

YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

Shavuot

You Can't Take It With You

by Rabbi Moshe Peretz Gilden

The Chofetz Chaim (1) once related a true story - that never really happened. A young man once traveled to a far-away land to earn a livelihood to support his family who stayed behind. He had heard that this far-away place had streets lined with diamonds and rubies and other precious gems. He arrived and found jewels on the ground as one would usually find grass growing. He picked up a few handfuls, stuffed his pockets and went into a restaurant to eat a solid meal after many weeks of travel. When he pulled out an emerald to pay his bill, he discovered that the gems - because of their commonness - were worthless. The commodity of value in that land was terribly scarce but most important: chicken fat. In time, he found a job, saved enough to start his own business, and eventually amassed quite a fortune, in chicken fat.

After a number of years, his wife sent him a message that she wanted him to come home. She reminded him that his daughters were of marriageable age, and the time has come for him to return with the fortune he had written home about in order to marry them off. The man sold his business and chartered a ship, loading it with ton after ton of chicken fat. With such fabulous wealth, he and his wife could not only pay for the weddings, but they would live like royalty for the rest of their lives. He sent a letter to his wife, instructing her and their children greet him at the port in his hometown when his ship arrived with his fantastic fortune.

The day he arrived at his home port, the whole town came out to greet him, for they too had heard that he had become a very wealthy man. It was a warm day, as recent days had been, and as the ship neared the shore, they began to notice a faint stench. But as the ship came closer, the reek grew stronger. The businessman's wife was perplexed as the crew unloaded case after rotting case of chicken fat, so he explained the financial system of the far-off land, that this fat is the fantastic wealth he had spent so many years accumulating during his many years away. "You fool," she

replied. "You forgot that in our land chicken fat has no value! You could have spent your time just standing there, stuffing your pockets, and you come home with tons of worthless, rotten, chicken fat? How are we going to marry off the girls, how are we going to live, after you have wasted these years for this rancid 'commodity'?" The merchant was completely speechless. There was nothing with which he could defend himself. Then he remembered his first day there, so many years ago, when he DID stuff his pockets with a few handfuls of gems. He meekly reached into the pockets of those clothes and pulled out some of the precious stones and handed them over to his wife. In the end, the relatively few diamonds and rubies, emeralds and other jewels helped sustain his family for a long time quite comfortably.

The holiday of Shavuot is when we relive the acceptance of the Torah 3316 years ago. The Talmud explains an anomaly present in the Torah's narrative of the conclusion of Creation. Unlike the previous days, where the narrative concludes "a fourth day," (Beraishis/Genesis 1:19) and "a fifth day," (1:23), the final day of creation ends with, "THE sixth day" (1:31). The Talmud advises us this is an allusion to the sixth day in the Jewish month of Sivan, the day on which we received the Torah. The Talmud continues: "The creation of the entire universe and its continuity was really dependant on that sixth day. If the Jews accept the Torah, good; if not, everything would be returned back into nothingness."

Living in this material world easily causes us to forget what kind of currency is considered precious "back home", the World of Truth from where our souls came and are destined to return. We are presented many opportunities throughout our lives where we may, in a fit of inspiration, "grab a few handfuls" of the "precious diamonds" of studying Torah and fulfilling mitzvos (Divine commandments). Involved as we are in our material lives, it is easy to forget that our studying the Torah and observing its commandments is the central reason for the Creation itself. Jewish holidays do not commemorate historical events; they are our opportunities to relive their realities in the present. This Shavuot we have the chance to reacquire Torah and let these thoughts carry us through the rest of the year, so when our "ship comes into port" it will be laden with gems much more valuable than "chicken fat".

Have a Good Yom Tov!

(1) Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen Kagan of Radin; 1838-1933; author of basic works in Jewish law, philosophy and ethics and renowned for his saintly qualities

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