

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

The beginning of this week's portion describes the Jews' exodus from Egypt. Jews gathered their possessions and took gold and silver from the Egyptians. With sacks of dough they prepared for a trek into the unknown desert. One person, however, was preoccupied with other treasures. Exodus 13:19: "Moshe took Yoseph's bones with him, for Yoseph, had made the children of Israel swear, saying, "Hashem will remember you, and you shall bring up my bones from here with you."

The Midrash explains a verse in Proverbs 10:8: "A man with a wise heart shall choose Mitzvos." "This verse," says the Midrash, "refers to Moshe during the Exodus. While the entire nation was busy collecting gold, silver, and precious stones from their former masters, Moshe was busy looking for the remains of Yoseph, the pioneering sojourner who laid the groundwork for Jewish survival in exile."

An obvious question arises. Why is Moshe lauded as a man searching for Mitzvos and praised as one who has special wisdom? Didn't the Jewish people gather gold and silver at the request of Hashem? The Torah openly commands the people in Exodus 11:2 "that each man ask his fellow (Egyptian) man and each woman ask her fellow (Egyptian) woman for gold and silver utensils."

If that is the case -- both Moshe and the Jews were all doing Mitzvos. Why then, is Moshe considered "wise of heart?"

During the early 1920s, Velvel Epstein drove a truck on the Lower East Side for the Mittleman Seltzer Company. He delivered promptly and was courteous to his customers. But one day a most terrible event occurred. A horse-drawn wagon veered in front of his truck and he swerved sharply to avoid it. Dozens of cases came barreling out of the truck and went crashing to the cobblestones. Glass and bubbles were everywhere, and Epstein knew that his career at Mittleman's Seltzer Company was over.

All of a sudden from the small throng of spectators a heavy-set man appeared with his fedora outstretched in his hand. He turned to all the onlookers. "Why are you all just standing there? Let's help this poor man out!" With that he thrust a ten dollar bill into the hat and passed it around. He cajoled and persuaded the gathered to help the driver in his plight. After a few minutes the man had gathered a sizable collection and approached the hapless driver.

"Now, young man. You give this money to your boss, and I'm sure he will be happy with the compensation!" With that the distinguished gentleman disappeared from the crowd.

The onlookers were amazed. "What a mentsch," cried one woman. "A real hero," shouted another. "Such a mitzvah!" declared a third.

Epstein rolled his eyes heavenward. "Mitzvah, Shmitzva," he sighed, "that was Mr. Mittleman!"

There are many, many Mitzvohs to do. Some are very enjoyable and easily performed. Some even mete out to us personal gain and honor. Others, however, require self-sacrifice and hard work. The mitzvah of retrieving gold and silver was quite honorable. However, there may have been much self-motivation involved. We do not know where the actual wealth finally ended up. It may have been contributed to the Mishkan (Tabernacle), or it could have served as a portion of the Golden Calf. One thing we do know. The bones of Yosef that were taken by Moshe served as an inspiration to a generation that faced hardship, questions, and uncertainty. Even today, those bones, interred in Shechem (Nablus), still do. That is, thanks to Moshe, the man of wise heart who had a vision of the future.

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