

OUTSTANDING CREDIT WINE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Last week's Torah reading, Parshas Vayeishev, ends with the royal wine steward forgetting Yosef's plea to, "mention me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this jail... Yet the wine steward did not remember Yosef; he forgot him. (40:14,23)" Mefarshim (commentators) note the redundancy: "[he] did not remember Yosef; he forgot him." Or HaChaim says this alludes to the fact that the wine steward's "forgetting" of Yosef was far from accidental. "He did not remember Yosef" because whenever he did think of Yosef, "he forgot him" - purposely.

After two additional years in prison, the wine steward is forced to fulfil his promise and mention Yosef to Pharaoh, following Pharaoh's two troubling dreams, neither of which his wise-men are able to interpret to his satisfaction. Even so, the wine steward did not hesitate to recall Yosef in the most derogatory manner:

"And there [in prison] with us was a young Hebrew, a slave of the [royal] steward of butchers. We related [our dreams] to him, and he interpreted [them] for each [of us] in accordance with his dream. (41:12)"

Rashi quotes the Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 89:7), which finds great malice in the wine steward's words: "Young" - He is a young fool! "A Hebrew" - he doesn't even understand our language! "A slave" - and a slave is forbidden by royal decree to ever ascend to a position of royalty!

Obviously, the wine steward had great distaste for Yosef; at first he refused to mention him to Pharaoh, and even when he does, he does so vindictively. Yet we are at a loss to explain what Yosef did to deserve such unkind treatment! Yosef faithfully took care of the wine steward while he was in prison. He gave him a very optimistic interpretation of his dream, which was subsequently fulfilled to the letter. So why the hatred? - What was the source of his negative attitude toward Yosef? Are we seeing here, perhaps, the seedlings of anti-semitism?

In the times of the holy Ba'al Shem Tov zt"l lived a simple Jew with a very bitter heart. He had but one daughter, who was now seven, yet she was yet to take her first step. Doctors had all but given up hope; she was unable to move from the neck down, and would likely never leave her wheelchair. Understandably, her parents' pain was immeasurable.

Her father had heard on occasion of the holy man they called the Ba'al Shem Tov, who, it was rumored, was able to perform great wonders and miracles. Yet he had thus far resisted going to see

him. In those times, Chassidism was still a fledgling movement, and its opposition was vast. Still, in view of his situation, some of his friends encouraged him to go and see the famed tzaddik. However, in order to ensure that no one thought they were becoming the next "victims" of the Chassidim, they took advantage of the opportunity to cast aspersions on its holy leader and founder: "Just make sure," they warned, "that you bring lots of money with you; it is rumored that the so-called Ba'al Shem Tov does not perform his wonders for free!..."

Feeling he had no choice, he saved up a handsome sum of money, wrapped it in a cloth, and set out to meet the enigmatic tzaddik. When he entered the Ba'al Shem Tov's study, he found him sitting at a table. At first, he showed no sign of noticing that someone had entered the room. Then, slowly, the Ba'al Shem Tov raised his holy eyes, gazing upon the bitter Jew and his daughter, who sat next to him in a wheelchair, motionless. "Here's your money," the man said brazenly, setting his bundle down upon the table, "now do something for my daughter."

The Ba'al Shem Tov gazed at the bitter man for a long moment, not uttering a word. He then picked up the bundle of money which lay before him, and heaved it out the window. Seeing this, the girl's eyes opened wider than they ever had before. She jumped up from her wheelchair, burst through the door, and ran outside, where she began gathering the scattered coins. Her father, overwhelmed by what he had just seen, was at first unable to move. After gathering his composure, he too ran out of the room and began gathering the scattered coins with his now-mobile daughter. "Come on now," he said nervously, "let's do this quickly. I bet he'll soon come out and claim this was his doing!..."

Some favours can be repaid with a simple "thank-you." Greater acts of kindness call for a more substantial form of recognition; perhaps a present or a card. But how do you thank someone who has changed your life? A simple thank-you, a present, a card - none of these will do. Indeed, there really is no way; as long as one lives, he will remain indebted. And for some people, this is very difficult to swallow.

At some level, when we show appreciation, we do so out of the need to "get it over with," so that we can get on with our lives. Part of being human is that we desire independence; we want to feel that whatever we have accomplished, we did so on our own. If, at times, we are unable to function independently, and require the help of others, we show our appreciation in an appropriate fashion, after which, we hope, we will revert to our previous state of independence and self-sufficiency.

But when the kindness done to us by others is so substantial - so life- changing - that we realize we have incurred a debt that will not - can not - ever be repaid, we are at a loss. Sometimes, we simply deny. Instead of recognizing our eternal indebtedness, we deny its very existence.

The wine steward found himself in such a scenario. "Dreams bear fruit," say Chazal (Bereishis Rabbah 89:8), "according to how they are interpreted." He owed his life to Yosef, yet he was in denial. Rather than recognize Yosef's pivotal role in his release from prison and reinstatement as royal wine steward, he chose to belittle him. "True, he is an expert at interpreting dreams - but in essence he's a

foolish Hebrew slave."

Every morning, when a Jew arises, he washes his hands, and thanks Hashem for the gift of another day. "Modeh ani lifanecha, I gratefully thank You, O living and eternal King, for You have returned my soul within me with compassion..." By realizing that our "independence" is merely an illusion, it becomes easier to recognize, appreciate, and be thankful for the good and kind deeds that others do for us - big and small - even if it leaves us with an outstanding debt on our "credit line."

Have a good Shabbos.

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