

WHAT'S IN A SMILE...

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

This is that "other" parsha I mentioned back in Parashas BeChukosai. Parashas BeChukosai was Moshe telling over to the Jewish people what G-d said would be the curses for straying from Torah. This week's parsha, Ki Savo, is Moshe's own repetition of those curses.

However, before the Torah turns to the section dealing with the blessings and the curses, it begins with the mitzvah of Bikurim, the mitzvah of the first fruits:

When you come into the land which G-d, your G-d is giving to you as an inheritance, and you inherit and settle it, take from the first of all your produce of the ground. Bring from your land which G-d, your G-d, has given to you and place it in a basket, and go to the place which G-d, your G-d, will choose to establish His name. Come to the priest of that time and say to him, "I profess this day to G-d, Your G-d, that I came to the land which G-d promised to your fathers to give" ... and say, "An Aramean destroyed my father..." (Devarim 26:1-5)

Like all mitzvos dealing with agriculture the mitzvah of Bikurim reminds us of the Source of all the bounty in our lives. However, what is particularly interesting about this specific agricultural mitzvah is the "viduy" (confession) said upon bringing the First-Fruits to the kohen; within it there is an obscure reference to a certain "Arami" who tried to kill our "father."

The list of anti-Semites throughout Jewish history is extremely long. However, as the Torah stresses, it is the nation of Amalek that is the ultimate nemesis of the Jewish people. Yet, the focus of the viduy and the reason for gratefulness at the time of offering the First-Fruits was not the salvation from the hands of Amalek. In this viduy, we are grateful for salvation from Ya'akov's uncle and father-in-law, Lavan the Aramean. Why?

The answer is mentioned in the Haggadah shel Pesach, where we talk about how Lavan wished to obliterate the Jewish people by eliminating Ya'akov. Whereas Paroah decreed only against the male children, the Haggadah says, Lavan wanted to exterminate us altogether.

But where in the Torah do we see this? The only account of Lavan actually "attacking" the Jewish people is after Ya'akov "stole" away from Lavan while the latter was away from home tending to business. Upon hearing the news of Ya'akov's secret departure, Lavan pursued Ya'akov with a

vengeance. In fact, Lavan declared to Ya'akov upon reaching him that had not G-d interceded on Ya'akov's behalf, Lavan would have killed him (with fathers-in-law like that, who needs enemies?).

However, that was certainly not the first or last time someone pursued the Jewish people with thoughts of wiping them out. Why then is Lavan looked upon as being the overriding threat to the Jewish people, more than anyone else?

Lavan's own words provide the key:

"Why did you flee from me in secret, robbing me, not telling me [and thereby] preventing me from being able to send you away in joy, and with songs of the tabret and harp? You prevented me from kissing my sons and daughters!" (Bereishis 31:27)

Though Lavan's complaint may have been valid on some level, it certainly was not justification to kill or even harm his son-in-law. Unless, of course, Lavan had no need for Ya'akov, only for Ya'akov's children. After all, the Torah reveals, Lavan looked at his grandchildren as if they were his own children:

Lavan answered, "These daughters are my daughters, and these children are my children..." (Bereishis 31:43)

No they weren't! They were Ya'akov's children, the future Jewish people. More importantly, they were the essence of Ya'akov's struggle for completion, without which all that Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov strove to achieve would have disappeared. It is to this that Ya'akov alluded even before the first tribe was born:

He took two stones in his hand and said, "If these two stones become attached as one then I know that there is no refuse to issue from me ..." (Bereishis Rabbah 68:11)

It was through his children that Ya'akov hoped to implement the unity he himself had achieved. It was Avraham's, and then Yitzchak's single-mindedness to remain moral within an immoral society that warranted G-d choosing them as His own. And just like Ya'akov represented the continuity of that morality to Yitzchak, Ya'akov's own children represented that continuity to him.

This is not the only place in the Torah where we learn about unity through children. The Torah tells us that "a man is to leave his mother and father and cleave to his wife," to whom he was previously a stranger. Through marriage they are supposed to achieve a unity that makes them like "one flesh."

However, can two flesh-and-blood beings literally become one? Thus Rashi explains:

One flesh ... both parents are united through their children.

Children are a genetic combination of both parents, a literal expression of the unity the parents are

meant to achieve. However, on a higher level, the birth of children also represents an even greater unification, that of husband, wife and G-d. For, as the Talmud relates, every child is the result of a three-way partnership between G-d, man and woman.

For this reason, a child represents even more. A child is the embodiment of the values of the three: man, woman and G-d. What is important to note is that the child himself is the fourth element. This understanding will yield deep insight into the mitzvah and message of the fruits of the fourth year.

Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov were the Forefathers of the Jewish people, but they were not the Jewish people themselves. It was their descendants, the Twelve Tribes, who became the basis of the Jewish nation. Applying this concept of three elements producing a fourth element that embodies the awareness of the three, the children of Ya'akov represented the synthesis of all three fathers.

When it comes to the mitzvah of the First-Fruits, there are four mitzvos involved (Ohr HaChaim, Devarim 26:1). They are: knowing that Eretz Yisroel is a gift for accepting G-d as our G-d, knowing that the land was given to us as inheritance to be shared with no other nation, settling the land of Israel, and the actual bringing up of the First-Fruits. However, as much as the four are a unit, it is really the first three that give rise to the last part of the mitzvah, the bringing up of the fruit.

Bikurim, the fruit itself is the unified expression of the first three mitzvos, just as a child is the unified expression of the partnership of G-d, man, and woman. Children represent the commitment to produce that which can receive and carry the spiritual "baton" of previous generations and pass it on to the next. So, too, the Bikurim represented this very same commitment because of its connection to the "fourth element," its connection to the land of Israel (a symbol of Jewish continuity and commitment), and its reference to salvation from Lavan who plotted to destroy that continuity.

It is this commitment that Lavan tried to uproot. This is why he is the subject of the viduy. Lavan's attachment to his grandchildren was more than a matter of blood relationship. Lavan understood that the twelve tribes represented the embodiment of all that Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov strove to teach mankind about G-d's existence. Allowing the tribes to remain that way gave the world the potential to be a place in which ultimately there would be no room for people like Lavan. Capturing the imagination of the sons of Ya'akov and changing the way they perceived the world was crucial for Lavan's own survival.

Thus the mitzvah of Bikurim represents more than gratitude for the bounty of the land; it is a sign of Jewish commitment to bring order to a world whose natural course is one of chaos. It is the idea of synthesizing the various elements of creation into a wonderful unity that represents the fulfilled purpose for creation.

Shabbos Day:

As the Ohr HaChaim also points out, this week's parsha begins with the "language of joy." As the Talmud states (Megillah 10a), when the word "*ha-yah*" ("when it will come to be ...") is employed, it is a reference to a joyous event, in this case, the bringing up of Bikurim. As the Talmud describes, the bringing up to the Temple of the First-Fruits was a cause for great ceremony and celebration.

But why, in a parsha that is going to discuss the curses (anything but a cause for joy), do we start with a mitzvah of joy?

The Torah itself answers this question with a startling revelation at the end of the curses. The Torah sums up the long list of horrifying consequences for straying from Torah by saying:

... And it will come to be that you and your descendants will be a sign and a source of wonder forever, all because you didn't serve G-d, Your G-d, in joy and goodness of heart... (Devarim 28:47)

Because we didn't serve G-d with joy? All of that happened to us because we didn't show our appreciation for the good G-d gave to us while we had it? All of these curses ... even the ones which sound frighteningly like pogroms and the Holocaust ... happened because of an attitude problem? Disobedience is one thing, but how does a lack appreciation result in so much suffering and destruction?

The answer to this question is a sad, historical fact. There is an expression in the world of psychology: sad children make angry, rebellious adults. In other words, today's sadness is tomorrow's delinquency; children that have negative dispositions often grow up and carry those attitudes into their adulthood, which find negative expression in their everyday lives. This is what G-d warned Kayin back at the beginning of history:

... To Kayin and his offering, [G-d] did not show favor; Kayin became very angry and depressed. G-d told him, "Why are you angry and depressed? If you do good, will I not reward you? However, if you don't do good, transgression crouches at your door and desires you; it will control you." (Bereishis 4:5-7)

The end result of Kayin's depression? Murder.

Human beings do not like to remain sad or depressed for long periods of time, if at all. Sadness and depression is counterproductive, and makes for lousy company. There are many ways to deal with such negative emotions: see a therapist, take a vacation, or ... or eliminate the source of that depression.

In the case of Kayin, that meant murdering his brother, Hevel. In the case of the Jewish people, that has usually translated into forsaking Torah for other, less "burdensome" lifestyles. But that,

unfortunately, is even more counterproductive with respect to the purpose of creation, and therefore totally unacceptable to G-d.

Furthermore, as the Nefesh HaChaim points out, G-d "mirrors" us. If we act depressed and downtrodden, then that is the way He acts toward us. Certainly this makes for a very depressing world, and one ripe for the impact of the negative forces and drives of creation, which fester in the darkness and gloom of negative emotions.

And guess who gets it the worse in the end? Us, it seems.

Thus, the root of all straying from Torah is not because someone proved the unprovable, that Torah is not of Sinaitic origin, or that G-d doesn't exist. Forsaking Torah, we are warned in this week's parsha, is the result of discontentment, and it is this that forces the person or people to look for reasons why Torah is not valid. Like Kayin killed Hevel to solve his depression, historically, Jews have often tried to "kill" Torah to solve theirs ...

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

... Therefore, the real commandment incumbent upon every Jew is to find the joy of keeping Torah; it is this that will make Torah the "labor of love" we spoke about in Parashas Aikev. Indeed, Dovid HaMelech wrote:

▮ *Serve G-d with joy! (Tehillim 100)*

In order to understand how to do this, one must first appreciate the difference between simcha (joy) and oneg (pleasure). The difference between the two is fundamental: oneg is physical pleasure, and simcha is the pleasure that results from achieving a certain intellectual awareness.

This is why a person, who detests the taste of meat, does not have to eat meat on Shabbos if he doesn't want to. Since Shabbos is a time of oneg, of physical pleasure to enrich the spiritual experience, enjoying oneself physically is an integral part of properly experiencing Shabbos. On the other hand, on a Yom Tov, such as Sukkos, one should eat some meat and drink some wine, whether they enjoy such food or not. This is because Yom Tovim are days of simcha.

But wherein lies the simcha in eating food that one does not enjoy? The answer is that we eat meat and drink wine, not because they make our meals fancier, but because they remind us of how, in Temple times, we used to offer sacrifices and drink-offerings to bring ourselves closer to G-d. Eating the meat and drinking the wine is a way of breaking through the boundaries of time and re-experiencing on another level of consciousness what once was, and will one day be possible in terms of closeness to G-d. That is the true source of joy.

Therefore, the Torah has warned us: If living by Torah and mitzvos is joyless for you, then watch out!!

You are on a slide down to spiritual oblivion, and the consequences of such spiritual void. If you lack simcha in serving G-d, then seek out a deeper awareness of Torah and mitzvos, and search for a higher level of Torah consciousness. That is where you will find true and lasting joy, and salvation from destruction. This too is implied by the mitzvah of Bikurim, a mitzvah of simcha.

Melave Malkah:

The Talmud (Avodah Zara 17a) discusses the story of Rebi Elazar ben Durdia, a real Ba'al Tshuva. As the story goes, he was a tremendous sinner, until one day, a spirit of reality hit him and he realized how self-destructive his ways had been. Immediately, the Talmud says, he went and sat among the mountains and began seeking G-d's forgiveness.

To make a long and beautiful story short, his intense effort to return to truth cost him his life. He put so much into his tshuva that his soul was taken from him and he died. However, this was not a sad ending, for his tshuva was accepted and he went to the World-to-Come.

Until that point in the story, nothing is that strange. What adds a kind of strange twist to the story is Rebi Yehuda HaNasi's ("Rebi") response: he cried, and then said, "There are some who acquire their portion in the World-to-Come only after an entire lifetime, and yet, there are those, like Rebi Elazar ben Durdia, who acquire their portion in a moment."

Rebi wasn't bemoaning the fact that Rebi Elazar ben Durdia had gotten off lightly (after a lifetime of sinning yet!!). What glory is there in be a transgressor? No, rather, what Rebi was complaining about was the realization of how powerful the potential of a moment is. Most people take a lifetime to earn their "portion" of eternity because they squander the potential of the countless moments that make up their entire lives.

For Elazar ben Durdia, it was a do-or-die situation-forever. He only had moments to right the wrong, and therefore, he put everything he had into his tshuva. We, on the other hand, often feel that we have eternity left to live ... plenty of time to still make the most of life. That, perhaps, is the biggest mistake one can possibly make.

This is why elsewhere, the Talmud states, "Do tshuva one day before you die." The obvious question is asked: who knows the die of his death in advance? The Talmud's answer: Exactly. Therefore, make the best of each and every moment as if it's the last one you'll ever live. This way, you'll impress G-d and His Heavenly Court on that awesome day of judgment: Rosh Hashanah.

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston

Chasiva v'Chasima Tova,

Pinchas Winston

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