



## "EVERYONE DOES IT"

Dear Parents,

Erev Shabbos Parashas Acharei-Mos 5782

Most people are impressionable, especially children. We form impressions of events, ideas, proper and improper behavior and societal norms from our family, neighbors, media, celebrities and friends. It is worthwhile to delve into the potential consequences of this dynamic.

To paraphrase a *pasuk* in this week's *Parsha* (*Vayikra 18:3*): *Do not behave like the Egyptians, amongst whom you lived, nor like the Canaanites into whose land I am bringing you. Hashem* was instructing *Moshe Rabbeinu* to warn the Jews to be extra careful not to emulate the ways of the inhabitants of the lands in which they lived. It is so very easy to be swayed by the behavior of one's neighbors. It is hard to resist falling prey to sin, when "everyone" is doing it.

**"It is very easy to be swayed by the behavior of one's neighbors."**

The *Mefarshim* disagree as to the exact extent of the (mis) behavior the Jewish people were to avoid. The *Kli Yakar* points out that (unlike *Rashi's* explanation) it is not likely that *Yosef* would have picked the land of *Goshen* for his family to live in, if it was the absolutely most immoral and degraded area of Egypt. Similarly, it is not right to assume that *Hashem* would place the Jewish people in the most corrupt and debased area of the world. *Goshen* was not the worst and the land of *Canaan* is not the worst. So why the need for this special warning?

The *Kli Yakar* explains that *Hashem* was warning against a presumption the Jewish People were likely to make. The Jews understood the need to avoid contact with the absolutely outrageous manifestations of immoral and idolatrous behavior, that did exist in more distant surrounding areas. The fact that *Hashem* needed to warn them about their immediate neighbors who were not as bad as some of the others, brings us to an important insight.

People have a tendency to justify behavior when they can point out that "so and so is doing even worse than me." We like to place ourselves in the middle ground of what we consider acceptable norms and behavior. Those to our right, we tend to label as "extremists" and those to the left as being too open-minded or loose. If we're looking to excuse marginally inappropriate behavior, we benefit from the grossly inappropriate and we justify our conduct to ourselves and others by saying – "look, I'm not as bad as him!" We know to avoid the absolute worst type of behavior around, but are we as careful with the marginal or questionably improper conduct?

**"We like to place ourselves in the middle ground of what we consider acceptable norms and behavior."**

One lesson is to live, work, study and play in the most wholesome, spiritually supportive environment possible. Another lesson is we have an obligation to help our children understand this dynamic. When a child misbehaves and tries to justify his actions by "but everyone does it," or "he was even worse than me" we need to patiently explain that each of us is responsible to be the best we can and always act appropriately. Others' unacceptable behavior is no justification for our misconduct.

If we were to enter our children into a sports or academic competition, we would encourage them, inspire them and help them to do their very best. The last thing we would want is for them to only try to be like everyone else, and become complacent in the middle of the pack. Our striving for our children's spirituality and *mentschlichkeit* should be the same – we don't settle for "just as good as everyone else." We aim for the stars and leave the mediocrity in the dust.

There is an overwhelming preponderance of immorality, weakening of ethics and values swirling around the world today. If we let down our guard and look to surrounding societies for a barometer of how to behave, we would be swept away by a tidal wave of anti-Torah and anti-*Kedusha* influences. We need to go beyond the bare minimum, beyond mediocrity, in our *Mitzvos* and beyond the barely acceptable in our conduct. We must strive to make the proper impressions on our children's minds and hearts through our own mode of conduct, from the surroundings in which we place them, and most importantly – through the tools we give them to be true to their inner values and beliefs.

**"Our striving for our children's spirituality and mentschlichkeit should be ... – we don't settle for "just as good as everyone else."**

Best wishes for a wonderful, *Kedusha*-filled Shabbos,

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