

CLOSE CALL

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: When a man among you brings an offering to Hashem... (1:2)

Commentaries note that the word-order of the above verse is unusual. Translated literally, it reads, "A man, when he brings, from among you, an offering to Hashem." The word "among you (mi-kem)," which should be at the beginning of the verse, is inserted parenthetically in the middle.

Or Ha-Chaim Ha-Kadosh writes that, aside from its simple context, the verse alludes to a different type of 'offering.' The Hebrew word for offering, korban, is from the root 'le-karev/to bring near' because part of offering a korban is the process of bringing it to the Holy Temple (Beis Ha-mikdash) and the Kohein. The concept of bringing near, he writes, is best applied to something which has become distanced, and is now being returned to its rightful place. The greatest 'korban' we can offer Hashem, he writes, is when we find a fellow Jew who feels estranged from G-d, and we bring him closer to Hashem!

A man—you or me or anyone, when he brings from among you—his offering is not an animal, gold nor silver; it's something among you—your friend, neighbour, cousin...an offering to Hashem—this is the greatest offering we can give Hashem!

His interpretation brings light into an important point: Often, we focus on the material things we 'give' Hashem. We donate to charity, build beautiful synagogues and Yeshivos, buy the most expensive tefillin, and grace our Shabbos and Yom Tov tables with the most elegant finery we can fit into our budget.

Suppose someone have saved his money and bought a sefer Torah (Torah scroll)—no small feat. To celebrate, he invites friends, family, and anyone he knows to a lavish meal prepared in its honour. As is the custom, the sefer Torah is lead to its final destination amid song, dance, and much festivity. This is all as it should be.

And how do we treat the Torah? We stand up as it passes by. We kiss it if we can get close. The fear of, chas ve-shalom, dropping or 'embarrassing' a sefer Torah is immense.

Do we treat our fellow Jews with this level of respect and reverence? Listen to the following story; perhaps it will give us a new perspective on where our priorities should lie:

Unlike most Jews living under the Communist Soviet regime, R' Pinchas Sudak did not lack much.

He had an underground knitting factory, and was a relatively wealthy man. He also managed to sustain a Torah-observant life for himself and his family. When he escaped Russia in the summer of 1946, at the age of thirty-eight, it was not because of any material or even spiritual need. On the contrary, he risked being shot at the border for trying to escape. He did it for his grandchildren.

R' Pinchas felt that his children, raised to fight for the preservation of their faith, had the strength and faith to persevere in following the path of their tradition. "They will always know that they are Jews and will remain loyal to their faith. But what will become of my children's children? That, I do not know. It is for them that I must escape the clutches of this regime."

Fortunate to have crossed the Russian border alive, the Sudak family found themselves in Cracow with a group of forty-six other Chassidim escaping the Stalinist dictatorship.

There in Cracow, R' Pinchas met a Polish Jew who was offering a Torah scroll for sale, and resolved immediately to purchase the Torah. He had a heavy wooden box fashioned to carry and protect it. "Wherever this journey may lead us," said R' Pinchas, "how can so large a group of Jews travel without a sefer Torah in their midst?"

The group forged onwards, walking through Steczen, to cross the Czechoslovakian border on their way to Prague. They left late at night. Each person could carry only their most basic necessities; all other worldly possessions were abandoned.

In the blackness of the night, R' Pinchas, his wife Batya, and their three children, grasping a coarse rope to keep them together, trekked silently through the dense forest. R' Pinchas clutched his beloved sefer Torah as he walked alongside his wife, who carried their youngest child, Bracha. As time progressed, Batya grew weary, and motioned to her husband that she could no longer carry Bracha.

With tears in his eyes, R' Pinchas took his sefer Torah out of its wooden case, and silently mouthed an apology. "Priceless Torah, you know that it is for you that I have left Russia. I am fleeing to ensure that my children's children will know you and live with you. Forgive me, dear Torah, for betraying you now. It is either you or my child. I part with you now, so that my children and children's children should live a life where you are a real and meaningful part."

R' Pinchas embraced the Torah for the last time, and gently laid it back in its case, placing it under a tree. He lifted his young child in his arms and journeyed forward.

Eventually, R' Pinchas and his family reached the shores of Eretz Yisrael safely. His children, Batsheva, Nachman and Bracha, each grew up to become Rabbis or Rebbetzins serving their respective communities and promulgating faith in Torah.

A few years ago, his daughter, 'Rebbetzin Batsheva,' was visiting California where she was invited to the home of a distant acquaintance. This acquaintance was describing her own father's escape from Russia— several weeks after that of R' Pinchas. She said that she attributed her father's longevity and

robust health to an incident that happened over more than 50 years ago:

He and his wife were escaping Russia on a dark night. Along the way, their five year old daughter wandered away from them and was momentarily lost. Frantically, the parents searched for her, crawling on their hands and knees through the pitch-black forest.

Suddenly, her father felt a hard surface. Upon further investigation, he opened a wooden box to discover a sefer Torah. Next to the wooden box sat his young child. Kissing both passionately, he took the Torah from its box, unravelled it, and wrapped it around his body, tying it with his gartel (prayer belt). Eventually, that Torah scroll made its way to its current home, in a shul in New York City.

Concluding her story, she looked up at Rebbitzen Batsheva, and couldn't fathom why her face had gone completely ashen and tears were streaming from her eyes. The legacy of R' Pincha's precious sefer Torah had come full circle.

If we were to see a sefer Torah, G-d forbid, lying in disgrace, we would run to pick it up, kiss it, hug it, and return it to its place of respect. Our hearts would be torn from having witnessed such a tragedy. Likewise, our eyes should be open to the many opportunities that grace our lives to pick up the spirits of a fellow Jew, revive his spirits, and hopefully help him return to his place of respect among Torah loving Jews.

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