

JUST A COINCIDENCE?

by Rabbi Dovid Green

We begin a new book in the Torah this week; VaYikrah, The Book of Leviticus. Now that the Tabernacle has been initiated, we are introduced to many laws which pertain to sacrifices. The first topic regards an individual who vows that he will bring an Olah, or a burnt offering, to G-d. Once someone has vowed, he is bound to fulfill his word. This is true to the extent that he can even be forced to do so if he chooses to renege. This may seem odd considering that the Torah states (Leviticus 1:3) that the sacrifice must be according to the will of the owner. In other words, the owner of the sacrifice must willingly bring it. Rashi quotes the midrash that we force him until he says "I want to." Who are we fooling? If we need to force him then he obviously doesn't want to.

The answer is that we understand that something got in the way of his desire to bring this sacrifice. Perhaps the expense of the animal, which is considerable, got in the way. Perhaps something else dissuaded him, but we take it as a matter of course that a Jew wishes to do the will of G-d. Opposing interests may get in the way and cover up that desire to serve G-d, but deep down it always exists. When the person sees that his opposing reasons are not that weighty, the desire to do what is right kicks in. Hence, one can even be forced to do a commandment in which there is a requirement to do it out of one's own volition. Needless to say, forcing someone in such a case is done in an official way by responsible people. Individuals can't go around making and enforcing such decisions.

This idea relates to the topic of the upcoming holiday of Purim. One can find the entire story of Purim in the Book of Esther, in the Scriptures. However, the basic points are that through many "coincidental" occurrences, a Jewish woman, Esther, is chosen to become the new queen of the Persia-Media Kingdom which existed approximately 500 B.C.E. At around the same time an evil, and very ambitious, self-serving man named Haman becomes prime minister to the king. The decree goes out that everyone must bow to Haman, but Mordechai the Jew refuses. Haman decides to eliminate all of the Jews, realizing that Mordechai's refusal is based in his commitment to being a Jew. A date is set that all peoples in the kingdom are granted the right to destroy every Jew in every province, and loot and plunder as well. Esther, had been hiding the fact that she was Jewish, but now Mordechai instructs her to reveal her identity to the king and beg for mercy. The tides turn against Haman, and he ends up hanged on the very gallows that he had prepared for Mordechai. The king grants the Jews the right to protect themselves on the appointed day, and they win the war in one day. The next day the Jews rested and celebrated, and that day was declared a day of celebration for all generations.

The Talmud in Tractate Megilla (12a) relates a question asked of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai by his students. "Why were the Jews of that generation deserving a decree of death?" After some discussion, Rabbi Shimon answers that several years earlier the Jews bowed to a statue of King Nevuchadnetzar, King of Babylonia. If so, then, why did they merit that a miracle be done for them? Because they only bowed down outwardly, out of fear. Inwardly, there was no Jew who actually worshipped that statue. It is still considered a sin, because outwardly it looks like they are worshipping the idol. That being so, G-d only acted towards them on an outward level. He brought a threat upon them which never materialized. It was only a superficial threat. However, it was enough to motivate the Jews themselves to heroism. Since the Jews only bowed down outwardly the threat that was brought upon them succeeded in bringing out that which was inward. Mordechai was the heart of the Jewish People. He would only bow to G-d, and not Haman under any circumstances. The Jewish people would oppose Haman's decrees to the death, rather than compromise their convictions. This was the repair of the sin they had done earlier. Now it was clear that their hearts were not in agreement with their actions when they bowed to the statue. Every Jew is the same in this respect. When the Torah was given it made such an impression on our collective soul that sinful behavior can no longer be intrinsic to us, but a consequence of ignoring that which we know is truly right. May we all have the privilege to bring out the greatest potential in ourselves in the best of circumstances. Have a very happy Purim!

Good Shabbos!

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