

THE GAP BETWEEN PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"You shall call out on that day, it will be a holy convocation for you... And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not consume the corners of your field when reaping, and you shall not take the gleanings of your harvest; you shall abandon them for the poor and the stranger." [23:22-23]

This is very strange - in the middle of a Torah portion which describes the holidays of the Jewish calendar, the Torah suddenly takes time out to provide a single verse discussing the law to leave parts of the harvest for the poor to collect. It seems utterly out of context.

Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, offers the following from the Talmudic Sages (in the Sifra): Rav Avdimi, the son of Rabbi Yosef, said: "why did the Torah see fit to put this [verse about leaving corners and gleanings for the poor] in the middle of the [verses about the] festivals - Passover and Shavuot on this side, and Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkos on the other? [It did so in order] to teach you that whoever gives the gleanings, forgotten sheaves, and corners to the poor, is credited as if he had built the Temple and offered sacrifices within it."

The Meshech Chochma, Rabbi Meir Simcha HaCohen of Dvinsk, derives another lesson from this, for the holiday of Shavuot and the counting of the Omer which precedes it are found in the very same "paragraph", as it were, as this verse about the corners of the field.

Shavuot itself is just weeks away, the holiday when we will celebrate the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people. It is the Torah which laid out for us the Mitzvos, the Commandments which bring us closer to G-d. Rabbi Meir Simcha says that when we celebrate receiving the Torah, we must celebrate not only the laws and rituals which would have been completely unknown to us without it; we must also celebrate the "logical" commandments, and give thanks to G-d for Mitzvos such as giving charity to the poor and showing mercy towards the downtrodden.

Rabbi Meir Simcha writes that man, left to his own devices, is liable to engage in the lowest and most reprehensible forms of behavior when personal or nationalistic considerations come into the picture. To all the stories of war, and behavior of the victors towards the men, women, children and property on the losing side, I would add the following (for the squeamish to skip): a local talk-show host, a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, described burying recently the jawbone and

part of the skull of a Confederate soldier, which had been removed and taken back to Michigan by a Union counterpart as a trophy of war, 135 years earlier. One needs no sympathy for the Confederacy for this to sully the image of the Union as the pristine force of good.

A famous story, perhaps apocryphal, is told about the philosopher Aristotle, who was caught behaving in a way that violated his own carefully-thought-out code of ethics. His response? "Now, I'm not Aristotle!" When personal desires color one's calculations, a person is similarly able to descend from his own lofty standards - precisely because they are merely his own.

"I am the L-rd your G-d" adds an impressive weight to the scales, able to empower a person, thinking rationally, to retain ingrained values even in moments of passion. This is, of course, not to say that one always thinks rationally, but that the realization of the Divine is a powerful force which pushes us towards good.

Therefore, he says, the holiday of Shavuot is a time when we must thank G-d even for the Commandments which we ourselves realize are obligatory in any society - for without the Commandment, who says we would actually **do** good?

Good Shabbos!

Rabbi Yaakov Menken

[Parts of this Dvar Torah come from Rabbi Joseph Grunblatt, Rabbi of the Queens Jewish Center and Professor of Judaic Studies at Touro College. If you have RealAudio, you can [hear him](#) speak on Israel's Holiness.]