

The Intellectual Dangers of Familiarity with Knowledge

פרשת אחרי מות

Engaging in activities that have become routine generally lose their excitement and fail to capture our attention. To combat the impact of routine, our Sages tell us to always view the Torah as new. In this week's Parsha, the Ralbag shares with us a further insight into the nature of routine that can help us retain our passion and focus.

The Ralbag says, "The first benefit of the Parsha is in regards to Mitzvos. The Torah warns us not to enter the Holy of Holies, if it is not for the purpose of the Avodah. The purpose of this is clear. It is human nature not to analyze that which he is used to seeing. This lack of analysis is due to the fact that he thinks he can always see it. However, something that he is not familiar with, will capture his focus and attention. It is for this reason that the Torah did not allow us to enter into the Holy of Holies all of the time. This would ensure that when we do enter, we focus and penetrate to the depths of what we are seeing. A proof to a person lacking understanding of things that he is used to, is from Tefillah. Tefillah was organized by the Men of the Great Assembly possessing wondrous secrets. However, due to the fact that we are so habituated in Tefillah we don't focus ourselves to

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attempt to understand its secrets. This lack of focus to understand what we are saying, results in many of our wise people even making mistakes in understanding Tefillah. We find this same problem when it comes to Torah study. Due to our familiarity with the Torah we don't try to understand it. We even find many of our wise men, whose knowledge spans the breadth of Torah, having no understanding at all in many areas of Torah."

It seems from the Ralbag that routine alone is not the primary cause for the lack of analysis and focus. As he says, "This lack of analysis is due to the fact that he thinks he can always see it." The mere fact that I am so familiar with this activity does not prevent reflection. Rather it is the message the routine sends that hinders our focus. Routine triggers the brain to think

that I will always be able to do this, which causes an inability to properly analyze what I am seeing. It is the lack of urgency which causes us not to focus properly. However, the Ralbag seems to even go a step further, and says that this familiarity not only causes a person to not focus properly, but also causes him to not focus at all! As he says, "This causes wise people to even make mistakes in understanding Tefillah, and causes wise men to have no understanding in many areas of Torah."

We can glean a few practical lessons from this Ralbag. Firstly, through the Ralbag's understanding of the dynamics of routine on our psyche, we can derive an additional strategy to counter the negative effects of routine. Through focusing on the urgency of the matter, we can circumvent the message triggered by routine that causes us not to reflect. In regards to davening, we can think that if we don't pour out our hearts in Tefillah today for someone who is sick there may not be a tomorrow, and in learning we can increase our focus and analysis in our formative years, through realizing that we don't know what the financial stresses and obligations of tomorrow will bring. Therefore, we have to grab while we can. Secondly, we shouldn't be discouraged if we find learning difficult and unfamiliar to us. As this lack of familiarity is indeed the key to being able to analyze and penetrate to the depths of Torah.

BASED ON THE WEEKLY SHMUSS GIVEN BY HARAV SHAYA COHEN, ROSH HAYESHIVA ZICHRON ARYEH

לעילוי נשמת גיטל בת הרב אליעזר מנוח
לעילוי נשמת הרב יוסף חיים בן מאיר
לעילוי נשמת רפאל חיים דוב בן ריסא שושנה
לרפואה שלמה יהושע דוד בן אלטא יענטא