

Manifestations of Mockery

יום כפור תשפ"ה – על חטא שחטאנו בלצון

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Artscroll-Viduy

And for the sin ...
through scorning.

ועל חטא שחטאנו לפניך
בלצון.

WE REPULSE ATTEMPTS TO IMPROVE US.

We have greeted constructive criticism with scorn and ridicule. By resisting attempts to help us become better, we have little chance of improving ourselves.

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We have scorned,

WE HAVE MADE A MOCKERY OF SERIOUS MATTERS.

We have joked about serious matters. We have ridiculed honest and dedicated people. We have tried to find a springboard for humor in every topic. By so doing we have made repentance very difficult, both for ourselves and the people entertained by our witticisms, for as the Sages taught, one jest can repulse a hundred admonitions.

14 / ודיו

לצנו,

358 □ STEP BY STEP

R. Bienenfeld

Mockery

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Leitzanus is usually associated with frivolity or levity; however, it also encompasses sarcasm and cynicism. Leitzanus is characterized not by the fact that something is merely humorous, rather than the humor, sarcasm, or cynicism are used in order to diminish, degrade, or ridicule that which is holy, important, and valuable. Any ideal, institution, individual, or text can be undermined in this way. Humor can be a dangerous form of leitzanus because the peril is not apparent. The speaker can captivate the audience, sending a destructive message in either a tacit or direct manner. Since the remark is couched in humor and is entertaining, it may seem harmless and the malice behind it may not be immediately recognizable. When humor is used as the vehicle to denigrate, it is often excused or dismissed as "just a joke"; however, the message registers and permanent damage is done. In Mesillas Yesharim, "Path of the Just" (Chapter 5), the Ramchal warns us of the profound repercussions leitzanus can have; just one joke or humorous remark can set back a person who had been motivated and inspired; לִיְצִנָּה אֶת רִוְחָה מְאֵה תֹכְחוֹת, one cynical remark can cancel 100 lectures of valuable rebuke.

Viduy - R. Cohen

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This refers to leitzanus, mockery and scorning, which is also a terribly harmful averah, badly damaging both the victim and the perpetrator. It is so major that David Hamelech actually refers to it in the opening pasuk of Sefer Tehilim: "Ashrei ha'ish ... uv'moshav leitzim lo yashav (Happy is the man... and who has not sat among a company of scoffers)." Chazal²¹³ tell us that this is a reference to Avraham Avinu who refused to associate with the P'lishtim, who were the leitzanei ha'dor, the scoffers of his day. This terrible habit of mocking, scorning, taking nothing seriously and making fun of anything of value or importance, or of any person who is important, serious or righteous, or of any davar she'bikdushah - is truly frightening. It is often said and written that, "Leitzanus achas docheh me'ah tochachos (One joke repels a hundred reproofs)²¹⁴ - one silly remark or cynical comment, never mind laughing, can entirely 'delete' a wonderful speech or shiur. It can wreck the whole impression and ruin the message that the speaker was trying hard to convey. The damage caused is enormous. We find that Chazal associate two nations with leitzanus: the P'lishtim and Amalek. The P'lishtim were the avos ha'tumah of this midah and it is also Amalek's trademark that we encounter time and again throughout our troubled history with that nation.

ז' ניסן ה'תשפ"ה - אגור

שהתלוצץ מאדם, מדברי תורה, מאיזה מצוה, או ממי שעושה מצוה, שקבע עצמו בקיבוץ אנשים שאין ביניהם תורה ומצוות וצורך מצוה ולא ישובו של עולם אלא דברים בטלים, דהרי זה מושב לצים יי.

ועל חטא שחטאנו לפניך
בלצון:

רמ"ח אברים שנפגמו - ותיוקנם הארת דרך

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"על חטא שחטאנו לפניך בלצון": איזה חורבן מביאה ליצנות על האדם, כפי שביאר ב"מסילת ישרים" (פנה ה) "כי בליצנות אחד ובשחוק קטן יפיל האדם מעליו ריבוי גדול מן ההתעוררות וההתפעלות, מה שהלב מתעורר ומתפעל בעצמו, מידי ראותו או שמעו ענינים, שיביאוהו אל החשבון והשפוש במעשים, ובכח הליצנות יפיל הכל לארץ ולא יעשה בו רושם כלל".

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By contrast, tzchok, laughter, can be holy. Rav Moshe Shapiro says that laughter is always elicited by the sudden juxtaposition of something unexpected. This can happen from embarrassment e.g. an elderly person slips on ice and falls in the street, a person reaches for their luggage and falls onto the conveyor belt or tumbles down the escalator backwards, sparking a domino effect and causing the people behind him to fall. Such unfortunate occurrences often make observers laugh. Why do people laugh, are they sadists? Not at all - they might even realize that they really shouldn't be laughing but just can't control their response - they laugh because of the unexpected. This is also what makes a joke funny - its unexpected punch line. So on the holy side, when Yitzchak Avinu was suddenly born to his

parents after decades of barrenness he was named Yitzchak, meaning, he shall laugh, on account of his unexpected birth.²¹⁵ Then came the P'lishtim and made a disgusting joke, claiming that me'Avimelech nisabrah Sarah²¹⁶ - they said that this wasn't Avraham Avinu's child but that Sarah had conceived only after being taken to the palace of the Philistine king, Avimelech. Although they mocked the miracle, we got the last laugh because the child looked exactly like Avraham Avinu. That's what is so abhorrent about leitzanus - it takes something the world should marvel at and had indeed been marveling at until you came and made this disgusting joke - and completely upends it, portraying it instead as something unseemly and sordid.²¹⁷ This tendency expresses itself throughout the Philistines' history.

8 Amalek too has a long record of the same behavior. "Sham'u amim yirgazu... (Nations heard [of the Egyptian army's destruction at the Yam Suf] and were confounded)²¹⁸ until Amalek came along. The nations living in and around Eretz Yisrael were trembling in fear of the approaching Bnei Yisrael and of Hashem yisbarach who was leading them to unnatural victories. They quaked that is, until Amalek decided to throw caution to the winds and spitefully attack Bnei Yisrael - no matter at what cost to themselves - merely to cool Yisrael's ardor and show that it's possible to wage war on kedushah and spirituality. Their wickedness is captured by Chazal in the famous parable of a bathtub of boiling water that everyone is afraid to enter until a scoffer leaps in and although he gets badly burned, he has cooled it off for all the others.

* The Ibn Ezra points out that the word leitz is related to meilitz, which means an interpreter. Just as a meilitz interprets ideas and communication in order to convey them from one language to another, a letz also "translates," but in a perverted way, from the mindset of truth and sincerity to the mindset of unbridled mockery, his jokes and sarcasm distorting the content of a sincere

message. Another related word is *melitzah*, meaning a polished phrase with a poetic ring. A *leitz* also makes sure to polish his mocking comments – his message of *leitzanus* – making sure that they really hit home. The Panim Yafof points out that *leitz* contains the letter *tzadi*, denoting a righteous tzaddik, because the *leitz* considers himself to be a scholarly and righteous person and truly believes that he's G-d's gift to mankind. It is that arrogance that leads him to look down on everyone else and to feel entitled – or perhaps even a warped sense of obligation in the interest of 'revealing the truth' – to make jokes and cynical comments at their expense. In Mesilas Yesharim the Ramchal quotes Chazal as saying that the only punishment for a *leitz* is *yissurim*, because nothing besides physical suffering can dent his arrogant demeanor and get him to reconsider his attitude and modify his behavior.

Here I must make an important point. This shortcoming should not be confused with having a sense of humor. When used correctly, a sense of humor is a wonderful gift. The gemara says in *Taanis*²¹⁹ that Eliyahu once met one of the Amoraim, Rav Beroka and pointed out to him two people walking in the marketplace, telling him that these are *bonei Olam Haba*. Rav Beroka asked them, "You look like simple people; what do you do?" They said, "We're *badchanim*, jokers – we cheer people up and make them happy." Admittedly, it can seem a very thin line separating the *tzchok* of *simchas chaim* from that of *leitzanus* but they are actually two different worlds. *Leitzanus* is *m'zalzel* a *davar she'bik'dushah*, taking something serious and making a mockery of someone or something holy, whereas wholesome humor, the *badchanus*, the lighthearted humor of *simchas chaim* that can raise people's spirits and give them a positive outlook is a very good and healthy practice. The only area in which Chazal say actual *leitzanus* is permitted is *avodah zarah*. There it's not only okay; it's desirable, good and healthy. Chazal made mockery of the names of various *avodos zaros*. There were certain individuals who considered themselves *avodos zaros* and Yidden over the generations have used mocking terms when referring to that kind of people. *Leitzanus* has a place when it comes to any kind of *avodah zarah*.

came to choosing an automobile, there really were no choices other than the Honda Accord.

To catch the attention of the public, the commercial mockingly portrayed one loser profession after another which the young man must consider and reject. Among the ridiculed professions was emu farming. Imagine, some people actually think emu meat will replace beef. Only hicks from Texas, the commercial implied, could have such a ridiculous idea.

The commercial was, of course, not intended as an attack on the fledgling emu-farming industry. Emu farmers were simply used as a foil for the sarcastic commentary that would catch the attention of prospective buyers and direct them towards the peerless Honda Accord. But believe it or not, this commercial destroyed the emu-farming industry. Within a short time, a pair of breeding emus was selling for \$500, a decline of 90 percent from its earlier \$45,000 price tag. The State of Texas brought suit against Honda Corporation of America, claiming that Honda had defamed the emus and the entire emu industry. The case is pending.

So what do these emus and Hondas tell us about cynicism? They show us how destructive even one little throwaway line of mockery can be. One line of *bittul*, as a put-down is called in Hebrew, can wipe out years of effort.

Cynicism, as defined by the dictionary, is the state of being scornful of the motives or the virtues of others, of mocking and sneering. That's a cynic: someone who knocks, mocks, denigrates and puts down. A cynic is a fault-finder, a

person who always seeks and pinpoints the faults in people, in institutions, in ideas.

The Hebrew word for cynic is *letz*. A *letz* is not a funny guy, a stand-up comedian. That is an incorrect translation. A *letz* is a cynic, a mocker, an evaporator of people.

Unfortunately, there are numerous Jewish *letzim*. We all know them and meet them wherever we go. But why would a person want to be a *letz*? Why would a person want to tear down other people and destroy them? Why would a person want to cause hardship and pain to people who have done him no harm? Why does such a sinister thing exist in our circles? And what can we as a society and a people do about it? These are very troubling questions indeed.

Let us listen to what Rav Yitzchak Hutner, the Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin, has to say on the subject. Writing in his classic *Pachad Yitzchak*, Rav

Hutner contends that the struggle against cynicism forms the paradigm of the epic battle between the Jewish people and Amalek. Amalek's attack on the Jewish people was far more than a military confrontation between two nations. It was far more than just a battle of swords and chariots, of guns and tanks. The battle between the Jewish people and Amalek centered on the very issue of cynicism.

There is a powerful tendency in human nature, Rav Hutner writes, a veritable passion, to denigrate, to mock, to tear down, to eliminate others. There is a tendency to take that which is noble and important and holy and to find within it the little hairline crack which can be used to bring the entire edifice tumbling down. It is a particularly virulent form of the *yetzer hara*. People have a *yetzer hara* for money, for honor, for carnal pleasures. People have a *yetzer hara* for all sorts of forbidden things. And they also have a *yetzer hara* to destroy other people, to be cynical, to put people down, to ridicule all that is important and holy.

The nation of Amalek personifies this tendency. When the Jewish people came forth from Egypt, the world stood in awe of them and of the Almighty who had performed all the spectacular miracles on their behalf. The Jewish nation was important, revered. But Amalek could not tolerate it. And so they attacked to dispel the aura of Jewish invincibility, to show that the Jewish people were mere mortals after all, that they need not be held in awe and reverence. That was Amalek's motivation for the attack. It was not territorial. It was not political. It was not even ideological. It was cynical.

How do we understand this *yetzer hara*? We can understand why people would want money. We can understand why people would want honor. We can understand why people would want carnal pleasures. But why would people want to destroy others? Why would people want to tear down whatever is good, holy, important, serious and worthwhile in this world?

Perhaps it is because cynicism liberates. Perhaps it is because cynicism emancipates. If there is nothing worthy and important in this world, we are all free to do as we please. If there are no higher standards, we can all go wherever our fancy and our impulses take us. If the citadels of holiness can be ripped down, we are all released from personal responsibility.

That is what Amalek is all about. As Rav Hutner puts it in his inimitable fashion, Amalek represents the *koach hachillul*; but there is also an opposite tendency in human nature, which Rav Hutner calls the *koach hahillul*.

The battle lines are drawn: the *koach hachillul* versus the *koach hahillul*; the forces of sacrilege against the forces of reverence; Amalek against Yisrael. This is the battle, the struggle for the soul of the world. And Hashem tells the Jewish people to eradicate all traces of Amalek. Wipe them out. Eradicate them. They are your mortal enemy in this life-and-death struggle — not merely your physical mortal enemy but your spiritual mortal enemy. They despise all that you stand for, all that is holy, pure, fine and worthwhile in this world. They are the antithesis of the Jew.

There is a little bit of Amalek in each of us, Rav Hutner concludes, and that is why we have an inclination to be cynical, to mock and destroy.

So that is the philosophical basis of why people tend to be cynics. There is also a very real psychological basis.

Arrogance and egotism, for instance, can easily engender a desire to put down people and the institutions they represent. After all, who do they think they are? They are not religious enough, learned enough, smart enough, rich enough nor successful enough to expect a place in the sun. And so the arrogant, the *baal gaavah*, the sanctimonious will seek to put them in their place, and what more effective way is there than a good dose of cynicism?

Even more common, I suspect, than an overinflated ego as a cause of cynicism is an underinflated ego. People with

low self-esteem feel threatened by other people and are therefore inclined to ridicule them and bring them down to their own level with a shot of cynicism.

Let's not forget jealousy as a motive for cynicism. How do jealous people deal with those who enjoy more blessings than they do? With cynical put-downs, of course.

We have a very potent mix here. We start with a little dash of Amalek in each of us that impels us to tear down whatever is important and holy. We stir in a little arrogance or low self-esteem, top it off with a dash of jealousy, and presto, what have we got? A cynic — a person who will capitalize on every opportunity and try to make snide comments about anything and anyone that might inspire admiration and respect! This is the genesis of a cynic.

The prophet declares (*Amos 4:13*), "He forms mountains, creates wind and tells a person about his conversations (*maggid la'adam mah sicho*)." What exactly does "telling a person about his conversations" mean? Does it mean to remind him of the things he said? If so, it should have said *maggid la'adam sicho*.

What is the significance of *mah sicho*? R' Chaim Volozhiner explains that it means to tell a person *mah sicho*, "what his conversations are," to show him the far-reaching effects his words have, how they can build and how they can destroy.

Let us take a closer look at the words of the prophet. What do mountains and wind have to do with a person's conversations?

R' Elya Lopian explains that although mountains are massive, solid, immovable, God told the prophet Elijah (*I Kings 19:11*), "A great and powerful wind rips apart mountains and shatters stones." What is a wind? Can you see it? Can you catch it? It is just air. And yet a wind can destroy mountains and shatter stones. That

is how God "creates wind." Words can also destroy and shatter, even though they are just air.

Even in this world, the power of speech is far greater than it would appear to us. We understand, of course, that if we say something bad about another person he may lose his job. That is certainly destructive enough. But there is also a destructive side to speech that defies rational explanation. I will give just one example here.

R' Shlomo Wolbe once gave an exceptionally powerful talk to a group of his students in Jerusalem. Afterwards, one of the students came forward. "Thank you, *rebbe*," he said, his eyes wide with reverence and admiration. "This was such a powerful talk. It is so clear that it is the truth that no one could possibly refute it."

"Do you really think no one can refute it?" said R' Wolbe. "I can refute it. And it won't take much, either. Listen: Ha, ha, ha. One word of mockery can counteract one hundred *tochachos*, rebukes."

It is true. A speaker can build up an argument so solid and airtight that he cannot conceive how anyone in his audience will fail to be convinced by the overwhelming logic. And then someone gets up and makes a joke, and the argument loses its entire effect. The precise translation for *tochachah* is "rebuke through the demonstration of the truth." A person may present one hundred logical proofs for the truth, but one word of mockery makes a mockery of it all. How can such a thing be? It is just one example of the awesome power God infused in speech. It cannot be explained rationally.

Why do we use speech so destructively? It all comes down to a lack of faith. We do not have faith in our own importance and significance. We do not have faith in our own power to effect enormous changes both in this world and the next, to build and to destroy.

We can hear a thousand times that the Temple was destroyed because of *sinas chinam*, unjustified hatred, but somehow, deep down in our hearts, we do not believe it. We can hear a thousand times the words of the Chafetz Chaim that if we would stop speaking *lashon hara* about each other we would be

redeemed from this long and bitter exile, but somehow, deep down in our hearts, we do not believe it. Why? Because we do not have faith in ourselves.

This then must be our first step to gain control of the power of speech. We have to believe in ourselves. We have to believe that every word we speak leaves its mark in the lower worlds and in the higher worlds. We have to believe that our words can build and they can destroy. We have to recognize the awesome power of speech that God has infused in us, the divine power He has shared with us when He created us in His image. Only if we respect the power of speech can we harness it for the good.

The Gemara tells us, "Four groups of people will not be welcomed into the presence of the Almighty. Who are they? People who speak *lashon hara*; people who lie; people who curry favor through flattery; people who are cynical."

We have national campaigns against *lashon hara*. Everyone is learning about *shemiras halashon*, and the amount of *lashon hara* has really been drastically reduced. All because it is forbidden by the Torah. Well, cynicism is also forbidden. And yet, paradoxically, the more religious people become, the more they are inclined to view others with cynical eyes. So why do we do it?

Let me present a theory. Apparently, our Sages themselves have instructed us to be cynics. They have told us, "All mockery is forbidden except for mockery of idol worship." Never be a cynic, but when it comes to idolatry, be as cynical as you can be. Make fun of them. Mock them. Ridicule them. Why is this so? Why jeopardize this taboo by making an exception?

Rav Eliyahu Dessler explains that our Sages did this in response to a real need of the Jewish people. Two thousand years ago, we were the only monotheistic religion in a vast pagan sea. How could the Sages prevent the people from giving in to the pressure of their neighbors and succumbing to the predominant idol worship? How could we survive as a pure people? By allowing and encouraging the people to mock and ridicule idolatry.

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Eliyahu, the Prophet Elijah, is on the one side and the priests of Baal are on the other. The challenge is to see who can bring down fire from the sky. The priests of the Baal bang their heads together but all to no avail. There is no fire forthcoming from the sky. And while this is going on, Eliyahu mocks them, "You know, maybe your god is sleeping. Maybe he is indisposed." Eliyahu is playing the role of *letz!* He is making a mockery of them. Obviously, mockery is fine when it comes to idolatry. You can make as much fun as you like, because that is the only way to survive.

Today we don't have the old forms of idolatry. People don't genuflect to little stone or wood figurines. But there are other idols out there, cultural icons that exert a powerful attraction on us. So what are we going to do? How can we protect ourselves? We have to revert to mockery. We ridicule these attractions so that we should not succumb to their lure. We have no choice. This is what we have to do. This is what our Sages want us to do.

But herein lies the rub. We can lock *lashon hara* away in a forbidden zone, because we are never allowed to speak *lashon hara*. We can lock dishonesty away in a forbidden zone, because we are never allowed to lie. We can lock sycophantic flattery away in a forbidden zone, because it is always forbidden. but we cannot do the same for cynicism. We cannot say, "Never be a cynic." It is simply not true. From time to time, you have to be a cynic. Once you've let the genie out of the bottle, though, it's hard to push him back in.

21 That, I believe, is why Orthodox Jews have become such terrible cynics. We are so accustomed to using cynicism to protect ourselves against the dominant culture that we sometimes have difficulty controlling it.

So how indeed can we control it? How on earth are we supposed to stop ourselves from falling into this trap of unwarranted cynicism?

Number one, we have to come out and say that cynicism is not acceptable. We have to tell our children, our families,

our students, our congregants that cynicism is a terrible, terrible trait. Have you ever met a person who boasted about speaking *lashon hara*? Of course not. Some people do it, but they are not proud of it. But you have probably heard religious people pride themselves on being cynical. I certainly have, and more than once. "You know what? I'm a big cynic." We have to stop that by attaching a stigma to cynicism, just as we have attached a stigma to *lashon hara*.

We have to come to the realization that cynicism is bad, that it's destructive, that it's pernicious and that it destroys. We have to come to the realization that uncontrolled habitual cynicism leads people to the belief that nothing in this world is worth anything, that cynicism is a slippery slope that will plunge you into the abyss. No one should even have the temerity to pride himself on being a big cynic, as though it were a badge of honor.

Let us check out some cynics in history. Esau, Jacob's brother, was a cynic. On the day his illustrious grandfather Abraham dies, what does this fellow go out and do? He goes hunting and comes back famished. His brother Jacob offers him a bowl of lentil soup in return for the firstborn rights to the spiritual heritage of the Patriarchs. Esau consents without any argument. "Fine," he says. "Give me a bowl of soup and the firstborn rights are yours." The Torah concludes, "And Esau made a mockery of the birthright." He thumbed his nose at the birthright, at the memory of his sainted grandfather, at everything holy. He was the classic cynic denigrating anything and everything. He considered nothing sacred.

23 Esau's descendant was the hotheaded Amalek who could not endure the spectacle of all the world standing in awe of the triumphant Jewish people.

Amalek's descendant was Haman, who followed in the footsteps of his infamous forebears. The Baal HaTurim points out that the word *vayivez*, and he mocked, appears only twice in all of the Torah: once with regard to Esau, who

made a mockery of the birthright, and then with regard to Haman. The Midrash considers Haman a mocker the son of a mocker, a cynic the son of a cynic. Nothing is important. Nothing is sacred. If a nation gets in your way, just wipe them out. What does it matter anyway? Nothing matters.

That is the path of cynicism. Nothing moves a cynic. Nothing disturbs him. Nothing inspires him.

How often does it happen that a rabbi makes an impassioned speech about an issue of vital importance to the community and one clown sitting in the back makes a wise crack that wipes everything out? With one little remark, one mere twist of the nose, that single clown can counteract all the rabbi's efforts. The cynic is immune to inspiration, and he will make sure no one else is inspired either. Is that a life?

Step by Step

24

24 Rabbi Ovadia Yosef in *Yechaveh Daas* (Vol. 5, Chapter 50) war against those who scoff and degrade Rabbis and teachers on Purim. He cites the Gemara that says: תְּרַבְּרָה יְרוּשָׁלַיִם אֵלָא עַל שְׁבִיּוּ בָהּ תְּלַמְדֵי חֲכָמִים, *Jerusalem was destroyed only because Torah scholars mocked* (*Shabbos* 119b). He then quotes the Gemara that states: אֲרַבְרָבָא מְרַבְּנָן וְלֹא מְחָאֵי בְּדָבְרֵי לִי, Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, was punished for remaining silent upon hearing a Torah scholar (*Bava Metziah* 84b). Rabbi Ovadia Yosef concludes that even to embarrass or hurt an ordinary person is prohibited on Purim! This should give us great pause in attending Purim *shpiels*.

the like. The stature of a person (especially a respected authority) can easily be forever undermined or compromised by public humiliation or ridicule. Any remark, mimicking, or joking that will forever alter the way we relate to a *gadol*, *talmid chacham*, *rav*, *rebbe* or *menahem* should clearly be off-limits.

I once witnessed a prominent Rosh Yeshivah publicly protest a skit where the yeshivah *bachurim* were using verses of the Torah as punch lines to their jokes. This Rosh Yeshivah exclaimed that even a play on words of any *passuk* or phrase in *Tanach* is forbidden. In support of this objection, he related the story of Rabbi Akiva Eiger and his prospective son-in-law. This future *chassan* referred in a joking manner to the words of the Torah: וְרָעַי מִקְרָם (*Bereishis* 12:8) — which actually refers to a location — saying that we see from this that eggs should be served first at a meal. (The word “ע” means egg in Yiddish and קָרָם could be translated as “precede”; hence the joke.) At that moment, Rabbi Akiva Eiger broke the engagement!! Obviously, he felt that this too was injurious and dangerous *leitzanus*.

R. Frand

Choice number three. What kind of children do you want to have?

There are no shortcuts to raising good children, no magic formulas. But one thing is indisputable. Children learn from their parents. If children see a positive, upbeat, trusting attitude in their parents, they will seek to develop a similar attitude themselves.

Do you want your children to be kind-hearted, caring, enthusiastic people and go through life with a positive outlook? Show them that you yourself are an explainer, that you always see the good in people.

Do you want your children to be masters of the one-liner? Do you want them to be hardened cynics at age 10? Do you want them to sneer at their teachers and their peers? You can accomplish this, too. Just show them that you are a cynic, that you want to tear down everything others build up.

But I'll let you in on a little secret. I don't think there is anyone in the world who wants his children to be cynical. It's a privilege some people reserve for themselves alone.

Apples From the Tree - R. Young

When a person is in the habit of scoffing, the Maharal says, there is no end to it (*Nesivos Haleitzanus* 2). Innocent laughter provides light relief, but scoffing at others accustoms us to devalue the important things in life. Scoffing can become a habit that embeds itself within one's character, and we cannot escape its pernicious influence. It will undermine even those things that are sacred.

WHEN CHILDREN HEAR THEIR PARENTS SCOFFING AT OTHERS, for whatever reason, it affects their entire future. Little Baruch, for instance, had heard his parents speaking disparagingly of a particular yeshivah. It seems that this yeshivah works with weaker students in the hope of raising their level of achievement. So when Baruch's *mechanech* recommended that yeshivah as the most suitable place for him to continue his studies, naturally Baruch refused to go there. His parents had no choice but to send him to a different yeshivah, where he was never happy and never settled down.

Rivky is another example. She had often heard her parents deriding the young married men who stayed in yeshiva for some years after their wedding and “just sat and learned.” Rivky absorbed this mockery in her own attitudes toward marriage. Even though she had received an excellent Torah education and understood that the first years of marriage were the ideal time for a young man to study Torah intensively, and even though all her friends were marrying Torah scholars, Rivky refused to consider such a shidduch. Her parents were frantic, but their own mockery had tainted her attitude.

The power of *leitzanus* is great. Moreover, it is the essence of Amalek. The Torah says that because Amalek mocks everything sacred and considers the truth as nothing, so the end of Amalek will be nothing. Amalek will just disappear — *...veachariso adei ovai* (*Bamidbar* 24:20). Parents can destroy their children by making a joke of everything.

Moishy knows that whenever a “meshulach,” a collector, comes to his house, he will hear his parents make one or two disparaging comments behind his back. He himself begins to think of them as “schnorrers,” beggars, not as worthy representatives of important institutions who are raising funds for good causes. Moishy learns to trivialize this type of *tzedakah*.

And how is Chani going to keep high standards of *kashrus* when she is older, if she hears her parents ridiculing those who are careful about checking for insects in the fruit and vegetables they eat? In order to justify their own laxity in such things, perhaps, they say that those who are strict have excessive *chumros*, and create unnecessary difficulties for themselves.

Parents who speak disrespectfully about *talmidei chachamim* (calling them by only their last names in conversation, for instance) are undermining the dignity of the Torah. Calling teachers by their last names without a proper title also sows the seeds of disdain in children. Similarly, ridiculing the study of certain subjects will make those subjects seem irrelevant to children, so they will not make an effort to study them.

A final point to consider: When a child (or even an adult) hears an unfortunate play on the words that are recited regularly in our *tefillah* or a joke made up of verses of Torah or statements of Chazal, he will think of the “joke” whenever he davens. It may be amusing at the time, but the element of *leitzanus* will always remain in his mind. Purim Torah is the most striking example of jokes that may be well intentioned, but are usually extremely disrespectful of Torah.

In all the above cases, parents are teaching their children to be *leitzanim*, scoffers.

Step by Step

Orchos Tzaddikim (*Shaar HaShesikah* 21) states: 1) The first category *leitzanus* is the person who mocks others, as David HaMelech warned against תִּשָּׁב בְּאָחִיךָ תִּדְבֵר בְּבֵן אִמְךָ תִּתֵּן דִּבְרֵי, *You sit and speak against your brother, you slander your mother's son* (*Tehillim* 50:20). One who does so is called a *leitz*, as it says: וְדַר הַהוֹיֵר לֵץ שְׂמוֹ עוֹשֶׂה בְּעִבְרַת וְדוֹן, *The boastful willful man, scoffer is his name; the arrogant evildoer, he is a willful man* (*Mishlei* 21:24). The *leitz*/mocker possesses two evil traits: one, that he acts intentionally out of malice. Unlike anger or jealousy that are natural emotions, *leitzanus* is premeditated. The second evil trait of the *leitz* is conceit (*gaavah*). He feels superior to others so he degrades and ridicules.

2) The second category is one who mocks people who are not successful, those who are disadvantaged, indigent or impoverished. *Leitzim* mock them for they are not the honorable wealthy people in our society, and this is the *leitz* Shlomo HaMelech warns against: גַּג לְרֵשׁ תִּרְף עֲשׂוֹהוּ, *One who mocks a pauper insults his Maker* (*ibid.* 17:5). That is, he who mocks the poor person simply because he is poor insults Hashem.

3) The third category is the *leitz* who is cynical about life. He rejects programs and activities that he did not think of, and therefore belittles them and mocks them, even though they have potential to be beneficial. He thinks that he is smarter than those who originated these ideas, and if he didn't think of them, that is reason enough to mock and show others that they are meaningless. This type of *leitzanus* can sometimes lead to heresy, for he may even go as far as to ridicule the mitzvos of the Torah. This is the *leitz* that is mentioned by Shlomo HaMelech: אַל תּוֹכַח לֵץ כִּי יִשְׂנֹאֲךָ, *Do not rebuke a mocker for he hates you* (*Mishlei* 9:8). This type of *leitz* thinks he is smarter than you and knows better; therefore your admonishing him is pointless.

4) The fourth category of *leitzim* are those people who sit idly without pursuing a career or any endeavor of substance. They sit on the street corners looking for conversations of mockery and frivolity. They engage in dialogue that is mocking and degrade people and their actions. In the Gemara they are sometimes referred to as *yoshvei keranos* or, in modern day jargon, bums.

31 Ascending the Path R. Hillel

Watchfulness Chapter Five

There are a number of factors which can distract us and deter us from the Watchfulness and personal assessment we now know are vital. The Ramhal explains what they are and how we can avoid them.

הנה מפסידים המדה הזאת ומרחיקים הם שלשה: האחד, הוא הטפיל והטרדה העולמית. השני, השחוק והלצון. השלישי, החברה הרעה. יגדבר בהם אחד לאחד.

The Second Deterrent

However, the second deterrent, behold it is very difficult, and it is laughter and frivolity. The tendency to view everything, one's own life included, as a joke, a lighthearted quip, is disastrous. For one who is submerged in them is as one drowning in the great ocean, from which it is very difficult to escape. Picture a person drowning far out in the depths of a vast ocean. Realistically, how likely is it that he could ever be rescued? His chances are close to nil. So too, the joker is dangerously close to being a lost case.

Why is this so?

32

Immoral and Amoral

For laughter destroys man's heart, so that intelligence and understanding no longer rule him, and he is like a drunkard or a fool, on whom it is impossible to bestow cleverness or guidance, for they do not accept control. If we choose to take the

world and our existence lightly, if we choose to make fun of even serious matters, we destroy our own hearts. The heart is symbolic of sensitivity, of feeling and caring. But if we view everything as a joke, we no longer care. The most horrific event can be reduced to a witty one-liner, because our hearts – our feelings – have been dulled and deadened. With this sort of attitude, it becomes impossible for anyone to influence us or restrain us. Just as drunkards and fools cannot accept control, neither can the person for whom life is no more than a laugh. And this is what King Shlomo, of blessed memory, said (*Kohelet* 2:2): Of laughter I said 'it is silliness (*meholal*) and of happiness, 'what does it do?'' The Hebrew word *meholal*, used here to describe laughter, can also be interpreted as "destructive," an all too accurate adjective, as we shall see.

Our Sages went even further in condemning a worldview based on frivolity: And our Sages, of blessed memory, said (*Avot* 3:17), "laughter and frivolity make one accustomed to immorality." One who sets his sights strictly on fun and good times, who relates lightly to even the most serious matters, is not far from committing adultery or its adjuncts.

34

For even though immorality is recognized as severe by any intelligent person, and his heart is afraid to approach it, because of the image which has already been drawn in his mind of the true severity of the offense and the immensity of its punishment, for the lighthearted individual, things are different. To any normal person, adultery is criminal, and this truth is so firmly imprinted in his mind

that it would be impossible for him to think of even approaching it. But for the confirmed joker, behold, laughter and frivolity slowly, slowly draw him along, and bring him continually closer to it, so that fear departs from him bit by bit, level by level, until he arrives at the sin itself and commits it. A lighthearted, frivolous attitude will gradually pull us further and further down, until our sensitivities are so blunted that nothing is sacred anymore. We have no fear of God, and sins which would revolt any normal person no longer frighten us.

Why is this so? How did things go so far? Because just as the entire existence of Watchfulness depends on paying attention and taking things to heart, so too the entire existence of lightheadedness and frivolity is only that one turns his heart away from straight, analytical thought, and we find that thoughts of fear will not come to his heart at all. What is *zehirut*? It is taking things seriously. It is being careful and precise and exacting. It is correcting and improving and refining. It is taking things to heart. And what is frivolity? The exact opposite. It is seeing life as no more than one huge joke, pulling the heart away from any serious thought or positive impulses. One who descends to this nadir will never find the time for honest reflection or remorse. Consider where this attitude is bound to lead, and

35

Just like a shield smeared with oil, which will repel and topple the arrows and throw them to the ground, and not allow them to reach the body of the man carrying the shield, so is frivolity in the face of rebuke and chastisement.

In an earlier era, soldiers going into battle carried shields as protection against the spears and arrows formerly used in combat. For greater efficacy, the shields were smeared with a greasy substance, causing potentially dangerous projectiles to slide off harmlessly. This type of oily shield was valued for its impenetrability – nothing could pierce its grease-coated surface.

The frivolous individual has armed himself with his own greased shield: his lighthearted posture, which protects him from such intrusions as rebuke, advice, or serious reflection. It is a magnificent defense; invasive annoyances simply slide right off. **For with one jest and a little joke, man throws off the great majority of awakenings and impressions that a man's heart stimulates and effects within itself, when it sees or hears matters which arouse him to accounting and scrutiny of his actions.** Even if something happens which might nag at the frivolous man's conscience, he will not allow it to penetrate. **With the power of frivolity, he will throw it all to the ground and it will make no impression on him whatsoever.** It is said that "one jest repels a hundred reproofs." One cute little quip is enough to erase a hundred powerful lectures on ethics and morality. We can even review the words of the *Mesillat Yesharim* itself a hundred times, but one good wisecrack will wipe out everything we have learned.

39

As we said earlier, "one jest (*letzanut*) repels a hundred reproofs." What is "*letzanut*?" It does not only mean cracking jokes and poking fun. It means neglecting to balance life correctly. It means giving too much weight to the trivial, at the expense of the significant. *Letzanut* skews our perspective on life, transforming the inconsequential into the vital, and the vital into a mere trifle, so that we are capable of making fun of just about anything and everything.

not that our Sages' teachings are not convincing enough, or that the frivolous person has not understood their message properly. The problem is not with the principles; the problem is with the person. With his lightheaded, lighthearted temperament, he obliterates the impact of reproof or rebuke, simply by treating it as just another joke.

And behold, the prophet Yeshayah shrieked like a crane over this, for he saw that this tendency is what did not leave room for his rebuke to make an impression, and it destroyed all hope for sinners. How could it be that Yeshayah's rebuke, powerful, heartfelt, and well aimed, was shrugged off by an uncaring nation? Their future, their very lives, were at stake, and somehow they just didn't seem to care. Why? Because, Yeshayah realized, they were **frivolous, and this tendency did not allow his rebuke to make an impression.** Their carefree attitude destroyed his reproof, shattering any hopes for the repentance which could have earned them a Divine reprieve. **And this is what he said (*Yeshayahu* 28:22), "And now do not be frivolous, lest your bonds be strengthened, for I have heard, etc."** "Stop mocking my words," he warned his complacent countrymen, "Your ridicule causes you to ignore my calls to repent, and if this does not change, I will be forced to tighten my hold, resulting in great hardship

The Mishnah (*Pirkei Avos* 3:3) states: שנים שיושבין ואין ביניהם דברי תורה הרי זה מושב לצים "במושב לצים לא ישב" *If two people sit together and there are no words of Torah between them, it is a session of scorners, as it says, "In the session of scorners he did not sit" (Tehillim 1:1).*

This Mishnah is telling us that a casual gathering of friends that is devoid of Torah is also *leitzanus*. This quote from David HaMelech — which is the very first verse of *Tehillim* — is the earliest source in which *leitzanus* is mentioned.

* The difficulty with this mishnah is that the participants never uttered one word of *leitzanus*; they either said nothing or, if they did engage in conversation, they spoke about subjects other than Torah. Of course, it is admirable and preferable to speak words of Torah; however, if one does not, does that necessarily mean that one is mocking or ridiculing? If two people decide to speak about politics, science, sports, or art, and omit any definition of *leitzanus*?

39 According to the Rambam's explanation of this mishnah, it seems that the sin of *leitzanus* is in not utilizing one's time properly. Any opportunity that could have included words of Torah, but does not, falls under the heading of *leitzanus* of time and is contrary to our objectives in this world. If we do not value opportunities and use them to the

fullest, we are diminishing the value of time. The mishnah is telling us that if one had a meeting, or a conversation, or a gathering that was devoid of Torah, he is in essence mocking the preciousness of time.

* Even if no jokes or words of frivolity were uttered, the absence of Torah is also a form of *leitzanus*; *leitzanus* as an act of omission rather than commission. The sin is in one's lackadaisical attitude toward one's mission in this world. We see then that sometimes ridicule and cynicism can result from passivity and that what we don't say can be just as incriminating as what we do say.

Rabbeinu Yonah demonstrates that the absence of words of Torah is also included under the heading of *leitzanus* from the next verse in *Tehillim*: כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו ובתורתו יהגה וילל: *But his desire is in the Torah of Hashem and in His Torah he meditates day and night (1:2).* Toiling in Torah is the antithesis of not using time properly. David HaMelech praises one who learns day and night and uses every opportunity for Torah; conversely, if one does not do so, he is derided as belonging to a "session of scoffers."

40

שְׁלוֹם אֲבוֹת נְתִיבוֹת קִצָּה

אכן חז"ל מורים לנו במשניות אלו את דרך ה' בעניני העולם. דהקב"ה ברא את כל מציאות העוה"ז שיהיה עולם השפל מדור התאוות והקליפות, ומצד בריאתו של העולם שולט בו חלק הרע וכל עניניו הם בחזקת סומאה וזוהמא. וכמו כן ישנו בכל דבר בבריאה חלק טוב, ונתן הקב"ה כח ודרך ליהודי להפוך את עניני העולם לטוב, להשליט על כל ענין בבריאה את חלק הטוב שבו ולקדשו, ומבלי זה עומד הדבר מצד עצמו בחזקת סומאה. לכן שנים שיושבין ואין ביניהם דברי תורה הרי זה מושב לצים, כי עצם השיבה, אם אינו עושה מאומה להופכה לטוב, הריהו בחזקת סומאה. וע"ד מאמר מרן אדמו"ר בד"ש זי"ע עה"פ (תהלים קלב) אם אבא באהל ביתי אם אעלה על ערש יצועי אם אתן שנת לעיני לעפעפי תנומה עד אמצא מקום לה, היינו שבכל דבר מעניני העוה"ז צריך יהודי למצוא מקום לה. וזה סדר החיים של יהודי למסור מכל דבר את ראשיתו להשי"ת, כמ"ד ראשית ביכורי אדמתך

מאידיך, שחוק ושמחה אינם מושגים זהים, שהרי הז"ל אומרים "ולא מתוך שחוק אלא מתוך שמחה של מצוה". שחוק - זו גישה לא מציאותית לעבודה, כובד ראש פרושו, גישה רצינית לכל חלקי העבודה. אדם רציני הוא אדם, המתייחס אל תפקידו ברצינות, מתוך גישה מפוכחת, מציאותית, ודוקא הוא שמח בחלקו, מכיר בכוחותיו, מודה להקב"ה על חלקו ושמח בו. הביטוי הקולע לשלשת עמודי העולם, שהם מהווים קיום האדם הוא - רצינות. ממילא ברור שכך צריכה להיות הנהגתנו כלפיהם.

43

העולם עומד על שלשה עמודים. ומהי הקרקע שעליה עומדים שלשה עמודים אלה? רצינות. רצינות פירושה, להיות אדם רציני בכל חלקי העבודה, להיות מציאותי בכל מה שהוא עושה. כאשר אנו עושים חשבון נפש לעצמנו, עד כמה חיינו הם צחוק, הרי הסיכום הוא מבהיל! אם מאחרים זמן ק"ש ומסתמכים, כביכול, על זמן ק"ש של הגר"א פרושו של דבר שק"ש אצלנו הוא שחוק. אם חוטפים התפלה ומקצצים בה - פרושו של דבר שתפילה אצלנו היא צחוק. אם הופכים מחצית שעה יקרה של "מוסר" לדברים בטלים, פרושו של דבר שמדות אצלנו הן צחוק. אם סדר לימוד עשוי קרעים קרעים פרושו של דבר שגם למוד אצלנו הוא עדיין צחוק. נדמה, שהשבח הגדול ביותר שאפשר לומר על אדם - שהוא אדם רציני. "עילוי" איננו שבח לאדם! זו מתנת אלקים!! אדם רציני הוא אדם, שמבחין בכוחותיו, בין אם כשרונותיו מבריקים או בינוניים או פחות מכך, ונגש, מתוך שמחה, בכל הרצינות להוציא לפעל כחותיו. מקדש ראשון חרב מפני שהיו בו ג' עבירות: ע"ז, ג"ע ושפ"ד (יומא ט:). דהיינו, חיים לא מציאותיים. זהו שורש החורבן. ממילא חיים רציניים, מציאותיים, הם שורש הבנין של קדושה. אחד שיגש במלוא הרצינות והאחריות לכל חלקי העבודה - זהו המפתח לשלמות!

45 R. Frand

People need to condition themselves; they have to become accustomed to saying that all Hashem does is for the best. You can't just get up and say it. You have to train yourself to believe it deep down inside your heart. You have to become accustomed to it. You have to make it a habit. This, I believe, is also the key to overcoming cynicism. We have to develop the habit of being positive instead of negative, of seeing the good instead of the bad. We have to raise our consciousness. We have to be on the lookout for — and squelch — those almost involuntary little cynical remarks that escape from our mouths. Then little by little, we will form the habits of looking at the world in a positive light. And we will be immeasurably enriched, both by the increased happiness in our own lives and by the profound joy of seeing our children blossom into the kindhearted and enthusiastic people we want them to be.

46 Viduy - R. Chen

So once again, a good sense of humor that cheers people up and creates a happy atmosphere around you is wonderful, so long as it's never at the expense of anything *kadosh* that ought to be taken seriously. Cheering people up, cracking a good joke that doesn't involve any *chata'im* and that creates an atmosphere of *simchah* is entirely appropriate.

תביא בית ה' אלקיך, בכור בניך תתן לי, ראשית עריסותיכם חלה תרימו תרומה לה, ראשית גז צאנך תתן לי, וכן תרומות ומעשרות. וכך בכל עניני עוה"ו, שלא אבוא להשתמש בהם עד אמצא מקום לה, דאם אינו מוסר חלק לה' נשאר הדבר בחזקת הטומאה של העוה"ו מדור התאוות והקליפות. ודומה הדבר לחדר חשוך שכדי להאירו צריכים להעלות בו אור, ואם אין עושים שום פעולה להאירו נשאר החדר חשוך, לא בתור עונש אלא משום שהמציאות היא שהחדר מצד עצמו חשוך. כך כבריאה כל עניני העולם הם חושך, ונתן הקב"ה ליהודי את הכח של כי נר מצוה ותורה אור, שכת התורה מאיר ליהודי את כל הענינים, אבל אם אין ביניהם דברי תורה, אין לו את כח התורה שיאיר לו והריהו נשאר שרוי בחושך, לא משום עונש אלא מפני שזה מציאות העולם. והכלל בזה הוא כמאמר מרן אדמו"ר בב"א זי"ע עה"פ (בראשית לב) מנחה היא שלוחה לאדוני לעשו, כל פעולה שיהודי עושה הר"ז מנחה שלוחה, או לאדוני או לעשו, או להש"ת או ח"ו לסט"א,

אצל יהודי אין ממוצע ואין פשרות, ואין דבר שהוא לא מצוה ולא עבירה, ובכל דבר מעניני העולם צריך יהודי לתת מנחה להש"ת, למצוא מקום לה'.

אדה פרק משה טיט

"ולא תעלה במעלות על מזבחי, אשר לא תגלה ערותך עליו" (שמות כ-כג), והרי ברים קל וחומר, ומה אבנים הללו שאין בהם דעת להקפיד על ביוזון, אמרה תורה וואיל יש בהם צורך לא תנהג בהם מנהג ביוזון, חברך שהוא בדמות יוצרך ומקפיד ל ביוזון, על אחת כמה וכמה (רש"י שם). מנהג ביוזון מתחיל בדומם, ובכעין דמות ביוזון של הרחבת פסיעות, משום נתינת כבוד והכרת ערך הדברים הוא מעיקרי הבריאה, אכז"כ לבעל חיים, ולאדם נברא בצלם, וליהודי שהוא בן למקום, ולחברך - החשבון כפול לאין סוף. מי שאינו נותן ערך לדברים, עלול להתרדד בכך ולהגיע למה שכתב רבינו יונה שהביאה המדה הזאת את האדם לידי מינות ולהלעיג על מצוות". וזה יורד וגוקב התהום.

ובמובן לנו מדוע כת לצים אינה מקבלת פני שכניה, כי ענין הליצנות הוא היפך בריאה, שהרי כל סוד הבריאה הוא שימת לב, ליתן ערך ויקר לענינים, ואדם שאינו יזום ומחשיב דברים - יוצא מעולמו, ולפי זה יבואר היטב מה שאמרו במס' סנהדרין ט"א ע"א "כי דבר ה' בזה" (במדבר טו-לא) - זה כל מי שאפשר לו לעסוק בתורה ואינו עסק, שהרי אילו היה מכיר ערך התורה לא יכול היה לפרוש ממנה, ואם אינו עוסק הריהו בכלל בז לדבר ה', ועליו נאמר "הכרת תכרת הנפש ההיא עונה בה" (שם) מי יוכל להתבונן בעומק הדין שלו על פי החשבון של "לא תעלה במעלות על

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Summary: ועל חטא שהטאנו לפניך בלבון As tempting as it can be to draw laughter with a witticism or sarcasm at the expense of an authority figure imparting instruction, bear in mind the huge spiritual damage this wreaks on both the listeners and the "humorist" and Chazal's warning that those who make a habit of this are among those who are barred from encountering the Shechinah.