

A POWERFUL NEW BEGINNING

by Rabbi Label Lam

And now, if you will hearken well to Me and observe My covenant, you shall be to Me the most beloved treasure of all the peoples, for Mine is the entire world! (Shemos 19:5)

And now: If you will accept upon yourselves it will be sweet from here on.

>From here we learn that all beginnings are hard. (Rashi Mechilta)

There's a phenomenon that openly defies this Rashi. If "all beginnings are hard", then why do we find at the beginning of a z'man (a semester) of learning there's an initial burst of energy but in a short few weeks the exuberance has all too often waned? What's happening here? I once heard a Kotzker-like answer from a Yeshiva Rebbe who claims that it is not a contradiction at all. The answer is that for so many who are sprinting in the first days it's not "the beginning" at all but actually "the end".

As a challenge I once promised a group of Hebrew Day School Students who were wavering about whether or not to continue on to Yeshiva High School that I could prove to them mathematically that there is such a thing as the Yetzer Hara- the negative inclination. The proof is quite simple. That same year I was also teaching in a Hebrew School for public school kids preparing for their Bar Mitzvah. I wondered aloud why even the best kid didn't come back to school the day after his Bar Mitzvah.

I think the answer is comparable to stepping out onto the court at Madison Square Garden before a basketball game and taking warm up shots. Everyone can do what he pleases shooting and missing from close and far range but once the clock is set, the game begins, and points begin to register it becomes woefully difficult to get the ball near the basket. Similarly till the age of 13, up until the age that Mitzvos begin to count we can shoot around and practice in whichever way we want. However the day after the celebration which was to propel one to a responsible Jewish living, an iron curtain magically descends and only a select few of determined individuals will even dare to approach the goal. What is a day of beginning, a launching for some is the finale, the good-bye party for too many others.

A residual point that emanates from this illustration is that learning Torah and doing Mitzvos really

count for something great. Why else would there be such strong opposition? The Talmud queries based on a verse from Habakuk "And he placed man like the fish of the sea..." "Why are people compared to fish? In order to teach you that just as fish of the sea when they come onto dry land they immediately die so too when people separate from words of Torah and Mitzvos they immediately die." (Avoda Zora 3A)

Rabbi Dovid Ordman asked, "Just how precise is this analogy? Do people die when removed from Torah and Mitvos?" Let us put on our scuba equipment and observe the quiet and subtle motions of the schools of fish going about their business in an almost surreal environment. Their world is so quiet, peaceful, and dream-like.

Now we turn our attention to a harvest of fresh fish being lowered by net onto the dock. Now, these fish look alive. Some are jumping 20 feet in the air performing all kinds of gymnastics and fancy dance moves. The others in the water seem dead in comparison. We understand though that nothing is further from the truth. The fish that appear to be so active and animated are behaving so because they are choking. Their brains are convulsing and so they flail about in desperation. This is not the dance of life but the throes of death.

This may help us understand that the loudest voices that seek attention and are making the biggest noise in our world are really dying movements organizing thunderous "good-bye parties". In the meanwhile we quietly prepare again and again just as we did 3315 years ago for a powerful new beginning. Text Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Label Lam and **Torah.org**.