

HITTING PAY DIRT

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

There is a certain sensitivity displayed in this week's portion that serves as a lesson to mankind.

The first two of the 10 plagues that befell Egypt evolved around water. In the first plague, the waters of Egypt turned into blood. The second plague had frogs emerge from the water. In order to generate those miraculous events Moshe's staff struck the waters. Moshe, however, did not strike the water. He was told that his brother Ahron should do the smiting. After all, as a three-month-old child the waters of the Nile were Moshe's refuge as he was hidden in a reed basket from Pharaoh's soldiers who were drowning all Jewish males. It would not be fitting for one who was saved by the water to strike it.

The next plague, lice, emerged from the earth. After striking the earth with his staff, lice emerged, afflicting all of Egypt. Again Moshe was told not to be the agent of transmutation. After all, he must be grateful to the earth that hid the Egyptian whom he had killed.

Of course, the great ethicists derive from Moshe's behavior the importance of gratitude. "Imagine," they point out, "Moshe had to refrain from striking inanimate objects because he was saved by them years back! How much more must we show gratitude to living beings who have been our vehicles of good fortune."

Such morals deserve a homily to themselves, and there are countless stories of gratitude to accompany such essays. However, I am bothered by the simplicity of that message and the derivations that lead to it. Why is striking water or earth a display of ingratitude? Was it not the will of Hashem to have the dust and waters converted? Would it not be a great elevation to those waters or the dust to be transformed to higher components of G-d's glory? That being the case, wouldn't it be most fitting that Moshe be chosen to elevate simple waters or lowly dirt into objects that declare the open presence of an Almighty Creator who shouts together with his humble servant, "Let My people serve Me"?

Rabbi Nossan Schapira of Krakow (1585-1633) once told of his most difficult case.

A wealthy businessman from Warsaw would do business each month in the Krakow market. On each visit he noticed an extremely pious widow huddled near her basket of bagels reciting Psalms. She only lifted her eyes from her worn prayer book to sell a bagel or roll. After the sale she'd shower her customer with a myriad of blessings and immediately she'd return to the frayed pages of her prayer book that were varnished with teardrops and devotion.

Upon observing her each month, the Krakow businessman came to a conclusion. "This pious woman should not have to struggle to earn a living. She should be able to pursue her prayers and piety with no worries."

He offered to double her monthly earnings on one condition: she would leave the bagel business and spend her time in the service of the L-rd. The woman, tears of joy streaming down her face, accepted the generous offer and thanked the kind man with praise, gratitude and blessing.

A month later, when the man returned to Krakow, he was shocked to find the woman at her usual place, mixing the sweet smell of bagels with the sweet words of Tehillim. As soon as he approached, the woman handed him an envelope. "Here is your money. I thought it over I can't accept your offer."

"A deal is a deal," he exclaimed. "We must see Rabbi Schapira!"

After the businessman presented his case, the woman spoke. "The reason this generous man offered to support me was to help me grow in my spirituality and devotion. From the day I left my bagel business I've only fallen. Let me explain.

"Every day that it would rain, I would think of the farmers who planted the wheat for my bagels. I would sing praises for the glory of rain as I felt the personal guidance of Hashem with each raindrop. When the sun would shine I would once again thank Hashem from letting the farmers harvest in good weather. When I would grind the flour and then sift it again I'd find countless reasons to thank the Almighty. When the bread would bake golden brown I'd thank Hashem for the beauty of the product and its sweet sell. And when a customer would come I'd thank both Hashem for sending him and then bless my patron, too! Now this is all gone, I want no part of a simple, all-expense-paid life."

Moshe had a very personal relationship with the water and the dust. Each time he saw the Nile or tread upon the ground, he remembered the vehicles of his good fortune and used them to praise Hashem. Blood, frogs, and lice are surely miraculous, but they were not Moshe's personal salvation. Striking the water or earth may have produced great national miracles, but Moshe would be left without the simple dirt that yielded piles of personal praise. When one forgoes marveling at a lowly speck of dust and chooses to focus instead upon huge mountains, he may never hit pay dirt. He may only bite the dust.

Dedicated in memory of A. Milton Brown by Mr. & Mrs. Ben Brown