

Strive for a *Normal* High Holiday Season!

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There are many profound and important lessons of the High Holiday period. For me, one of the most inspiring – and challenging – can be gleaned from the Yom Kippur Torah reading. The Torah tells us, “Do not perform the practice of the land of Egypt in which you dwelled; and do not perform the practice of the land of Canaan to which I bring you, and do not follow their traditions. (Vayikra 18:3)” At first glance this doesn’t seem to have much to do with Yom Kippur, but upon further reflection it has everything to do with this awesome day!

The Kli Yakar is of the opinion that Yosef must have chosen places for the Jews to dwell that were not too immoral, so that we would not learn from their bad ways. The Torah is thus telling us that we should not even follow these places despite the fact that they are only mildly immoral. Rashi, however, argues that the people of Egypt and Canaan were the “mekulkalim mikol haumos - the most degenerate of all nations.” By placing us there, Hashem was teaching us how extremely dangerous it can be to follow outside influences and how hard we must work to maintain Torah standards. The Torah concludes this verse by warning us not to “follow their traditions.” The Ibn Ezra asks why we are first warned not to follow their *maasim* and then it switches to *chukoseihem*? He argues that the Torah is warning us not to allow their ways to become our norms, which is what will happen if we are not vigilant.

We can learn from this analysis that there is a difference between being “average” and being “normal.” Although we usually conflate the two, this can be deceptive. Torah norms are our ideal, whereas average is simply a mathematical equa-

tion of what is generally accepted. Average is only normal in an ideal world, but in reality we must strive to rise above the “average” of our society and achieve the exalted “norms” of the Torah. The practice of the Egyptians or the Canaanites, was the “average” of the societies which we had departed from or to which we were approaching, but the “normal,” that which we were taught at Sinai, must continue unaffected and undiminished for all time. For a Torah observant Jew average isn’t good enough, we can be satisfied with nothing less than what the Torah prescribes as normal.

It is now clear why this, the Parshas Arayos, is read on Yom Kippur. On the most exalted day of the year we read the Torah’s moral code, and we pause to take stock and realize that we must apologize for being average, and strive to be normal!

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