

# DEVOREEM

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Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

Many times people come to me and say, "Rabbi, I do not see why I cannot do anything I like as long as it does not hurt anybody else. If I want to take dope or I want to get drunk or I want to run around with other women, who is it hurting? It will only hurt me and if I want to hurt myself, that's my business". We cannot go along with this way of thinking.

We believe that a person cannot do anything he likes to himself. G-d made us the custodians of our body and our talents. He gave them to us as a gift to help Him better the world. We cannot destroy them or ourselves needlessly, but even if we would believe that we are the complete masters of ourselves and our talents, it would not be possible for us to hurt only ourselves without hurting others. Drunks have more accidents and everybody's insurance rates go up. Dope addicts need large amounts of money and crime rises dramatically. Broken homes increase the number of welfare recipients and taxes rise. Children from broken homes need much more counseling and psychological services and educational standards fall. The idea that "I can do anything that I want as long as it does not hurt anybody else" is false because everything we do affects others. If by our behavior we burden society with problems and costs which we should have shouldered and which others now must bear, then we are affecting others.

This, though, poses a very different problem. How are we to treat people who choose not to shoulder their burdens? Do we approve, tolerate, leave alone, or punish such individuals? We cannot say in Judaism as they did in certain ancient cultures <sup>then</sup> that if a person chooses to lead a certain life style, ~~that~~ we should leave him alone and he should bear all its consequences. If he wants to harm himself or his family, let him. We will not rescue him. We will not help him. We cannot do this because we

believe that we are our brother's keeper. If an individual yells for help even though he brought his problems on himself we are still obligated to help him. What, though, should be the community's stance toward individuals who violate its standards? The Torah has given us standards. How do we get people to uphold them?

In Judaism, we believe that G-d rules the world. Therefore, ultimately He will determine who is doing the right or the wrong thing. It is not our job to judge people. Judaism is by nature a tolerant religion. It is not our job to punish people. Very few offenses are actually punishable in Jewish law by a human court. All the punishments mentioned in the Bible are impossible to implement and are mainly statements of standards and priorities. We leave most of them to the heavenly court. Of course, courts of justice must be established to litigate disputes and make sure that violence is not rampant. Judaism enforces social discipline through the setting of community standards and by admiring and honoring only those who meet these standards. It tolerates everyone, but it only approves those who meet its standards.

There is a big difference between tolerance and approval. In our modern world we have confused these two concepts. I might tolerate another person's behavior which means that I would not seek any criminal penalties against the individual, but it does not mean that I would approve this person's actions. This confusion of tolerance and approval is widespread. ~~Many people think that if they talk or sit down with certain individuals they are approving them and their actions. This is not so.~~ Tolerance means that you let an individual exercise his free will but you do not praise or honor or respect any choice he makes. Approval means that you honor and respect and praise him for any choice he makes. In our modern world, we have a tendency to admire courage, strength, dedication, devotion,

etc., irregardless of whether this devotion was to a good cause or a bad cause. Not all dedication is worthy of approval and praise. I might tolerate certain individuals, but I would never approve what they do. For example, we in Judaism tolerate homosexuals but we most certainly do not approve of what they do. We might tolerate drunks but we most certainly do not approve what they do, etc.

In the Torah portion, Devoreem, which we always read before Tisha B'Av, we have a lesson in the distinction between tolerance and approval. In it we find the expression, "Aicho", which means literally "how". It is an expression of woe. We find the same expression in the book of Isaiah where it says "How the city has become a harlot". This same word, "Aicho", begins Jeremiah's Book of Lamentations which we read on Tisha B'Av. "How the city is desolate". In all three places, a Jewish leader had to come to grips with the people's laxity. He had either to approve, tolerate, or castigate it. Moshe was dealing with people who wanted to do the right thing but their selfish desires clouded their objectivity. They thought they were upholding the Torah's standards. They didn't see the difference between the standards they were to uphold and the things they wanted to do. They had gotten confused. That's why Moshe needed to be tolerant. The people meant to do well. They had special problems. Each one was interpreting his duties and obligations in their own way. Moshe did not approve what these people did but he could understand why they were doing it, and he was trying to help them back on the right path by teaching them, by talking with them, and by encouraging them. They meant well. They caused a lot of trouble, though, and Moshe was getting tired. He needed help in contending with them.

In the time of Isaiah, the problem was different. The people no longer felt that they were doing the right thing. The city had become a harlot. They

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knew that what they were doing was the wrong thing but they wanted to do it, anyway. They did not fool themselves into thinking that what they were doing was right. They knew it was wrong. Isaiah's task was to talk with them and to show them that they did not have to keep on this wrong path. They could do the right thing if they wanted to. They did not approve of what they were doing, and he did not approve of what they were doing. Isaiah's task was to tolerate the people and to keep the ethical and moral and religious standards of the Torah always before them. Even though they were not living up to them, the people should always know that these standards were still there.

The third stage and the one which caused the destruction of the Temple occurred in Jeremiah's time. The people were doing the wrong thing but they wanted to say it was the right thing. They knew objectively that their standards were not the Torah's standards, but they still wanted to say that they were correct standards. Jeremiah says "How the city is desolate". They wanted Jeremiah's approval and the Torah's approval for all the evil they were doing, and if they could not get it, they would substitute their own approval. They did not want to be tolerated. They wanted to be told that they were right. Jeremiah would not do it and he was persecuted. ~~Standards must always be maintained even if people are not following them because there are standards.~~ We must never give approval to things that are wrong even though we must always tolerate the individuals who are doing wrong, because only in this way can we show them how eventually to accept the correct standards. Tolerance and approval are not synonymous.

The Torah teaches us that it is wrong to condemn people out of hand. Moshe Rabbeinu was only allowed to rebuke the Jewish people the day before he died and then only by hints. It is not our place to judge people. It is our place to uphold Jewish standards. Tolerance, though, does not mean

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that we approve of what others do. They can do what they want, but we do not have to tell them that what they are doing is right. In this day and age, it is very important that we maintain both tolerance and standards. There are some who wish to be completely intolerant because they are afraid that if they are tolerant they will be misinterpreted and their tolerance will be misconstrued as approval. There are others who want to approve everything. Both these stances are wrong. Judaism teaches us that there are standards in the world, and that we should uphold them. We are not supposed to approve immorality, unethical, and irreligious acts. However, we must tolerate everyone.

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The Torah portion, Devoreem, is always read before the holiday of Tisha B'Av. In this Torah portion we learn about the difference between appearance and reality. Too often in life we confuse appearance and reality. People are only interested in appearance. They are not really interested in what things really stand for and mean. Religion, if it is only a pageant and a show and does not strike deep into the heart of the individual, is not worth very much. This is what the prophet Isaiah thunders against in this Haphtorah. The people confused appearance with reality. They thought that by looking religion they became religious. Religion was to them a pageant, a spectacle. Isaiah tells them this is wrong. You have to seek justice and relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless and plead for the widow. His words start out with Chazon which means a vision. The letters there stand for the Hebrew words Chazak Venechazaik, be strong and courageous. It is not always easy to understand the difference between appearance and reality. Sometimes fear of appearances help. In this town the Jewish Federation was really started because many Jewish merchants were ashamed when men with black coats and long earlocks came to their business and approached them for money, so they set up a special fund which was administered by someone away from the business district so they would not be embarrassed. These people would not be in their stores. To them it did not look nice. Sometimes this idea of it does not look nice is terribly destructive. I know a person who felt it was not nice for Jews to do the hard work that was required in his factory so that although he said he was a pious Jew he would not give a Jew a job in his factory. He said it was demeaning. This meant that when immigrant Jews came to town they either had to starve, go on welfare, or leave town. This man did a terrible thing. The Jewish people were told they could enter the land of Canaan because the other people there had become corrupt. They had thought that by going through certain rituals, certain appearances, you

could force G-d to do certain things. Religion is not magic. The difference between religion and magic is that in magic the god has to do what you tell him to do. You have forced him to do it by your ritual. In Judaism we do not believe that. G-d does not have to listen to our prayers. He can if He wants but He does not have to. G-d looks at the whole picture, our actions, our prayers and does what H knows is good for the world. We cannot force G-d to do anything. Society crumbles when good form, style is put over substance. Society also crumbles when people are not allowed to be heard. Moshe in this Torah portion says Eicha, how can I bear this people alone? He should not have to bear this people alone. The Rabbis say he made a terrible mistake by trying to bear this people alone. Everyone must be given an opportunity to be heard. Many labor relations people say that the reason for many strikes is not because of money but because the workers want to say they are important and want to be heard. There is a story they tell about a man in Russia where nobody can be heard really who wanted to leave. He could not get out. He saw that there was a traveling circus about to leave. He approached the owner and asked him to take him on so he could get out of Russia. The owner said he had no openings but his gorilla died last night and if he wanted to put on a gorilla suit he could and get out. That night the cage went over a big bump and the bars between the gorilla cage and the lion cage fell down. The lion stuck his head through the opening and the man in the gorilla suit started to yell, "help, help, help". All of a sudden, the lion shouted, "Shut up, you fool. Do you think you are the only one who wants to get out of Russia?" Destruction came upon the Jewish people because they put form over substance and did not listen to the cries of the oppressed. It is up to us to always remember this, never to put form over substance, appearance over reality, and to listen to the cries of everyone.

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The Torah portion, Devoreem, is always read before Tisha B'Av, the saddest day in the Jewish calendar. Perhaps this Torah portion can be summed up in its very last sentence. "You shall not fear them because the Lord your G-d, it is He who fights for you."

Tisha B'Av is known as a holiday and it speaks about suffering. Suffering is one of the major problems in religion. How can we account for it? If G-d is all good and all knowing and the creator of everything in the world, how can there be evil? How can there be suffering? To the ancient Greeks suffering was not a problem. Evil was not a problem because this was the very make-up of the world. The world was just an arena of conflicting forces and man was caught in it. He was pursued by an inexorable fate. We were forced to do things we really did not want to do and then we were punished by the furies by all their tremendous power and might. There was not such things as good or evil. The only thing a human being could do was to escape into something which would temporarily shield him or make him happy. We were to retreat into beauty or music or philosophy but we really could not escape our fate. This, of course, is what all the Greek plays are about. Man is trapped. We do not believe that. We say that G-d is good and that much of the suffering in the world we have brought on ourselves. This is what Tisha B'Av teaches us. As we have brought suffering on ourselves we can bring good things on ourselves. Tisha B'Av is a day which has marked many Jewish tragedies. We were expelled from England in 1290 on this date and Spain in 1492. According to the Spanish historians, Columbus was a Jew. We have always said that we are not like G-d in form or even in mind, that the only way G-d and us intersect is in morality. G-d is held to the same standards of morality as we are. That's why we can argue with G-d. Ultimately we believe G-d does uphold His own standards or morality and sometimes we cannot understand our suffering at all. That is what the Book of Job is about. G-d trusts us so much that He knows that even in spite of our suffering we will uphold our values. That is the only way we can maintain our humanity. A story is told about the man who was expelled from Spain. His ship was captured by pirates. The pirate ship then was shipwrecked and his wife and child were lost and he was cast on a barren desert. He looked up to G-d and said, "G-d, no matter what You do You cannot stop me believing in You".

The problem of suffering is real and we cannot give any easy answer to it. Tisha B'Av proclaims that we can explain national suffering but not individual suffering on the basis of our sins as we say in our prayers, "Mepnai Chatoaynu Goleenu", that because of our sins we were exiled. This, however, cannot explain individual suffering. That we do not always understand. G-d wanted to vent his anger on the friends of Job who tried to justify his suffering. Job asked G-d to desist and G-d relented because of Job's plea. We do not understand why individuals suffer. I had a friend who was a brilliant student. He lasted in the Rabbinate six hours. He got a job and when he came to his pulpit he was told a President of the Congregation had just been involved in an automobile accident. He went to see him. The man was all bandaged up with tubes coming out all over. He took one look at him and said, "What terrible thing did you do to deserve this?" On an individual level we cannot fathom suffering. When the Temple was being destroyed there was a beautiful Medrash that Abraham appeared before G-d and said, "Please, G-d, spare Your children, remember how I was really ready to sacrifice my son, Isaac, for you". Isaac said, "G-d, please stop, remember how I was willing to sacrifice myself for You". Jacob stepped forward and said, "G-d, remember how I was willing to fight even my brother, Esau, to save my children, please save the children of Israel". Moshe stepped forward and said, "Remember how I was even willing to have my name blotted out from Your book if You would just save Your people". G-d did not listen to any of them. Then Rachel stepped forward and she said, "G-d, remember how I gavemy secret signs to my sister, Leah, so she would not be embarassed when our father forced her to marry Jacob ahead of me". G-d said, "For the sake of Rachel, I will save My children". What does this Medrash mean? This Medrash is telling us how we can prevent suffering from destroying us all. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moshe were willing to die for their faith, to fight to the bitter end for principles, but that is not how to alleviate suffering. Sure, sometimes you have to fight. The way to alleviate suffering is to reach out and help others even when there is trickery involved. It is learning how to work with people even when they are not perfect. A teacher can be an excellent teacher, but very devious. You still have to work with her. After all, it was not Leah's

fault her father was using her. The only way we can handle suffering is not by going out and doing violence. Sure, there are a lot of crazy things and people in the world, but we have to learn how to work with them. It is a fact that in the concentration camps that those who were able to survive with their sanity intact were those that could reach out to others. Of course, this did not insure survival. A bullet does not discriminate between people, but it gave those who reached out the courage and hope not to die of despair. We all have to learn how to get along, how to reach out. There is a story they tell about a man who came running into a doctor's office. He said, Doctor, it is an emergency. I have a dime stuck in my ear". The doctor said, "Come in. How long have you had it there?" The man answered, "Two weeks". The doctor said, "Two weeks! How come so long?" The man said, "Well, doctor, you see I didn't need the money until now". There are a lot of crazy people in the world, but we have to learn to live with them. If we all learn to reach out we can overcome our suffering.

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In the Torah portion Devoreem we learn how Moshe Rabbeinu reviews Jewish history from the Exodus until the time of his speaking before the assembled people before he is to die. Many of the things that are written in the Sedra are very applicable to today especially his description of the land. He tells how Reuven and Gad, the two tribes, come to him and tell him that they do not want to enter into the Land of Israel, that they would rather stay in Transjordan. First Moshe became very angry with them because he suspected them of being afraid as the Jews were when the spies came back with their report. The night the spies came back with their report was Tisha B'Av. The Jewish people cried for nothing then. G-d said, "Tonight you cried for nothing, but in the future you will have something to cry about." The tribes of Gad and Reuven said that they would form the vanguard of the Jewish people to conquer the land. They were not going to shirk their responsibility. That is different than the Jews today who do not send their sons to fight in the army in Israel. However, there is something very peculiar about what Moshe eventually did. He eventually allotted the land in Transjordan to the tribes of Gad and Reuven and part of the tribe of Menashe. Why did he do this? Only Gad and Reuven asked for land in Transjordan. Why did he send part of the tribe of Menashe? The Rabbis explain that the tribe of Menashe were scholars and scribes and Moshe did not want the tribes of Gad and Reuven to live in Transjordan without adequate spiritual leadership. It is the responsibility of scholars and scribes to live among the people no matter where they live. It is important for them to be where the people are. They should not insulate themselves from the people and not be with them. This is also something we learn from a seeming contradiction in how we pray. We are supposed to pray in a fixed building and not outdoors generally. However, the building in which we pray must have windows. Why should this be so? Again, the scholars must know what the people are doing and be part of them even though they may set higher standards than the people are willing to uphold now. Judaism needs structure and that is what the State of Israel is giving to the Jewish people today. However, it also must contribute to the world. The story about the Russian who was standing in line for some basic necessities. After standing in line for 2 or 3 hours he got disgusted and said,

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"I cannot stand standing in line anymore. I'm going to go to Andropov and tell him off". He left and in an hour he was back. His friend asked him if he had told Andropov off. He said he hadn't. His friend asked him why he hadn't. He said, "Because the line was too long".

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The Torah portion Devoreem is always read before Tisha B'Av. One of the reasons we read this Torah portion before Tisha B'Av is because in it Moshe reviews the story of the Jewish people's refusal to enter the Land of Israel after ten of the twelve spies returned with an evil report. He mentions how "Vaterognu V'Oholechem", "and you murmured in your tents and you said, 'Because G-d hates us He brought us out from the land of Egypt to give us in the hand of the Amorites to destroy us.'" The night they murmured in their tents was the night of Tisha B'Av and, according to the Medrash, G-d said, "Because you cried for nothing on this day in the future you will have lots to cry about on this day." In the Haphtorah, which gives the special name for this Shabbos, Shabbos Chazon, we learn how Isiah castigates the people because they are not treating each other justly, and he predicts that the cities of Israel will be burned with fire and the land devoured by strangers. It seems strange that we are reading about this prophecy of Isiah now since Isiah was the prophet of hope when it came to Jerusalem. Isiah was the one who told King Cheeskiahu to continue fighting against the Assyrians when all seemed hopeless. Cheeskiahu had made a treaty with the Egyptians and Ethiopians against the Assyrians. Sanchered came from Assyria to put down this revolt. He defeated the Egyptians and Ethiopians and then turned his might against Judah. It looked hopeless. Everybody counseled that he should give up, especially after all the provisions in the city of Jerusalem were consumed. Isiah, though, told Cheeskiahu to keep fighting, that G-d would deliver them. He was the only one who counseled this way. There were many other false prophets who counseled Cheeskiahu to give up, to submit. Isiah turned out to be right. A plague attacked the Assyrian army and they all fled in one night. Since then many of the people believed that Jerusalem was impregnable. It could never be taken. They believed that G-d would never let Jerusalem be destroyed so, paradoxically, the prophet who enhanced Jerusalem's image and power and saved it once is now the prophet who is predicting its doom. It would seem that we should read the prophet Jeremiah today because Jeremiah was continually telling the people to submit, not to fight. There were many false prophets during

Jeremiah's time who, basing their prophecies on Isiah, told the people to fight, fight, fight. It seems strange that in the time of Isiah the true prophecy was to fight, fight, fight, not to submit while in the time of Jeremiah the true prophecy was to submit and not to fight. It is difficult in life to know who is the true prophet and who is the false prophet. Here were two prophets who also had false prophets in their time whose messages were diametrically opposed. Isiah said to fight and Jeremiah said to submit. Isiah lived 150 years earlier than Jeremiah. Sometimes the counsel of 100 years ago or 50 years ago is not the true counsel for today. G-d, when He first brought destruction on the world, brought it by water. We all know that water is a very very good thing. Without it we cannot live for more than 4 or 5 days. We know that without water nothing will grow, yet water, if it is uncontrolled, can destroy everything. Good things, if they are not well balanced, can destroy everything. Good pushed to the extreme becomes evil. The same thing can be said about fire. The temples were destroyed by fire. Without fire we, too, could not live. We could not cook our food or stay warm in the winter or, today, cool in the summer. We could not forge our tools to survive. It is necessary to man but can get out of control and destroy man. We always have to balance things. When Isiah prophesied during the reign of the King Hezekiah and told him to fight the people were righteous. Later, during the reign of Menasha, who some say was even Isiah's grandson, the people had turned bad. Each one was only lookint out for himself. They maybe had good reasons for being selfish and self-centered. Their discoveries may be important for mankind, it was important for their businesses to succeed, etc., but one man was taking advantage of another. The Kaballah tells us that man was created not just to receive, not to just do things to bring him happiness because this will only lead to evil, but was created to do things and achieve things to help others. During Jeremiah's time the people, too, were looking out only for themselves. They even had made other Jews slaves (it was good for the economy, etc.). The people were not united. In Isiah's time under Cheeskiahu it was right to fight because the people were united. The people were treating each other

with dignity and respect. Common sense and a balanced view told people this was the right course to take. However, in Jeremiah's time the people were not united. One group was trying to take advantage of another. They did not have the unity necessary in order to fight. Common sense and a balanced view would say that they had to submit. It is difficult to know what course of action is best because in different circumstances different courses are right. In Isiah's time it was right to fight. In Jeremiah's time it was wrong. We must always make sure the Jewish people are united so we can overcome all our enemies. I am reminded of the story they tell about three brothers: one was a piano tuner, one was an interior decorator, and one was in the tire business. They got together and bought a building. However, they then had a problem. The problem was what kind of sign to put up. To put a sign up that said "piano tuning, interior decorating, and tire repair" was just too long. They finally hit on the solution. They put up a sign which read "We fix flats." Unity at least assures a chance for victory. Disunity can only bring defeat.

# What's Wrong With Being Smug & Self-Satisfied?

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*Devarim*

Many times we are confronted by people who are smug and self-satisfied. They feel that they know everything and that they have all the answers. Many times they constantly try to put others down by showing how far from perfect other people are. They seem to feel that they are superior to others, either because they have had a certain education or because they have had a certain success in life or because they can follow a certain life style. They look down their noses at everyone else and they feel that they are to be deferred to by everyone. It is very difficult for other people to work with them. They always must tell others what to do while they, themselves, are never open to suggestions.

In the Torah portion, *Devarim Moshe*, recounts the history of the Jewish people, how after they refused to enter the Land of Israel because of the report of the spies, they were forced to wander for 40 years in the desert. The Jewish people were forced to wander in the desert for 40 years, the rabbis teach us, because they and their leaders did not want to face new challenges. They did not want to grow. They preferred the known hazards of the desert to the challenges of a new way of life.

The Torah portion continues by Moshe recounting how when the 40 years finally were coming to an end, the Jewish people circled through <sup>Trans-Jordan</sup> ~~Transjordan~~ and came into very close contact with the peoples of Moab, Amon, and Edom. They were warned not to provoke these peoples, not to fight with them. G-d had given them their lands and the Jewish people were not to harm them in any way. They were told not to provoke Moab

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even though Moab had earlier hired Bilam, the soothsayer, to curse them. They were not to engage in battle with Moab. They were to leave him alone. G-d had given the Moabites their land and the Jewish people were to stay away from them. It seems strange that the Torah was so solicitous of the welfare of Moab since later on we learn that the Moabites were not allowed to become full converts to Judaism. The other peoples, the Egyptians, the Edomites, even the Canaanites, themselves, could become full converts to Judaism but Moabite men could not become full converts to Judaism. Why should this be so? After all, if the Egyptians, who had enslaved the Jewish people, could become full converts, and if even the Canaanites and the Amalakites and the Edomites could become full converts, why couldn't the Moabites and their cousins, the Amonites, become full converts? After all, they were even related to the Jewish people through Lot. It does not seem to make any sense. It is true that when the Jewish people wandered in the desert, the Moabites and Amonites refused to give them water and bread but so did the Edomites and, after all, refusing to help somebody is not as bad as actively persecuting them like the Egyptians did.

It seems to me that the reason why the Moabites were not allowed to become full converts can be found in what happened when the Moabites hired Bilam to help them fight the Jewish people. They hired Bilam to curse the Jewish people. Why didn't <sup>the people of Moab</sup> they hire Bilam to bless <sup>them</sup> ~~the people of Moab~~, ~~the people of Moab~~, so that they would be able to overcome the Jewish people? The answer to this question is because the Moabites

did not want to grow. They did not want to try to perfect themselves. They were satisfied the way they were. They just did not want the Jewish people to grow or perfect themselves either. They wanted to destroy them by running the Jewish people down.

It is true that the Egyptians persecuted the Jewish people, but they were interested in growing, in building themselves up. They did not want to persecute us per se. They wanted our labor as slaves to build up their society. True, they made a terrible moral error, but they were interested in developing themselves. They chose a wrong road and for this they were punished with the ten plagues, the destruction of their army at the Red Sea, etc., but they had the right idea that in life we must grow and, therefore, they could later acknowledge error. They could see that they took a wrong road and be corrected. They made a common error. They thought that more was better. They wanted the Jewish people's talents, but they wanted to control these talents. That's why one of their fears was that the Jewish people would "fight against them and go out of the land". They wanted more control and more work out of the Jewish people. They made the same mistake the Russians are making today. They missed the mark.

After all, that is one of the meanings of "sin" in Hebrew, "Chait." It means "to miss the mark." They missed the mark just the way many people today do when they think that ~~just~~ <sup>alone</sup> more is better. If you have more control and more work from talented people, you can build a better civilization even though you must make them slaves. It is the same

error a person makes when he goes to a doctor and the doctor tells him to take two pills every 12 hours for two weeks. The person decides that if he takes four pills every 12 hours he will get better sooner. We all know this is foolish and may endanger a person's health even more than not taking the pills. It is the same error a cook would make if he would say "a little baking powder is good, if I double it it will be better," or the same error a chemist would make if he would add more of a chemical to a formula than called for. He could end up with an explosion.

The natural tendency of many people is just to assume that more is better. This can ~~even~~ <sup>even</sup> happen in religion, ~~too~~, when certain people feel that the more restrictions they take upon themselves, the more religious they will become. Many times, though, this has just the opposite effect. More is not always better. People who are searching and striving and trying to better themselves sometimes make terrible mistakes, especially mistakes based on thinking that more is better. However, because they want to grow they can be corrected. They can change. However, a person who is smug and complacent and thinks he knows everything is almost spiritually dead. He is not interested in growing or letting you grow. He already knows everything.

This was the sin of Moab. They did not want to grow and they did not want to let anybody else grow. They did not want to build themselves up to meet the challenges of the time. They just wanted to tear everybody else down. This is the reason many rabbis say that the Moabites were not fit to become converts. Of course, today there are

no such people as Moabites and Amonites and everybody is eligible to become a full convert, but the principle still remains that those who are not willing to grow, who think they know everything, cannot lead a true spiritual life.

Even those people who have taken a wrong path are better candidates to eventually lead a spiritual life than those who think they know everything. One of the problems of the 50's in America was that we thought we knew everything. We were smug and complacent and we were ripe for the terrible rude awakening of the 60's which showed us all that we must still grow. Smugness and complacency and self-righteousness is the enemy of Judaism and the spiritual life, not its ally. This is what the Chassidic Rabbi, the Seer of Lublin, meant when he said, "I much prefer a sinner who knows he is not righteous to a righteous man who knows he is righteous."

This is also what Rabbi Naftali of Ropschitz meant in his famous parable. Once a king went to visit a rebellious province. While he was riding through the town one of the rebels started to take a shot at him. The soldier who was next to the king pulled the king's horse up short and the shot missed the mark. The king, in appreciation, asked the soldier what he could do for him. The soldier said, "I have a sergeant who is very mean. Please transfer him." The king said he would do it, but he looked at the soldier and said, "Why didn't you ask to be a sergeant or even a lieutenant?" That is the problem with many people. They are too self-satisfied. They do not want to grow.

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4 Next time you run into a person who thinks he knows it all and who is smug and complacent, don't be angry with him. Instead pity him because since he doesn't want to grow, he will never be able to be a complete Jew.