



A LIFE OF HEFKEIRUS VERSUS A LIFE OF PRISHUS

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What is the reason for the juxtaposition of the *parsha* of *nedarim*, vows (Bamidbar 30: 2-17) to the *parsha* of the vengeance of the *Bnei Yisrael* against Midyan (Bamidbar 31) in the first of this week's *Sedros*?

The commentators explain that the command to avenge Midyan came about because Midyan had brought the *Bnei Yisrael* to a level of reprehensible depravity with the daughters of Midyan, which brought members of our holy nation to worship the god Peor.

The root to these transgressions was sinking into the way of life of the Midyanites, a life of *hefkeirus*, wanton abandonment to one's animal desires. They made their daughters readily available for wanton immorality which was one of the quintessential ways to serve Peor.

The fundamental fashion to serve Peor was to lead a life of total debauchery. A life of no limits to the satiation of physical desire. A life of no restrictions to decadence.

Consequently, when the *Bnei Yisrael* stumbled into this mire of promiscuity with the daughters of Midyan, before any sort of revenge could take place a process of rectification was required to root out the cause of this catastrophe.

The antithesis to a life of *hefkeirus* is a life of *prishus* (separation from physical desire). A man who wants to relinquish himself from the grip of debauchery has

to start leading a life of self-imposed decrees and preventative measures in order that he should not succumb to this depraved lifestyle again.

The method of *prishus* is summed up so concisely in Pirkei Avos (3:17), "*Nedarim*, vows are the protective fence to *prishus* abstinence." It is through the power of *nedarim*, when a person places prohibitions upon himself, even on those things that are actually permitted to him, does he begin to take control of his desires and remove himself from this life of *hefkeirus*. Therefore the *parsha* of *nedarim* is placed as a rectification for Israel after they fell into the mire of the pervasive influence of Midyan. This *parsha* of vows had to be told to the *Bnei Yisrael* before they could go to war against Midyan, and only specifically after they had purified themselves completely from the culture of *hefkeirus*.

Based on this insight the Divrei Yosher brings to our attention the immediacy of the danger that the men of Israel, who were going out to battle against Midyan, found themselves in. It was because they had been influenced by this way of life of debauchery that

they were now putting themselves in a self-imposed risk by going to confront the Midyanite enemy face to face, and according to one *Medrash* the Midyanites would send their promiscuous daughters onto the front line of battle. Only a foundation of *prishus*, through the strength of a *neder*, could protection be gained before the battle could begin.

Perhaps one of the major deficiencies that blights our society today is the prevailing culture of *hefkeirus*. Nothing is off limits today in indulging in our desires. There are no barriers for fulfilling a life of decadence. Even once we have carried out our human and G-dly obligations, there is a sense of, "now I can do what I really want to do – indulge!" As someone once said to me at a wedding, "I have learnt (Torah), davened and now I can really enjoy myself." It is almost like there is an irresistible drive for this life of *hefkeirus*.

Yet once those desires have been fulfilled, man experiences an emptiness and disillusionment with his life. As strong as the force for a life of *hefkeirus* is, there is also deep inside man an insatiable thirst for discipline and control of desire. For intrinsic to man is his yearning to break away from the animal inside him and connect with that which is beyond the physical – the spiritual - Hashem Himself.

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