

BRINGING JOY TO G-D AND MAN

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, 'Take a census of the sons of Gershon - them too - according to their fathers' household, according to their families.' (4:21-22)"

It seems strange that when giving the command to count the sons of Gershon (the second of Levi's sons to be counted), the Torah uses the superfluous term "them too." When, later, the sons of Merari (the third and final son) are counted, it doesn't say to count "them too."

Mefarshim (commentators) explain that, symbolically, the "sons of Gershon" represent those Jews who feel cut off and detached from the Torah, from their community, or perhaps even from Hashem. (The word Gershon comes from the root ger, foreigner, and gerush, divorce and estrangement.) We are commanded: "Naso es rosh b'nei Gershon - Lift up the heads of these unfortunate estranged souls!" In light of this it seems especially strange that the Torah should tell us to count "them too" - as if they were no more than an afterthought!

The holy Ba'al Shem Tov taught his disciples that one can give Hashem pleasure, to the extent we can express it, through every facet of his personality. Even a good sense of humour, he taught, can be used to gladden the hearts of the downtrodden, and uplift the souls of the unfortunate.

In this respect, the holy tzaddik R' Naftali Tzvi of Ropshitz zt"l was a standout. His sharp mind and clever wit were of great renown among the disciples of the holy Choize of Lublin zt"l, and he never missed the opportunity to perform the mitzvah of rejoicing bride and groom by regaling them with his famed badchanus (a form of off-the-cuff humour interspersed with divrei Torah and mussar). Of course those who were in the know knew that beneath the Ropshitzer's facade burned a fire of holiness, and that within his seemingly simple words of jest in fact lay great mysteries and permutations of Hashem's holy names, so holy that they could only be revealed in such a roundabout manner.

Every night the holy Choize would arise before midnight (chatzos) in order to recite Tikun Chatzos, during which he would sit upon the earth and lament the destruction of the Beis Ha-Mikdash (Holy Temple), and the exile of Israel and the Shechina (Divine Presence) from the Holy Land. On one such night the Choizeh got up as usual, yet when he lowered himself to the earth to begin his recitation, he knew at once that something was amiss. For some reason he simply couldn't bring himself to tears. While this may not seem strange to some of us, for the Choizeh this was unheard of. Normally, whenever he began reciting Tikun Chatzos, tears flowed freely from his eyes, and his heart was torn

in pieces as he pondered the sorry state of our glorious nation in exile from their homeland. But this night there was no feeling, and no tears.

After extended contemplation, the Choize was almost positive that the reason for his lack of tears had something to do with something going on in the city, yet he couldn't put his finger on exactly what. Perhaps, he thought, some grave sin was going on under his jurisdiction, and it was because of this that the Divine Presence was not coming upon him. He summoned his beadle, and told him to go out into the quiet streets of Lublin and see what he could find. Surely the answer to his quandary was out there somewhere.

The beadle left and wound his way through the streets and alleys of Lublin, yet he came up with nothing. Frustrated, the tzaddik tried once again to arouse himself to recite the Tikun, yet as before the words emerged with no feeling and no sorrow. Once again he summoned his beadle. "There is no doubt in my mind," he said, "that something must be going on. Go out again and search everywhere - go even into the poorer neighbourhoods - perhaps you will find the answer there."

The beadle once again went out, and headed for the city's outskirts, where the poor lived in dismal straw huts and hovels. Before long, he was back before the Choize, but this time it was clear he had something to relate. "All was quiet," he began, "except that when I passed one very small lodging, I noticed candles burning brightly and voices singing. Peeking inside, I saw that the wedding of an orphan couple was taking place, and the Ropshitzer was standing on a table and entertaining the chosson and kallah (bride and groom) with his badchanus."

"Now I understand!" the Choizeh said triumphantly. "If Reb Naftali is rejoicing the bride and groom, no doubt the entire Heavenly entourage has come to join him in his merriment. And if the Holy One, blessed his He, smiles (so to speak) at the Ropshitzer's wisecracks, then it's hardly a time for Tikun Chatzos!" The Ropshitzer's humour was unique in that it gladdened not only the hearts of men, but brought joy to the Almighty as well.

It follows that if we indeed wish to "uplift the hearts of b'nei Gershon," those who are forlorn and estranged, we must do so in a way which gladdens and uplifts not only them, but, to the extent we can express it, Hashem as well. What does this mean?

There are two ways to heal a broken heart. One way is to "give wine to the embittered soul! (Mishlei/Proverbs 31:6)" A good glass of wine (or two or three) does wonders for the crushed spirit. But, of course, the comfort offered by intoxicating beverages (a.k.a "comfort", "spirits") is short-lived. Once their spell wears off, nothing has really changed, and life is as bitter (or perhaps even worse) as ever. Money, immorality, illicit drugs, etc. are other things people use to "cover over" their bitterness.

The second way to heal the broken heart is to consider why the heart is broken, and how it can be mended. All forms of bitterness, depression, anxiety, estrangement, etc. (obviously notwithstanding clinical depression and chemical imbalances which must be addressed by a physician) stem from one common source: Their bearer has lost his connection with Hashem. One who has a true, deep

relationship (also known as d'veikus - cleaving) with the Almighty has the ability to overcome the most trying and difficult of situations, to smile in the face of adversity, and to not lose faith even in life's most trying moments. The b'nei Gershon - the estranged of spirit and broken-hearted - have obviously lost that connection. The only real way to "uplift" them is by trying, to whatever extent we can, to "reconnect" them with their faith and with Hashem. By tactfully helping them to find their own connection to Hashem - to emunah (faith) and bitachon (belief) - we bring joy into their hearts, and to Hashem as well, Who rejoices like a father at the return of a long-lost child. And sometimes we are the b'nei Gershon - and we too have to remember how to uplift our own souls.

Lift up the hearts of b'nei Gershon - but do so in a way that brings joy to Hashem as well, so that, so to speak, Hashem, and: they too - will be uplifted!

Have a good Shabbos.

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