

CASUALNESS AND CONSISTENCY

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

The second of this week's two parshiyos is parshas Bechukosai (in Israel Bechukosai is this week's only parsha as we re-synchronize the Torah readings). The Torah promises prosperity for the Jewish People if they follow Hashem's Torah. However, if they fail to live up to the responsibility of being the Chosen People, then chilling punishments will result. In the Tochacha (Admonition), the Torah details the harsh historical process that will come upon them when Divine protection is removed as a result of their misdeeds. These punishments, whose purpose is to bring the Jewish People to repent, will be in seven stages, each more severe than the last.

Commentaries explain that the reason the Tochacha is read during this time of the year, as well as in Elul (the month before Rosh HaShana), when the second Tochacha from parshas Ki Savo is read, is because both of these time periods are set aside for teshuvah/repentance. The forty-nine days between Pesach and Shavuos are meant to be used to prepare oneself to receive the Torah anew on Shavuos, and Elul is a month of teshuvah in preparation for the days of Awe. Reading the Tochacha reminds us that there will eventually be reparation for our sins if we do not repent.

One recurring theme of the Admonition is that the forthcoming punishment is a result of "keri/casualness". (26:27) "If despite this you will not heed Me, and you behave toward Me with casualness..." Rashi explains "casualness" to mean that your performance of the mitzvos will be haphazard and inconsistent. Rather than treating the mitzvos with reverence and esteem, you treat them as a matter of convenience (or inconvenience). "I too," says Hashem, "will treat you casually."

Casualness, inconsistency, superficiality - how accurately these adjectives describe our society. Once upon a time life wasn't so easy. Things weren't so convenient. If you wanted a warm house in the winter, you had to load the oven with wood, light the fire, maybe even chop the wood yourself. If you needed to go to the bathroom, well... You worked for what you had. So people didn't mind hard work. They knew that all good things only came with toil. There was no instant gratification. People had patience. They had patience with their gashmius (material needs) and so they had patience with their ruchnius (spirituality). They found the time to daven (pray) slowly, and learn diligently. Their avodas Hashem (service of G-d) was a continual, consistent growth process. Just as they did not expect to have their laundry washed at the push of a button, so too they did not expect to experience depth in their prayers and develop a relationship with G-d over a falafel at Chap-a-Nosh.

Nowadays, instant gratification is the name of the game. If I can't have it within five minutes - don't bother. We're impatient in our material lives. And superficial. And this seeps through to our mitzvah

observance as well. To create something meaningful and deep is just too great an investment of time and diligence.

This casualness and inconsistency permeates all aspects of life: prayer, learning, inter-personal relationships, spirituality - to experience true growth in any of these requires immense persistence and perseverance. The cry of the Navi (prophet) that prayers and repentance have become no more than "lip-service" takes on new meaning in today's age of round-the-clock minyans. Torah study has been made far more accessible than ever before. There is an absolute abundance of sefarim and learning aids. But working and toiling over the Gemara is at a premium. (Please don't take this in the wrong way. These sefarim are wonderful and make Torah study available to people who never before had the opportunity. But sometimes these aids become crutches to those of us who might otherwise be capable of investing a greater deal of effort and toil in our studies. I am reminded of the story of the Rosh Yeshiva who, quoting the Gemara (Nedarim 81a) "Take heed of the children of the poor, for from them will Torah come forth," quipped that tomorrow's Torah giants will likely emerge from those poor families who could not afford to spoil their sons with every new sefer that comes out, so that they actually had to toil and figure out the meaning of the Gemara themselves, thereby growing immensely in their Torah studies.)

The Gemara (Bava Metzia 85b) tells the story of R' Chiya, who said, "It is I who prevented the Torah from being lost to our Nation. [When I saw that Torah wisdom was diminishing] I went and planted flax seeds. [From the flax] I wove nets and caught deer. From their skins, I made parchment and wrote upon them the Five Books of the Torah (Chamisha Chumshei Torah). I took the Five Books and taught them to five boys. And I taught the six orders of the Mishnah to six boys. Then I told them to teach one another (each one the book or order that he was expert in). It was thus that I prevented the Torah from becoming lost to Israel."

That is the epitome of non-casualness!

Here's a small, practical way we can begin bringing a little more stability and permanence into our Judaism. Shulchan Aruch (191:3) rules that it is forbidden to do work while saying Birkas Ha-mazon (grace after meals). Mishna Berurah adds that this applies even to light labour (such as cleaning your glasses etc.) as it suggests casualness and indifference. One may likewise not think about Torah while reciting Birkas Ha-mazon. All this also applies to prayer and recitation of all berachos. These guidelines, he writes, are found in our holy Torah, as it is written, "And if you will behave toward me with casualness..." This halacha (law) offers a glimpse into the thoughtfulness and depth which could and should be permeating our everyday mitzvah performance.

Hashem, taught the Ba'al Shem Tov, is (to the extent we can express it) is like a shadow. He connects with us in the same manner that we connect to Him. If we treat His Torah and its mitzvos with casualness, the Tochacha warns what the result will be. But if we work on making the Torah the centre-point of our lives, giving substance and consistency to our service of G-d through prayer,

Torah study, and mitzvah performance, then surely we will be able to develop a powerful and meaningful connection to Hashem.

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