

A BACK-HANDED COMPLIMENT

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week we read the double parsha of B'har/B'chukosai, thereby completing the Sefer [Book] of Vayikra. B'har begins with the laws of sh'mita--the Torah's prohibition of normal farming of the Land of Israel every seven years. The parsha then deals with different types of redemption including lands that were sold and Jews sold as slaves.

B'chukosai deals predominantly with the to'chacha--the chilling punishment that will result if we don't live up to the responsibility of being the Chosen People. The parsha begins however, with promises of prosperity if we'll follow Hashem's commandments.

"If you'll keep the commandments... then I'll send the rains in their time, the earth and trees will give forth their produce... and you'll settle securely in your land... your enemies will fall before you, five of you will chase one hundred of them... I will make you multiply... you'll need to empty the storehouses from the old to make room for the new.[25:3-10]"

Everything seems to be going fine until we reach the next passuk [verse]. "I will place my Tabernacle in your midst and I will not be disgusted by you. [26:11]" Talk about a back-handed compliment! Why does there exist this possibility that Hashem would be disgusted by us if we're doing the right things?

The Drash Moshe explains in the following manner. It's quite common for a person to become complacent. I'm a good person. I observe the commandments. A person, at that point, might begin to rest on past accomplishments and no longer seek further challenges. He'll thereby stunt his potential for further growth. Such a wasted potential would be a cause for Hashem's disgust.

With this he explains the prohibition of setting up a matzaiva [an altar consisting of one stone] even in order to sacrifice upon it to Hashem [Devarim 16:22]. Rashi explains that, although in the time of the Forefathers, Hashem 'enjoyed' such an altar, once it became the Canaanites alter of choice for their idolatry, Hashem despised it.

However, Rav Moshe asks, regular multi-stoned altars were also used for idolatry, yet they continued to be allowed for offering sacrifices to Hashem. What was the difference between those altars and the single-stone matzaiva?

He explains that the multi-stoned altar represents that which Hashem demands from us throughout our lifetime. To constantly be adding to that which we do and to be increasing the level of sincerity

and dedication of that which we are already doing. The antithesis of this is the stagnant, static single-stone matzaiva. That exemplified the Canaanites, steeped in their idolatry. That is despised by Hashem and can never be used in our service to Him.

I recently heard a story about Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky, zt"l, that when he was in his late eighties, he was finally able to pierce the Iron Curtain of Soviet Russia and visit a relative of his who he hadn't seen in over fifty years. Before Rav Yaakov had left Europe, they had both been studying in the same yeshiva. Rav Yaakov managed to leave Europe and went on to become one of the gedolai ha'dor [leaders of the generation]. With the Iron Curtain being a reality, Rav Yaakov was only able to bring with him a small volume of Tanach [Scriptures].

After the long, arduous trip, Rav Yaakov was finally reunited with this relative. At the meeting, this relative looked at the Tanach that Rav Yaakov was carrying and asked him what that was. The communists had succeeded in alienating him from his Judaism to such a degree that he no longer knew what a Tanach was!

Rav Yaakov was so stunned and pained by this realization that when he returned home to the United States, at the age of eighty eight, he began the B'er HaGolah organization to help and educate the Russians who were able to leave the Soviet Union and come to the United States.

I'll always remember the discussion I had with my grandfather, a"h, who lived until the age of ninety five. (Of the quotes attributed to him, my favorite was: "Those Wright brothers, we thought they were meshuga [crazy]!") When he was about ninety four, I asked him how things were going at the shul [synagogue] of which he had been a founder. "Terrible, terrible," he responded, "if I was twenty years younger (i.e. seventy four years old!) I'd make a stink!"

That is what is demanded of us. Rock added to rock. No stagnation. No stopping. No 'matzaiva'. Rock upon rock. Growth. Development.

But perhaps, a person might feel that too much is being demanded. We're in 1999-- that's a pretty long road since Sinai. We are so busy and involved with our sophisticated and ever-changing world. How immersed in mitzvos [commandments] can we be expected to be?

Perhaps a Chofetz Chaim on the first parsha we'll be reading, B'har, will aid in our understanding. The parsha teaches that if a person becomes very poor and sells his land, his relatives can redeem back that land, even against the will of the buyer.

"And if a man will have no redeemers, and his hand will obtain and find his redemption [25:26]." The Chofetz Chaim explains that a person shouldn't think that all hope is lost if he has no redeemers. Ultimately, every person has the ability to redeem himself.

He tells the story of a grain merchant during the time of World War I who was complaining bitterly. "I sell wagons full of grain to the largest mills but I still don't earn enough to support my family. Since there is such an abundance of grain available on the market, everyone is so picky about what they

take. Half gets sent back to me and what does get taken only gets paid for months later."

After the revolution, there was a tremendous scarcity of wheat and the minute amount that was available was only being sold through the black market. When the same merchant was asked how he was doing, he now replied that he was earning an amazing living. "No one cares about the quality of what's sold to them. They'll take whatever is thrown at them and pay top dollar (ruble) in advance for it! I'm making more on the pittance that I sell them each month than I made on the wagons-full that I used to sell them each week!"

If that is the case with grain, the Chofetz Chaim explains, how much more so with Torah. In the earlier generations when the study houses were filled with people learning Torah, Hashem would check very carefully to only accept the highest quality and most sincere study of Torah. However, in our generation, the Chofetz Chaim said, (and certainly in our generation, I add) where the percentage of Jews studying Torah and observing mitzvos is so small, Hashem no longer checks the 'merchandise' so carefully. Even a small amount of lesser quality is treasured by Hashem.

"And if a man will have no redeemers, and his hand will obtain and find his redemption." Every person can offer a certain amount of 'merchandise'.

Chazak, chazak v'nischazek. Good Shabbos,

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