

It Won't Happen To Me

People tend to think that bad things will never happen to them. This Parsha teaches us how to handle the “Day After.”

The Poll

Several years ago, a poll was conducted in Israel to gauge whether people believed “it won't happen to me;” basically that certain events would never happen to them.

For instance, 40% of individuals believed that accidental drowning would never happen to them. A somewhat smaller percentage held the same belief about car accidents — 30% of people said it would never happen to them.

Home break-ins, though more common in Israel, still had a significant portion (21%) of people who believed it would never happen to them. Additionally, 64% of individuals expressed no concern about cyber attacks on their computers, firmly believing it would never happen to them. Even a bigger percentage believe that there were slim chances of their pictures or videos being hacked and spread on the internet – they thought it as unlikely as being involved in a plane crash.

Incredibly, however, there was something that a surprising number of people believed would happen to them – winning the lottery. A staggering 35% of individuals believed that they would win the lotto.

Psychologists explain that this belief of “it won't happen to me”

stems from a fundamental need to feel in control of our lives and minimize uncertainties. We seek psychological tools to feel good about ourselves and maintain a sense of control, even though they may not always align with reality. We convince ourselves that we know what to do and that certain undesirable events won't happen to us — and when they do, we always act surprised.

In Judaism, there is a similar problem of “it won't happen to me” — and it arises in our Torah portion:

The Yom Kippur Narrative

This week's Torah portions of Acharei Mos and Kedoshim begin in the wake of the death of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, who tragically perished after entering the holy of holies without permission. Moshe warns Aaron that entry into this sacred space — the holiest place on earth — is permitted only on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, by the high priest, the holiest man in the Jewish nation.

Yom Kippur is the central theme of the portion. The Torah provides specific instructions regarding the high priest's attire on Yom Kippur — he is to wear white garments devoid of gold, in contrast to his regular attire. Prior to entering the holy of holies, the high priest must immerse in a mikvah. In fact, on Yom Kippur, the high priest would immerse a total of five times. The Torah also introduces the concept we all know as the 'scapegoat' — one goat is sent out to the desert, while another is offered as a sacrifice to God.

In the subsequent section, instructions are provided for our own

observance of Yom Kippur: the Torah tells us to oppress ourselves, and our sages explained that the term “oppress” means abstaining from five actions: eating, drinking, anointing oneself, wearing leather shoes, and engaging in intimate relations.

Off Topic

Until here, everything makes sense. But then the Torah takes a surprising twist, warning us not to behave in the most decadent behaviors that were common at the time.

First, it tells us not to consume blood. This commandment perhaps arose from the prevalence of such practices during those times, particularly in pagan worship.

Then the Torah warns us not to imitate the behaviors of the ancient Egyptians and the Canaanites. What exactly were those behaviors? The Torah leaves no room for ambiguity: it was talking about the boundaries of marriage — that one may not marry one’s mother, sister, daughter, or granddaughter.

When I share this with people, their initial reaction is often one of repulsion. The mere thought of marrying one’s mother or sister is unsettling. Even when I mention that Jewish law permits marriage between cousins, it still tends to evoke apprehension. There is one aspect that I typically keep even more discreet—the permissibility of marrying one’s niece; I tend to speak about it only to those who already are immersed in Jewish learning...

Now, I understand that 3,300 years ago, the Canaanites and

Egyptians did such things and therefore the Torah found it necessary to prohibit them. But why did G-d choose to place this law right after the laws of the holy Yom Kippur?

Moreover:

Every holiday is celebrated by reading the Torah portion that is relevant to its day. On the holiday of Shavuot that is approaching, we will read the story of how G-d revealed himself on Mount Sinai and gave us the 10 Commandments. We just finished celebrating Passover, where we read the story of the Exodus. And on Yom Kippur morning, we read this Torah portion, which describes the service of the high priest on that day. However, during the afternoon service of Yom Kippur, guess what we read? We read the continuation of this week's Parsha, which cautions against adopting the behaviors of the Egyptians and the Canaanites!

The Haftorahs of Yom Kippur are beautiful – in the morning we read about helping the poor and destitute. The story of Jonah is read during Mincha.

Doesn't it seem strange that when every Jew is in synagogue, approaching the climax of Yom Kippur/Ne'ilah, wrapped in a tallit, fasting and acting like an angel, — what do we tell him? Don't marry your sister!

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The Rebbe explained that the answer lies in the name of the Torah portion, Acharei, which means "After." A Jew always needs to think about what's coming afterwards. It's true — he is

in the midst of a spiritual high; he feels a tangible sense of G-dliness and spirituality at this moment. But at that very moment, he needs to ask himself: “How will I channel this inspiration into reality the day after? What am I going to do to make sure that this spirituality doesn’t disappear in a puff as soon as the fast is over and I dig into a pastry?”

It is specifically at those sacred moments that the Torah gives us instructions for the most mundane aspects of life. Because, whenever we are inspired to do something good, we need to ask ourselves when exactly and how exactly we are going to do it. Only then, “it won’t happen to me.”