

WHAT WE REALLY THINK

by Rabbi Label Lam

...Because you didn't serve Hashem with joy and a good heart from everything in abundance... (Devarim 28:47)

Serve Hashem with joy. Come before him with exuberance. (Psalms 100)

In this week's parsha we encounter the shocking forecast of tragic consequences for the annulment of G-d's covenant. The entire litany of terrible news is only for the lack of joy in service of Hashem. What's so bad about that? What's important about knowing that people who were expected have served with joy had everything?

After WWII two brothers were separated. One went to England and the other went to Russia. They instituted a special code before parting so that the brother in Russia could speak his mind without fear of reprisal from the government. In order to pass the censor successfully it was agreed upon that if the brother in Russia wrote his letter with blue ink then everything in the letter was reliably true. However, if the contents of the letter were written in red ink then everything in the letter could be discounted and probably the opposite was true.

After a period of time the one in England received the long awaited letter from his brother in Russia. He tore open the envelope and there was a full page written in blue ink. He was very happy to read the glowing report, "Life was so open and free. There was good food and plenty of it. People were happy and generous of spirit. The economy was booming and everyone was pleasantly engaged in productive activity. There was no lack of good or goods throughout the entire land."

So glad was the tidings that the chap in England wondered if he hadn't made the wrong choice by settling in England. Perhaps he would be better off if emigrated and joined his brother in the prosperous land of Russia. That's how he had begun to feel as he was reading the letter, that is until he reached the postscript after the final salutation. "P.S. There's only one thing you can't get here...red ink."

For the lack of one small thing the entire meaning of something changes. The superficial cover is removed and an opposite message emerges. If there is no joy it cannot be that one is truly serving Hashem. Perhaps it's a mere social obligation or the inertia of tradition that drives the machinery of service. The final test is marked by red ink. What is in the heart? Is it heavy with the burdens of religious demands or is it light with the joy of feeling closer and connected to the source of all goodness? Only The One Who reads the heart of hearts can grade that exam.

Rabbi Yonason Eibshitz centuries ago discovered a percentage point difference between two statements about the darker side of human nature and the human condition made by the sages of the Talmud. One statement says, "If a person has one hundred he wants two hundred." Another statement reads, "A person doesn't leave this world having fulfilled half of his desires." The first aphorism indicates that a person achieves 50% of his wants while the second implies that the person ultimately fall short of the 50% mark. He resolved the contradiction with the following whimsical reply: The part that the person doesn't have is more important to him than the part that he does have.

When The A-lmighty showers abundant good upon people it is a great test. Will it generate a bigger appetite for consumption and petty jealousies between people to arise? Will it inspire a celebration of spirit, a profound sense of security and well being, and an overflow of gratitude to become manifest?

Does a person see his stuff as all his, from and for himself or as a gift from above? That will determine how a person feels about his sense of obligation or obeisance to his Maker. Is Divine service perceived as a heavy tax burden arbitrarily imposed or a privilege and a joy to perform? Even when all the right words are recited and correct deeds done at their proper time, still, the final exam, the color of the ink is what we really think.

Good Shabbos!

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