Loose one string, the pearls are scattered;
"Think one thought, a soul may perish;/ Say one word, a heart may break."

Benediction: O G-d, you have sworn never again to bring a deluge upon the world; Teach us, then, to ^{resist} steer clear of all sins, both large + small, which caused the original Deluge. Amen.
so that you can keep that promise.

הלל סגנון

1. אומנים - אלה ישרים אלה לא נה

2. באן סכסכ. - אלוף; באן גורב - חיוני

3. כשרה הקדש איון גורב אילסא, הכדור אה

העולם כולו א יולטיו, אנה וכ. ששמה
גללים אה הקולות נהקצבו כולם אה

בארץ, אומנים, כמחזיקים אומנים להמקום

מאז אה עולם, א"ל ה"עוצמתו ימ 3

יכול אה עולם גללים ואין עוצמתו גורב,

ה"ל א"ל 3 יכר אה עולם גללים.