

GETTING OUR MANNERS IN ORDER

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Devarim begins with a cryptic list of place-names that don't seem to connect with each other. Some of the places don't even exist (Lavan, Tofel, Di-zahav - see Rashi). Rashi explains that the common denominator among all the 'places' mentioned is that they allude to sins committed by the Jews during their 40 year journey through the desert. The last two places mentioned are Chatzeros and Di-Zahav. Rashi explains that Chatzeros was the name of the place where Korach led his rebellion against Moshe's leadership. Di-Zahav, he explains, is not a place name, but means "an abundance of gold," which led to the creation of the Egel Ha-zahav, the Golden Calf. Chronologically, the sin of the Calf took place before that of Korach. Why does the Torah reverse their order?

This week marked the fourth yortzeit of the Bobover Rebbe zt"l. Those who had the privilege of having been in the Rebbe's company will not soon forget the beauty of the Rebbe's every movement. Were it not for having known the Rebbe, it might be difficult to believe what one reads about past Torah giants - that they never moved their bodies in any way without thinking of Hashem. The Rebbe was recognized not only for his great sanctity and tremendous love for mitzvos and Torah, but also for his unequalled mentschlichkeit - he was a person that even gentiles who came in contact with him loved.

At the Rebbe's shiva, a woman came to visit. From her appearance, it was obvious she was not an observant Jew. The Rebbe's daughters wondered what her relationship with their father possibly could have been. "I lived in the West Side of Manhattan," she began, "when your father came to live there in the early 1950's. To tell you the truth," she said, "I'm no great maven on Rebbes, so I'm not going to tell you about how holy your father was, though no doubt he was a holy man. But do you know why I came to the shiva? Because in my whole life, I've never met more of a mentsch than your father. Even though I wasn't religious, he always treated me with tremendous respect, and never made me feel like less of a Jew. I used to look forward to seeing your father just walking in the street - he had such a way about him. I may not be a maven on a Rebbe - but I'm a maven on a mentsch."

A Bobover Hasid from Brooklyn once hired a black painter to paint his house. Noticing a picture of the Rebbe in the Hasid's breakfront, he remarked, "You know - that's my Rabbi." The Hasid was intrigued; it wasn't every day that a man like this had a Rabbi - never mind a Hasidic Rebbe.

"Do you want to know why? I'll tell you. That Rabbi - Rabbi Halberstam - once hired me to paint his dining room. When I arrived in the morning, he greeted me with a warm 'Good morning!'. Then he asked me if I had eaten breakfast. Actually, I hadn't, and I told him that I didn't have time. 'You can't work all morning without eating something - let me fetch you something to eat.' Can you believe it - the Rebbe made me breakfast!

"Once I had eaten, I began plastering the walls. At some point, the Rebbe came over to inspect my work. 'Your work is excellent,' he said, 'almost too perfect. Please, don't work too hard to make it perfect - there's nothing wrong with a few small rough spots here and there. Now, thousands of years ago, we had a temple - the Holy Temple (Bais Ha-mikdash). There everything had to be totally perfect - it's was G-d's house on earth. But for my house here - pretty good is good enough. Thank you for your hard work.'

"Now another time," he continued, "I was hired to do some work by another Rabbi. He didn't bother asking me if I had breakfast. When he came to inspect my work, he found a spot that had been plastered, but was not perfectly smooth. He began ranting and raving, 'Is this what I pay you for? It's not smooth! Do you call this plastering?' I promised him I would smooth it out, but that wasn't enough. He made me do the whole room over from scratch, and stood over me as I did it. 'You may be a Rabbi, but you're not at all like my Rabbi,' I told him when I left. I don't know if he understood what I meant, but he sure was shocked."

Chazal (our Sages) say, "Derech erez kadma la-Torah." Roughly translated - being a mentsch comes before keeping the Torah. This is not to say that we should all abandon our Yeshivos and study halls and enrol in finishing schools. But if our Torah study and observance is not accompanied by, and proceeded by, proper attention to our character and the way we deal with others, then it calls our study and our motives into question.

Rabbi Chaim Vital asks: If derech erez is so important, why doesn't the Torah address it by making it a mitzvah (one of the 613 commandments) to have good manners and work on one's character? He answers: Were derech erez to be a mitzvah, it would imply that it's a mitzvah just like all the other mitzvos. In truth, it's much more. It's a precondition to observing the Torah - a person lacking in basic mentschlichkeit can't even begin to study and connect with the Torah!

The sin of the Golden Calf was grave - the gravest. There is no sin worse than Avodah Zara, the sin of idol worship. But Korach's rebellion went beyond sin. Their lack of respect and appreciation for Moshe, and the brazen way they spoke and their refusal to speak with him even when he belittled himself by pursuing them in hope of forstaying the conflict, demonstrated that they lacked the most basic Jewish character traits of humility, respectfulness, and sensitivity. They could never be leaders of men - they weren't even mentschen.

Perhaps this is why the Torah switches the order, placing the Korach rebellion before the sin of the Calf, in deference to the dictum that good character, which Korach and his fellows were lacking, must be attended to before one can aspire to delve into the deeper and more intellectually challenging areas of Torah study.

The first Beis Ha-mikdash, say Chazal, was destroyed principally as the result of idol worship. The second Beis Ha-mikdash, whose rebuilding we still await, was destroyed as a result of one Jew hating and mistreating another. The first Beis Ha-mikdash was rebuilt after 70 years of exile, during which the Jews ceased to serve idolatry and repented from their ways. The second one still lays in ruin after two millennia of waiting and anticipation. Perhaps Hashem awaits our rededication to derech eretz kadma la-Torah - to treating one another with respect, courtesy, and Jewish character.

Have a good Shabbos.

***** *This week's publication has been sponsored by Mr. Yosef Marmorstein, in memory of his father R' Avraham Yehudah ben R' Yosef HaLevi ob"m.* ***** Text Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann and **Torah.org**