

FOR HIM THE BELL TOLLS

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

There is a verse in this week's portion which seems to have a misplaced possessive. But on closer analysis every noun and pronoun lend powerful meaning. "And every portion of Holies that the Children of Israel bring to a Kohen shall be his. A man's holies shall be his, and what he gives to a kohen shall be his" (Numbers 5:9-10). The question is obvious: if the holies shall be his then why are they the Kohen's; and if they are the Kohen's, as the Torah tells us, then why are they his?

Rashi sheds some light by explaining the verse with a Medrash: The man who gives to a Kohen shall surely not lose, as whatever he gives shall ultimately be returned they will be his. On the other hand, one who wants to keep his holies, they shall be his. The only properties left to him shall be the small percent that he was supposed to allot to the Kohen. That is what will be his.

These two diverse explications seem in contradiction. Does what he gives to the Kohen remain "his" or does only what he want to keep remain "his"? How does the word "his" play two different roles, one telling us of fortune, the other of adversity?

Many years ago, my father told me the following story: Before the turn of the century, Reb Dovid, a talented worker, decided that he had had enough of the shtetl. There was no money to be made, and he decided to travel to America in search of even a small fragment of the fabled streets that were paved with gold.

Before he set off, he appointed his friend, Yankel, a prominent businessman, to receive the monies that would soon be pouring in from his successful overseas ventures. After taking a small fee for his services, Yankel would deliver the remaining money to the man's family.

"How much should I take, and how much should I give your wife?" asked Yankel.

The America-bound traveler put his full faith in the friend and simply told him to use his own discretion.

After a few months, Dovid's efforts began to bear fruit, and he sent a respectable sum of money to Yankel's bank account in Kovno to be distributed to his wife and family. Yankel, however, had different plans. He kept almost the entire sum for himself, while allotting only a fraction of the cash to Dovid's wife and family. They, in turn, dejectedly, falsely assumed that Dovid was still not able to make ends meet.

A few months went by and Dovid's wife received a letter from him assuring her that things were

going well and soon he would be able to move the entire family to the United States. "Meanwhile," he concluded, "I am sure that the sums you are receiving enable you to live in extreme comfort."

Dovid's wife was flabbergasted. She had hardly received enough to feed her family!

She ran to the Kovno Rav, Rabbi Isaac Elchonon Spector, and cried her heart out.

"Yankel is cheating us! My husband is sending him a fortune, but he is giving us a pittance!"

Immediately, the Rav summoned Yankel to his study,

"Is it true," asked Rabbi Spector, "that you were supposed to give the monies received to Dovid's wife?"

"Yes," the man declared smugly. "But I was allowed to take my fair share."

And what were you supposed to give her?" the rabbi asked, almost incredulously.

"Dovid told me, 'Give her what you want.' So," he continued, a broad smirk on his face, "I took 90 percent of the money and gave her what I wanted. And that was 10 percent."

Immediately Rabbi Spector stood up and asked the man to repeat himself. "Can you repeat yourself? What did Reb Dovid tell you to give her?"

"He told me to give her exactly what I want."

"Good," declared Rabbi Spector, knowing fully what Dovid's true intention was.

"As Rabbi of Kovno, I command you to give her the ninety percent portion that you had kept for yourself."

"But why?" stammered the man.

"Because that is exactly what you want. You are to give her exactly what you wanted!"

The Torah tells us that a man whose holies are to him will remain his. There are many Heavenly ways to delineate what a man is meant to receive. The words "will belong to him" may ring with plenty or with poverty. If one's eyes are filled with greed then only his holies will be his. The tithe becomes his only want and Hashem assures him that that is what he will get. But if he gives with generosity than what he gives shall be his in addition to what he already has. Because the One who interprets man's heart interprets the verse. He fills the meaning in accordance with the man's intent. And then He interprets the reward.

Good Shabbos

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Dedicated in memory of Irving Adelsberg -- Yitzchak Eizik ben Gedalia of blessed memory whose

Yartzeit is 12 Sivan by the Adelsberg Family

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