

The \$2.9 Million Cup of Coffee

Based on the Teachings of R' Yitzchak Berkovitz

On February 7, 1992, Stella Liebeck, a 79 year old woman from Albuquerque, New Mexico (a place near Boro Park) ordered a forty nine cent cup of coffee from her local McDonalds drive-through restaurant. While adding some cream and sugar, Liebeck managed to spill the cup of coffee on herself, and ended up in the hospital with third degree burns and no more coffee to drink.

When McDonalds refused to cover her basic medical costs, Liebeck declared a massive war on the mega fast-food company. She sued, while the whole world watched.

On August 18, 1994, the Jury awarded Liebeck \$200,000 in compensatory damages, and an additional \$2.7 million in punitive damages! It was the most expensive cup of coffee McDonalds ever sold!



Is this the way to react to a spilled cup of coffee?

Dama Ben Nesinah

Let's travel for a moment way back in time to ancient Rome. There was an assembly of nobles, aristocrats, and governors. Amongst these prestigious and honored men, was a man named Dama Ben Nesinah¹. Try to place an image in your mind of Dama, properly dressed for his stature in a fine cloak made from gold-embroidered silk, sitting amongst royalty and noblemen.

A deranged woman stormed into the room and ran up to Dama. It was his mother. In front of all of the noblemen, she ripped off his cloak and spat in his face! You can imagine the rage that Dama must have felt! Despite his severe embarrassment and fury, Dama did not react. Instead, he sat in his chair and dared not show even the slightest expression of anger.

If his mother would have spilled a boiling hot cup of coffee on him, we could be sure that Dama would have done the same. He would have sat and remained quiet.

So what should we do when a cup of coffee spills? Should we smile as the coffee burns through our skin, or should we declare war on the world? Or maybe, there's another answer.

Mr. Nice Guy

Everybody likes Mr. Nice Guy. He's the type who's always smiling, never has a

bad word to say, and is known for never getting upset.

The only problem with Mr. Nice Guy, is that all his pent up anger is sitting inside of him waiting to explode!

The Chinuch² addresses this individual. He teaches us that every person needs to be careful not to insult anyone with his words. However, if a person is the victim of an insult, he has no requirement to sit there like a stone and not respond! On the contrary, if one were in the habit of repressing one's anger, it will eventually express itself somewhere else, possibly in a very detrimental way - hurting a co-worker, a spouse, or even one's own child.

Although Dama Ben Nesinah conducted himself as a stone and showed no emotion, clearly this is not an adaptable attitude for everyone. Clearly, we are not stones and we do have emotions.

Korach's Mistake

Our coffee spiller, Stella, wasn't the first person to react poorly when she felt she was wronged. She was preceded many years by the infamous Korach.

Korach had issue with Moshe that he couldn't have the same privileges as the kohanim. His jealousy cultivated and festered until it bred anger and he did something unheard of. He amassed a rebellion against Moshe. Korach and all his followers were held responsible to the highest degree and met their deaths in a gory and dramatic fashion.

But why? Why was korach punished for being angry? Anger is just a human emotion! It is a

natural and instinctive reaction. Why was he so brutally punished?

The truth is, if Korach would only have expressed his anger by storming into Moshe's

tent yelling and shouting, perhaps he would not have been held responsible. A

person is allowed to express his anger. Korach's grave mistake was that he didn't know when to stop. He got angry and *remained* angry, letting the situation escalate to the point of no return.

The Torah warns us – "Lo yiyeh k'korach v'kadaso"³, don't be like Korach and his followers. We are allowed to have an immediate and natural reaction of anger. But the Torah demands of us to know ourselves. To know the critical point when the instinctive anger ends and the controllable anger begins.

Two Challenges

Imagine a long number line. Stella Liebeck and Korach are all the way on one end of it, with an obvious display of no self control. On the opposite extreme is Dama Ben Nesinah, a man who was completely in control of his emotions.

Most of us stand at a point on the number line somewhere in between. Our first challenge is to identify *exactly* where that point is. To know when our natural reaction of anger is permitted and at what point it becomes venomous unnecessary anger capable of blinding and destroying others and even ourselves.

The second challenge is then to move that point! Each time we are in a stressful situation,

we should note at what point we feel like we became in control, and try to move that point

closer and closer towards being like Dama Ben Nesinah and further and further from being like Korach.

Have a great shabbos and enjoy your shabbos morning coffee ☺

The only problem with Mr. Nice Guy, is that all his pent up anger is sitting inside of him waiting to explode!

To know the critical point when the instinctive anger ends and the controllable anger begins.

¹Kedushin (31a) ²Sefer H'chinuch (Mitzvah 338) ³Bamidbar (17:5), Sanhedrin 110a - Please email sstilerman@gmail.com with any comments. Your input is greatly appreciated!