

Bringing the Farbrengen Home

FROM THE REBBE'S LETTERS

The Alcoholic



by Rabbi Shaul Wertheimer

In 1962, an alcoholic wrote a letter to the Rebbe, in which he detailed his struggles with alcohol. He was cognizant of how it was damaging his life and had resolved to quit -- yet time-after-time he was not able to withstand the temptations.

The Rebbe responded with four basic ideas to help this person, and perhaps even those of us who do not struggle with alcoholism can glean a lesson. My adaptation of the Rebbe's letter follows.

It is written in the Tanya (ch.28) that when a person struggles, it is critical that they not become downcast if they are unable to withstand a temptation, and stumble, G-d forbid.

One should not fall into a state of despair due to their failure to succeed in their inner battle. In fact, despair and a fallen spirit are weapons of the Evil Inclination himself, who uses them as artillery to bring the person to a state of despair, by attempting to show you how great of a failure you are!

To the contrary: If a person indeed stumbles and is cognizant of how bad and bitter his life has become -- for not only is giving in to the temptation to drink the opposite of G-d's will, but it is also destroying your life, in the most literal sense -- this can lead one to double-down on one's efforts with



renewed vigor. Then, the assurance of our sages (Talmud, Yoma 39a) will surely be fulfilled: When a person sanctifies themselves a little bit below, they will be sanctified much more from Above.

That being said, here are three points that may help you in your struggle:

1. It would be a good idea to have only the smallest amount of money necessary at your disposal; just enough for your basic necessities.

2. You should do everything you can to be in the company of people who are adhering to the Torah and Mitzvot and will have a positive influence on you. As our sages say (Talmud, Sotah 7a; end of Sukkah), "Good friends do a lot." It's good to have good neighbors; and vice versa.

3. There are doctors who can prescribe certain medications that will help you overcome the desire to drink. You should consult with a doctor and follow their instructions. Additionally, and perhaps this is the most critical point, you should become well-versed in some chapters of Mishna and Tehillim, reviewing them from time-time-time, particularly when you are feeling a temptation.

[Editor's note: I was not familiar with the idea of a medication to help curb a desire to drink, and I asked a friend who is knowledgeable in these matters.

It turns out that in the 1960s (when the letter was written), it was common to prescribe a certain drug (Disulfiram may have still been in use at the time the Rebbe wrote the letter) that would cause a person to feel nauseous if they drank alcohol. Today some doctors prescribe naltrexone to help a person quit drinking. Regardless of the efficacy of these medications, I think the Rebbe's point to consult one's doctor is the central idea here].

Regarding the other point you wrote, namely, that you are lacking diligence in your Torah study, it would be a good idea that when you begin to feel that your focus is waning in a particular subject or text, you should switch to a different topic, for example, from Halakha (law) to Aggada (homiletics); from Chumash (Five Books of Moses) to the Oral Torah (Talmud), or the opposite. ☘

Hayom Yom

12 Shevat

Intellect and excitement are two separate worlds. Intellect - a world cold and settled; excitement - a world seething and impetuous. Man's avoda is to combine them, unite them. The impetuousness then becomes transformed into a longing, and the intellect into the guide in a life of avoda and action.

א גוט שבט!

The Maharal of Prague

Throw it to the Birds

by Rabbi Shaul Wertheimer

This past Wednesday, 10 Shevat, was the 76th Yahrzeit of the Previous Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson. Here is an excerpt from one of his Farbrengens:

"My great-grandfather, the Tzemach Tzedek, once recounted that as a little boy he heard from his grandfather, the Alter Rebbe, that when he was a little boy his great-grandfather, the learned R. Moshe Posner, told him that his father's great-grandfather, the Maharal of Prague, established the following custom.

"In the week preceding the Shabbos on which Parshas Beshalach was to be read, he would instruct all the teachers and parents of little children to bring them to the courtyard of his shul on Shabbos Shirah.

"There, after telling them that this was Shabbos Shirah, the Maharal would direct the teachers to tell them all about the Crossing of the Sea -- how the birds chirped and pranced as Moshe and all the people, men and women, sang the song of thanksgiving for their miraculous deliverance that begins *Az Yashir*, and how the children fed the birds with fruit from the trees that miraculously grew in the sea.

"To recall this, the children in the courtyard would then be given kasha, buckwheat, to scatter for the poultry and the birds. Finally, after blessing the children, the Maharal would bless their parents that they should bring them up to Torah study, Chuppah, and the performance of Mitzvos."

The Previous Rebbe would not have told this story if it did not contain a pertinent lesson. That was not his way. This is no mere story



about a great Jewish personality from years gone by. This story was not only delivered verbally, but printed by the Rebbe for all of us to learn from.

At a Farbrengen on Shabbos Parshas Beshalach, 1961, the son-in-law and successor of the Previous Rebbe -- the Rebbe -- suggested the following lesson.

The Maharal was a copious author. He was a great sage. If he had spent all his time engrossed in his own personal study, no one would have batted an eyelash.

Yet the Maharal carved time from his busy schedule to teach a minhag (custom) to children.

Not a Torah law or a Rabbinic enactment -- although I'm sure he also did that. But a minhag; To keep a minhag is a nice thing, but is not mandatory.

The Maharal recognized one of the deepest secrets of our survival: *Minhag*.

A minhag is often what catch's a child's eye, inspiring curiosity and pride, a feeling of "this is how we do things in our family."

And when the Maharal taught children the minhag of feeding the birds on Shabbos Shirah, he also explained the reason(s) behind it. The boys and girls in the shul courtyard were encouraged to feed the birds with the same joy that their ancestors experienced at the Splitting of the Sea thousands of years earlier.

And then the Maharal blessed them.

Now, some things are indeed very lofty. Just open any of the Maharal's books to get a taste of deep, inspired scholarship.

But teaching our children is more important.

And what should we teach them?

Not just the fundamentals of our faith and practice, not just things that are written explicitly in the Torah and Talmud, but also a minhag.

In the case of the Maharal, he taught the children a minhag that isn't even connected with other human beings, but with birds! It's critical to point out that feeding animals on Shabbos is hotly debated amongst the halachic authorities. According to halacha, it is only permissible to feed animals on Shabbos if they rely on you for food.

Some authorities maintain that the custom of feeding birds on Shabbos Shirah is therefore not permitted. Others feel that it is permitted, since the purpose is not to feed the birds, *per se*, but to remind ourselves of the miracle at the Splitting of the Sea.

One of the Maharal's disciples, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz, even wrote that the word Beshalach in Hebrew is an acronym for "On Shabbos Shira, eat wheat" **בשבת שירה לאכל חיטים**

That being said, in the times of the Maharal it was common that people owned chickens or geese. In fact, one of the main sources of income for Jews in Eastern Europe was raising fattened geese. Thus, it would be permitted according to halacha to feed your chickens on Shabbos (since they rely on you), and if the birds also come to eat some wheat that you put out, that is not a problem.

Nowadays, however, that most of us don't own chickens or geese, this custom should not be followed on Shabbos itself; it is preferable to feed the birds on Erev Shabbos.

Nevertheless, we can certainly tell the story on Shabbos! Moreover, recounting the story will help implant *rachmonus* (compassion) for all of G-d's creatures.

And if we have compassion towards birds that don't even belong to us, may we all be blessed to be compassionate for all human beings. And let's do it with a song!



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