

A STIFF NECKED-NATION

by Rabbi Label Lam

And HASHEM said to Moshe, "I have seen the nation and they are a stiff-necked nation." (Shemos 32:9)

A stiff-necked nation: They turn the back of their neck to the one rebuking them and they refuse to listen. (Rashi)

A stiff-necked nation: You might think this is an insult to Israel but it is really their praise. After they accepted upon themselves the Mitzvos of the Torah, they give their lives entirely to sanctify the Name of HASHEM. Rabbi Avin says that until this very day Israel is referred to amongst the nations of the world as a "stiff-necked people" because of their devotion to the Torah without deviation. (Shemos Rabba)

Is this description of the Jewish Nation as a "stiff-necked nation" intended as an insult or a compliment? Which is the truth? If it is meant as praise, then why mention it here by the sin of the golden calf? The context would clearly tilt in favor of an unfavorable image. Why then does the Midrash choose to color it in more flattering tones?

With prophetic vision Dovid HaMelech describes "us" as follows: "All this has come upon us and we have not forgotten You, nor have we been false to Your covenant. Our heart has not turned back nor have our steps turned away from Your path. Even though You crushed us in the place of reptiles and covered us in the shadow of death. Have we forgotten forgotten the Name of our G-d and stretched out our hands to a strange g-d? Would not G- d have searched this out for he knows the secret of our hearts!? It is for Your sake that we are killed all the day, we are considered as sheep for the slaughter." (Tehillim 44:18-22)

In the Teshuvos HaRashba 1548, he writes about our people: "Israel the inheritors of truth, the descendants of Jacob, the man of truth, seed of truth, would prefer to suffer continued exile and its horrors rather than accept something without critically and thoroughly analyzing it, step after step, to separate out any doubtful validity... even when it appears to be miraculous and absolute"

It's recorded in a book about the Klausenberger Rebbe, The War Years: "Even during the most terrible times the Klausenberger Rebbe never lost his focus on Avodas HASHEM. Right under the noses of the Nazis, he studied and davened, and observed Mitzvos. Without regard for his personal safety he avoided the most minor transgression of the law. A survivor named Asher Brenner recalled, "In Auschwitz I was placed into the same group as the Klausenberger Rebbe. The Rebbe

suffered even more than the rest of us because of his stubbornness. He refused to eat non-kosher food. He managed to bring his Tefillin into the camp with him, and he put them on every day. Notwithstanding the great danger he organized daily minyanim for prayer services. We often forgot about Shabbos but the Rebbe avoided desecrating Shabbos every week and made sure that no one else did the work that was imposed upon him. All this, of course, drew the attention of the Kapos, and they punished the Rebbe with vicious beatings. The Rebbe accepted the beating calmly, whispering to himself verses of consolation."

Like any other trait, stubbornness can be used for good or the opposite. Therefore, for the sake of our survival, a stinging rebuke was needed, as it were, to reset the broken bone so it would not grow firm, committed to some corrupt value. So we have survived!

The historical record of the Jewish People's enduring loyalty, under extreme duress is not less than a glorious testament to the truthfulness of that proud title The Almighty Himself draped lovingly over us as a talis-"A Stiff-Necked Nation!" DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.