

A WORTH-WHILE STUDY INTO HUMAN NATURE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

The majority of parshas Bechukosai is devoted to the Tochacha/Admonition, in which the Almighty warns the Jewish nation that if they fail to live up to their obligations, they will become the victims of great calamities and harsh punishments, Rachmana litzlan.

Immediately following the Tochacha, the Torah describes the laws of Erchin, which determine what happens if someone pledges the value of another individual to the Holy Temple. In a nutshell, if someone's value is pledged to the Beis Ha-Mikdash (either by themselves or by someone else), there is a standard amount which must be given, corresponding to the person's age and gender. For instance, the erech, or standard value of a Jewish male between the ages of 20 and 60 is fifty shekels. It doesn't make a difference whether the individual whose worth was pledged was a brain surgeon, a Rosh Yeshiva, or a street-sweeper, the amount donated is dependent only on age and gender.

Why do the laws of Erchin follow the Tochacha?

The K'li Yakar, addressing this question, makes reference to a most unusual Gemara (Chagiga 5a):

"And it shall be, that when many evils and troubles come upon [this nation]... (Devarim/Deuteronomy 31:21)' Shmuel says [this verse] refers to one who lends money to the poor in his time of need."

Ha-levai, would it only be, writes the K'li Yakar, that the worst tzures ever to befall a Jew were that he loaned money to a poor man in his time of need! What could Shmuel possibly mean by explaining that this is the "evil" and "trouble" to which the Torah refers?

Unfortunately, he writes, it is human nature that as long as the sailing is smooth, and life is humming along as one might hope it should, we tend to ignore many aspects of life that in truth deserve our greatest attention. If one were to hear of a close friend or family member who had, G-d forbid, fallen deathly ill, he would no doubt begin making generous donations to tzedaka on his behalf, in whose merit one hopes the sick might warrant a speedy recovery. If there were ever a time for teshuva (repentance), this is it.

The afflicted himself would likely spend many hours in deep introspection. He would ponder what he had accomplished in life thus far, and what he would still like to do if Hashem would grant him additional years. "If I pull through this," he promises, "I won't waste my days like I have in the past on amassing wealth and indulging my body. I will spend more time learning with my children; I will

daven slower instead of rushing through; I will give more money to tzedaka..." Isn't it a crying shame, he writes, that it took all this just to get a man to have a few earnest thoughts of repentance and introspection.

It is this sorry fact, he explains, that the Torah is alluding to when, immediately following the Admonition, it imparts the laws of pledges to the Temple. Sadly, it is often the troubles in life that awaken us from our habitual slumber to increase our charity and examine our mitzvos, instead of doing so while the going is good.

And this is what Shmuel meant when he said that the verse which describes the "evil" and "trouble" that will befall the nation refers to one who lends to the poor in his time of need. Not the poor man's time of need, as one would normally understand, but rather in his own time of need. I.e. the tzures is that he only thought to give generously and lend whole-heartedly after calamities befell him, and he realized it was either "do or die" in quite a literal sense.

The Beis Yisroel (R' Avraham Mordechai of Gur zt"l) offers a most beautiful explanation of the connection between the Tochacha and the laws of Erchin. He quotes the verses that introduce Erchin (27:1-2):

Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: If a man pledges a vow regarding the worth of human beings to Hashem.

Notice how the Torah juxtaposes the phrase "human beings" and Hashem. Grammatically, it would have been more correct to write, "If a man pledges a vow to Hashem regarding the worth of human beings." What the Torah is saying, he explains, is that even though the parsha here refers to people who have gone through all sorts of punishments and admonitions which befell them as a direct result of their sins (this is clear from the Torah), all the same they are still "nefashos l'Hashem" - souls bound up with a G-dly bond. With all that has come upon them, they are still loved and cherished by Hashem.

I believe therein lies a most exceptional insight for parents, educators, and anyone who has to (as we all do at times) admonish, criticize, or even punish another human being. While it is a Torah requirement to reprimand one who has transgressed, and if need be administer punishment, it is a great error to allow the punished to feel that he has, by means of his transgressions, lost favour in your eyes. Punishment and criticism are for most people a bitter enough pill to swallow. Still, the human psyche is strong, and usually after the initial resentment, its recipient will eventually get over his feelings of bitterness, and perhaps even use the criticism as a springboard for growth and change (which was indeed its intent in the first place). But if the person (this is especially true with regard to children and adolescents) feels that "all is lost", and that my parent/teacher/mentor has given up on me, then what point is there to even try to do better next time - they no longer respect me anyway.

A teacher once told me: "Even when I get very upset at a student; even when I've had to punish him

severely, and inside I'm burning at his lack of derech eretz (manners), I still smile at him and tell him "A gitten tug" before he leaves my classroom. I know tomorrow he'll be back, and even though today was a total failure, tomorrow is another day, and hopefully a better one. But if he thinks that I've given up on him, why should he even bother trying harder tomorrow?"

If Hashem, Who sees all and knows all, still associates His holy Name with a Jew, no matter how far he's fallen, and no matter how severely he's been censured, then us mortals can always find place in our hearts to give others another chance. Amazing how, in its description of "the laws of human worth," the Torah has indeed given us such a critical and penetrating insight into the concept of human worth!

Have a good Shabbos.

Sponsored by R' Duvid Yitzchak and R' Yehuda Aryeh D'ancona, in memory of their mother, Rivkah bas R' Yehudah Aryeh Rabinovitch.

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