

TO JUDGE FAVOURABLY—FROM WITHIN

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Much of parshas Bo concerns the laws of Pesach (Passover) and its ritual sacrifice, the korban Pesach. The Pesach offering was strictly for Jewish consumption; regarding a non-Jew's participation the Torah instructs (12:43), "No foreign person may eat from it."

In a section learned recently in the Daf Yomi cycle, the Gemara relates a most interesting story about a non-Jew who, it seems, looked Jewish enough that he managed to trick the Kohanim into letting him participate (Pesachim 3b):

A certain Aramean (gentile) who was friendly with the famous sage R' Yehuda ben Beseira used to travel to Jerusalem and partake in the Pesach offering (contrary to the Torah's prohibition). He used to brag to R' Yehuda ben Beseira: The Torah says, "No foreigner may eat from it... No uncircumcised man may eat from it... (12:43,48)" yet I am consistently given the best portions!

R' Yehuda ben Beseira asked him: "Have they ever given you the sheep's tail? Now that is truly the best portion—all else is nothing in comparison. Next time you go up, tell them to give you to eat from the sheep's tail!"

The next time he came, he told them, "Please give me the sheep's tail."

"The sheep's tail? It's not eaten—it is burned on the Altar," they told him. "Who told you to ask for the sheep's tail?"

"The great sage, ben Beseira!"

"R' Yehuda ben Beseira told you to ask for the sheep's tail?" They were shocked. They launched an investigation, and it was discovered that he was a gentile who is forbidden to partake in the Pesach. They sent R' Yehuda a message: "Peace to you, R' Yehuda ben Beseira. You live in Netzivin (R' Yehuda ben Beseira's home-town), yet your net spreads until Yerushalayim!"

The Gemara ostensibly tells this story, among other reasons, to demonstrate the great wisdom of our sages; how R' Yehuda ben Beseira managed to outsmart the Aramean by getting him to unknowingly reveal himself. Yet at face value, the story seems very strange and somewhat improbable.

Imagine a bank robber whose house neighbours with the chief of police. He would arrogantly flaunt his cunningness to his helpless neighbour who, although fully aware of the man's illegal activities, was never able to catch him in the act. One day the police chief came up with a plan: "If you really

want to make a good heist," he told his criminal acquaintance, "go to the bank on the corner of Main St. and Broad Ave. at six o'clock this evening. There's going to be a huge cash pick up—you can make more in one robbery than you usually make in a month!"

"Really! What a great idea!" the robber says with a knowing grin. "Why don't I just meet you there!? You're going to have to get up a lot earlier to catch this worm..."

If the Aramean was smart enough to run circles around the Kohanim for years without ever arousing their suspicion, how could it not have occurred to him that R' Yehuda was setting a booby trap? Did he really think one of the great Sages of Israel would go so far as to help him in his ruse?

The Maharshal (R' Shlomo Luria [1510-1574]) has a novel understanding of this Gemara that is sheer brilliance. He explains that R' Yehuda ben Beseira told the Aramean, "You think you're fooling them? The joke's on you! They know you're not Jewish."

"It can't be—the Torah says, 'No foreigner may eat from it!'"

"Oh, that—that only refers to the best part of the korban Pesach—the sheep's tail. All other parts may be eaten by everyone (this, of course, is not true)! Tell me this—have they ever given you the sheep's tail?"

"Actually, no."

"Well then, that settles it! I told you. They know you're not a Jew; that's why you never got the sheep's tail!"

The Aramean knew R' Yehuda was wrong. He was smart enough to recognize whether they bought-into his disguise, and he knew, rightly, that they had. "It's not true; they think I'm a Jew—I know it! I just never happened to receive the sheep's tail—after all not everyone can get it."

"You know what," R' Yehuda told him, "let's settle this once and for all. If you're right, and they think you're a Jew, then prove it. This year, when you go, tell them you'll settle for no less than the sheep's tail. I'm telling you they won't give it to you, because they know you're not Jewish."

The Aramean, who had correctly deduced that they had no idea he wasn't Jewish, had no reason for concern—at least that's what he thought. He went to the Kohanim, asked them for the sheep's tail, 'the best piece—the one that only Jew's can eat (nod, wink).' The rest is history (as was the Aramean—see Gemara *ibid.*).

Perhaps on a different level, R' Yehuda's approach in dealing with the sinful Aramean offers us some insight into how to cope with our own faults and shortcomings. Far worse than sin, Chassidus teaches, are the worthlessness and despair (*yi'ush*) that consume the Jew who has been lead astray. There are laws of *teshuva* (repentance) that help us to rectify our sins. Alternatively, by increasing our enthusiasm for Torah study and mitzvos, we hope that our sins will in some sense be nullified by the Torah's great light. But the despair and hopelessness that come in sin's wake have the potential

to send us spiralling downwards, propelling us to far worse sins than the ones that got us there in the first place, and even to a complete loss of faith.

We all make mistakes; it's unavoidable. When we feel the onset of yi'ush, the critical thing is to put our sins and misdeeds in perspective. While we may indeed have erred, perhaps gravely, if we take another look at our lives we will certainly find other areas in which we've excelled, or at least some positive points, even the smallest of which are greatly cherished in Hashem's eyes. Just as there is a mitzvah, sifrei Chassidus teach, to give others the benefit of the doubt, sometimes we must give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. By focusing on our positive traits, we give ourselves a launching point from which to make a fresh start, propelled, as it were, by sin to new levels of enthusiasm and dedication in our Torah observance.

When our guilty conscience (yetzer hara) whispers in our ears thoughts of despair and depression ("I got you to do the worst sins"), we must answer like R' Yehuda ben Beseira did to the Aramean, "You think that's the worst?! Maybe you did trip me up in this one little area, but I'd like to see you get me to..." (Here's where we fill-in areas in which we, baruch Hashem, didn't falter; the positive points through which we judge ourselves favourably.) Even if, in our despair, we feel devoid of any positive points, the Gemara (Kiddushin 49b) says that avoiding sin is also a mitzvah and gives Hashem pleasure. Even if we find fault with ourselves in one or more areas, there are certainly many areas in which we did not falter (eating kosher, keeping Shabbos, avoiding forbidden marital relationships, etc.).

We are not advocating turning a blind eye to all our faults and patting ourselves on the back for the few areas in which our record is better; in the long run, we must strive to dedicate our lives and energies to being the best bnei Torah we can. But in the short run, when despair has us ready to give up, reminding ourselves that we are not as bad as the yetzer hara would have us believe can give us the push to get us moving in the right direction.

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