

חסידות

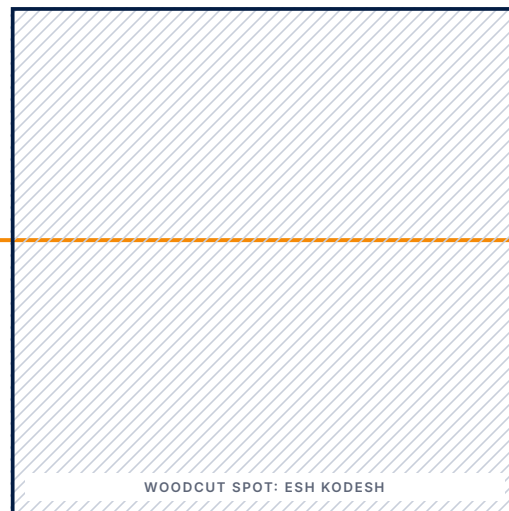
From the Chassidic Courts

PIASECZNO · NOACH, ESH KODESH

Why being called stubborn can actually be a compliment

Esh Kodesh

Being "stiff-necked" (kesheh oref) is not inherently negative but is one of the finest traits, for it means steadfastness — the capacity to hold firm under nisayon (trial) rather than wavering; when Yisrael direct this quality toward good rather than evil, they become fit not merely for a malach (angel) but for Hashem Himself to dwell among them, since their service, unlike that of angels, draws down the level of "I, Hashem, have not changed" and brings about hashra'as haShechinah (resting of the Divine Presence) even within this world and even, as the Gemara's story of the captives illustrates, within suffering itself. This same steadfast holiness enabled the captives to serve Hashem with wisdom even in captivity, ultimately bringing about their redemption. AI SUMMARY



"With God did Noach walk." And Rashi comments: Noach needed support to sustain him, but Avraham strengthened himself and walked in his righteousness on his own.

For it is stated in Sanhedrin 104: the incident of two people who were taken captive, etc. One of them said to his companion, "The camel walking before us is blind in one of its eyes," etc. The captor said to them, "You stiff-necked people, how do you know this?" etc. The Maharsha, of blessed memory, notes precisely: what does "stiff-necked" have to do with his question? And he answers that suffering diminishes wisdom, and they are "stiff-necked" in thinking of themselves that they are still wise — see there.

According to the Torah, it is possible to say that it was not only because they prided themselves in wisdom that He called them "stiff-necked" —

meaning that they are a stiff-necked people who boast even now that they are wise — but also because they truly are wise.

For the verses must be understood: that Hashem said to Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses our Teacher) "I will not go up among you, for you are a stiff-necked people," which gives the reason why He would not go up among them but would instead send a malach (angel). And for that very same reason, Moshe Rabbeinu asked of Hashem that He not send a malach, but that He Himself go with them, as the verse states, "Let Hashem go among us, for it is a stiff-necked people."

How is it possible that from one and the same reason they prove opposite conclusions — that Hashem said that because they are stiff-necked He would send a malach, while Moshe Rabbeinu said that because they are stiff-necked He should not send a malach, but Hashem Himself should go with them?

However, the matter of being "stiff-necked" is actually one of the very best qualities. For one who is not stiff-necked is fickle and light — now this way, now that way — and one cannot come to a settled conclusion with him. At this hour he wants already to serve Hashem, and the hour after he is as if a different person; and especially when he must stand up under a test (nisayon), he will not be able to, God forbid.

Not so the stiff-necked person: he is a straight (steadfast) man — when one speaks with him and works on him so that he resolves in his mind to serve Hashem, then one can be confident that so he will do; and the more stiff his neck, the more he will stand firm under the test, if a test should come upon him.

However, it is bad with the stiff-necked person when he uses this trait of his for evil and is stubborn in bad matters and bad character traits, God forbid. And this is like all good character traits when they are used for evil — like the trait of chesed (kindness), [which can be misused] for an evil love, God forbid, as is known from the Holy Rebbe, the Divine Maggid HaGadol, zatzok"al, on the verse "And a man who takes his sister, it is chesed" — that it is chesed, a supernal love, yet he uses it for a forbidden love toward his sister, God forbid.

Regarding the matter of "kesheh ofef" (stiff-necked), [it can be understood] that after the sin, Hashem said, "I will not go up in your midst, for you are a kesheh ofef people" — meaning that you have drawn out the attribute of stiff-neckedness toward evil.

But afterward, when Hashem said, "v'chanoti et asher achon" (and I will be gracious to whomever I shall be gracious), etc., and also said the Yud-Gimmel Middos (Thirteen Attributes of Mercy) to him, [promising] to forgive their sins, Moshe Rabbeinu said: Now I have a plan.

Yisrael are always great people, tzaddikim (righteous ones) of worth, who withstand trials as befits mighty spirits — and [they are] a kesheh ofef people; but as long as there is any trace of evil in them, the evil can attach itself to this very attribute and they use it for evil.

Therefore [Moshe said]: "v'salachta la'avoneinu v'la'chatateinu" (forgive our iniquity and our sin) — these being unintentional sins — and not only that, but also "u'nechaltanu" (and take us as Your inheritance). Rashi explains this as: "and You shall make us for Yourself a special inheritance." Then they will not use the quality of kesheh ofef for evil, but only for good, and because of this they will be fit for "yelech na Hashem b'kirbeinu" (let Hashem now go in our midst).

If when they preceded "we will do" to "we will hear" a Heavenly Voice went out, "Who revealed to My children..." this is because the ministering angels make use of this (Shabbos 88a) — that this trait is fitting for the ministering angels. With the trait of being "stiff-necked," when it is for the good, Mosheh Rabbeinu (Moshe our Teacher) said that because of this they are worthy of more than an angel — that God Himself should go with them, and not an angel. For an angel, when it comes to this world, requires purification for seven days until it is fit to return to its previous standing, whereas Yisrael, even in this world, serve God and effect the hashra'as haShechinah (resting of the Divine Presence) — such as the Avos (Patriarchs), Har Sinai (Mount Sinai), the Mishkan (Tabernacle), the Beis HaMikdash (Temple), and indeed every heart of a Jew, together with his body, is a place for the hashra'as haShechinah.

That is to say, the angels are changed through [contact with] this world, whereas Yisrael, who serves God, is not changed thereby — rather, he is "stiff-necked" in his service, and this is a drawing-down from the level of "I, God, have not changed," from the level of "darkness and light are the same before Him," where all the vessels, sefiros, and the body do not act upon Him, God forbid.

Therefore Yisrael, who cling to the "body of the King," have from this level of standing firm, not to be changed by the world, to withstand trials — and not only that, but even in this world they bring about hashra'as haShechinah, and this is the aspect of "stiff-necked," a drawing-down from the level of "I, God, have not changed," which is above the level of the angels: "Let God go now in our midst, and not an angel, for it is a stiff-necked people."

For it to be possible for a person to perform the acts of service (avodah) through action alone is also a matter and a level, as above; but that we should also be able to engage in Torah and contemplate it with understanding — that is a far greater level. And each person sees this in himself: that even in whatever distress may come upon him, it is not difficult for him to put on tefillin and to fulfill the other practical mitzvot (commandments), whereas to study Torah, and especially to contemplate it in depth, is very difficult for him.

This is what the captor-chief (Shabbai) said to them: "People of holiness (kedoshim), how do you know?" — meaning, he had already heard that Israel is a people of holiness, but he did not know that their holiness extended even to their suffering, that they could serve [God] even there with wisdom. As stated above, the quality of holiness is a drawing-down from the level of "I am the Lord" (Ani Hashem), etc. Therefore they merited, through this, redemption — that the captor-chief set them free, as stated in the Gemara.

Translation: translated by AI (anthropic/claude-sonnet-5)

