

NOT SO JUST REWARD

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"They brought the Mishkan to Moshe..." [39:33]

Commenting on the above verse, the Midrash cites a famous passage in Mishlei, from the chapter Eishes Chayil/A woman of valor (31:25): *"Strength and majesty are her garment; she joyfully awaits the last day"*:

When R' Avihu was about to depart this world, Hashem showed him the great reward prepared for him in the World to Come... There were 13 balsamic rivers. R' Avihu wondered aloud, "All this for Avihu?! Indeed, about me it is written the following (Yeshayahu 49:4): *'But I said, 'I have toiled in vain, and used up my strength for emptiness and naught. Yet my judgment is with you, Hashem, and [the reward for] my deed is with G-d.'*"

Clearly, R' Avihu was not being facetious. If he thought all his toil was in vain, he meant it quite literally. But how could this be? R' Avihu was no doubt exceedingly humble, yet he could not have denied that he - one of the great teachers of the Amoraim - dedicated his life to Torah study. Did R' Avihu not accept the simple fact that, "Your Employer is trustworthy to pay you for your deeds?" (Avos 2)

Also, how does this story relate to the verse in this week's parsha, in which the Mishkan is brought to Moshe to erect?

We find in the Torah, the Maggid of Dubna notes, seemingly contradictory statements regarding the ease and/or difficulty of studying and adhering to the Torah. On the one hand, we are taught, "The Torah only resides with those who kill themselves over it [i.e. study with extreme intensity and self-sacrifice]" (Berachos 63). But then the Torah itself says, *"For this commandment that I command you today, it is not hidden from you, nor is it distant... The matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart,"* (Devarim/Deuteronomy 30).

Torah observance, on a very basic level, is made up of positive and negative commandments. Of the two, refraining from the forbidden, and cleansing ourselves of sin where we have strayed, is far more difficult. Besides the simple fact that it's more enjoyable to do something good than to stay away from bad, there is another reason.

By performing positive mitzvos we, hopefully, attain some degree of holiness. Even so, the tohar ha-lev/pureness of heart is not a direct byproduct of our efforts. "One who comes to purify himself, he

receives [Heavenly] help (Yuma 38)." We perform the mitzvos, and, to the extent we merit it, receive some level of kedusha from Above.

On the other hand, staying away from temptation, especially if we've already fallen victim to its seduction, can be bitterly difficult and terribly lonely.

Ostensibly, at least half of our mitzvos should be a cinch. As King David says (Tehillim/Psalms 19), *"They are more desirable than gold, than even much fine gold; sweeter than honey, and drippings from combs."*

The reason we don't always feel inspired the moment we sit down to study Torah or perform some other mitzvah is because we have failed to first cleanse our hearts from the bad.

He explains this with a parable. A pauper was invited to a massive and most lavish feast being held in honour of a king. In anticipation, he fasted the entire day so he would come to the meal and be able to fully enjoy luxuries which at most times he could only imagine. As evening fell, however, he was so famished that he just couldn't wait. He ordered his wife to serve him some food in the meantime, before he fainted of hunger. They were of simple means, and the only food she had ready were some radishes and onions, which, in his hunger, he swallowed in rapid succession.

By the time he arrived at the feast, his stomach was churning and his mouth was raging with the unpleasant aftertaste of indigestion. The richly adorned waiters served him course after exquisite course of luxurious food served on the best bone china, yet it was all he could do to force himself to swallow small spoonfuls. At the feast's conclusion, he couldn't understand why everyone was raving about the sumptuous meal. In his opinion, each course was more bitter than the previous one.

The Torah and its mitzvos are naturally sweet, the Maggid explains -- sweeter than the sweetest honey, more precious than the shiniest gold. But when we foolishly ruin our spiritual taste buds with the bitterness of sin, we destroy our ability to 'taste' its sweetness. In our sorry state, we sometimes imagine the Torah's sweet delicacies are bitter.

Our lifelong task is to cleanse ourselves of the bitter taste of iniquity, and allow Torah's natural sweetness to do its thing, unimpeded.

It is no simple task; overcoming our weaknesses can take a lifetime. Temptation grows deep roots, which implant themselves deeply into our souls.

A landowner neglectfully let his lot deteriorate by dumping garbage indiscriminately. One day, some generous soul came along and told him, "Listen, that's a great lot you have. It's a shame to let it fall apart like you have. If you clean it up, I promise I will build you a beautiful house - on the very spot you once used for a garbage dump." Not foolish enough to look a gift horse in the mouth, the landowner did his best to dig up all the years of garbage and waste. Good to his word, the wealthy man then built him a house.

Proudly, he would show people his home. "I built it," he would tell them, "together with so and so."

One day, the wealthy man who built the house overheard him. "That's not exactly correct," he said. "I built the house."

"True," the landowner said, "but I cleared the land. You couldn't have built the house on top of a garbage dump!"

"Well, you're right about that," the wealthy man said. "But think about who dumped the garbage there in the first place."

R' Avihu knew he spent a life full of Torah and mitzvos. But in his mind, though, he couldn't see how he deserved any reward. For the positive mitzvos? They are sweeter than honey and more precious than gold! What greater reward could he ask for than the sublime pleasure of their experience. As for the negative mitzvos - refraining from bad and toiling to cleanse that which was already sullied - it's true he toiled to purify himself, but surely there could be no reward for that. After all, who turned the valuable plot into a garbage dump in the first place?

The Midrash teaches us that despite all this, Hashem, in His infinite kindness, does reward us for adhering to the Torah, even though much of our toil is spent fixing what we've broken and cleaning up the mess we made.

When they brought Moshe the Mishkan, he was unable to erect it. Hashem told him, "You go through the motions; make it seem like you're lifting it, and I'll put it up for you." Still, the Mishkan is credited to Moshe. Perhaps this is why the Midrash connects the story of R' Avihu to Moshe's 'erecting' the Mishkan. While ultimately we can make no just claim to whatever we achieve, Hashem rewards us in full - even if we've done no more than go through the motions. Have a good Shabbos.

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