

ONLY WITH HONEST WORK

by Rabbi Label Lam

For what great nation is there that has G-d so near to it, as HASHEM our G-d is at all times that we call upon Him? And which great nation is it that has just statutes and ordinances, as this entire Torah, which I set before you this day? (Devarim 4: 7-8)

Why is the Torah telling us these things? There are no Mitzvos being promulgated here. Are these mere open declarations of certain facts? Perhaps we are being made aware of some great gifts!?

If so, this seems to be in violation of a profound truth I have discovered over the years. Really it's a reality revealed by the Zohar. I am not disappointed not to be the first to have found this out. You can't truly give anybody anything! Perhaps, the best you can offer someone is to show them what they already have. I know this is all begging for an explanation.

HASHEM created the entire world in order to bestow His ultimate essence and His endless kindness upon a deserving other or others, and they would have to prove their worthiness by navigating through the gauntlet of this world. The destination where this reward is realized in full is the "Next World". The Zohar wonders why there would be a need for "this world" at all. Just plant a person right in the midst of the bliss of the next world and forgo all the struggles of this worldly life. The Zohar answers with a concept known as "Nahama D'kisufa"- "The Bread of Shame!" To get something for free is inherently painful and embarrassing. It is essential to the human soul to wish for the exhilaration associated with hard work yielding accomplishment, and to reject the reception of "something for nothing".

I was in Israel a few years ago and hurrying to catch a cab to my Shabbos destination with only 20 minutes to spare. A driver screeched to a halt and I jumped in. I decided I was going to try to strike up a deep and meaningful conversation with my secular Israeli driver even if he seemed disinterested.

Time was working against me though. I asked him his name. "Uri" he uttered. One syllable. He was already annoyed by the length of the conversation. "Where do you live, Uri?" I asked him. Again, a one word response, "Yerushelaim!" I sensed a slight uptick of pride in his tone and maybe this was my opportunity. I told him in my best Mishnaic Hebrew which must sound like Shakespeare English, "Uri, ata kmo dag! Uri, you are like a fish!" He almost let me off right there, shooting an angry glance. I certainly had his attention. I told him I need to explain and his look told me I needed to explain.

As I made my meaning clear, he calmed down and he even started to shake his head in agreement. I

explained as best I could that the most obvious thing about a fish is that he lives in water. The fish however does not realize that he is living in water. He is surrounded by it all the time and he cannot imagine what life would be without it. Water is his air. I told Uri, "You live here in Yerushelaim! I'm jealous of you! You are like a fish. You don't know how fortunate you are. I traveled from America and I paid a thousands of dollars just to be for a few days in the Holy City of Yerushelaim. You are here all the time!" By the time we reached our destination he was elated. Now we can all treat ourselves to a chuckle at Uri's expense. How can one fail to realize the real value of their location, where they dwell daily!?

The more I think about it the more I come to terms with the notion that we are Uri and Uri is we. The Torah tells us about two powerful entities that we have been granted. We have the power of prayer, the ability to invite G-d Almighty into the detail of our lives. We have a Torah so dense with wisdom and it is obvious no other nation could ever make a near claim. These cannot be mere gifts. It is an invite to employ these power tools and to explore the force of their functionality. They are not trophies to be placed on a shelf and admired from a distance. Rather they are the most incredible gifts a man can possess but only **with honest work**.