

THE JOY OF SERVING G-D

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

This week's PERCEPTIONS is dedicated to the refuah shlaimah of Aryeh Chaim ben Miriam, who is recovering from surgery. May the merit of this parshah sheet help him to achieve a speedy and complete recovery.

FRIDAY NIGHT:

It will be when you enter the land that G-d, your G-d, gives you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it, and dwell in it, that you shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground that you bring in from your land . . . (Devarim 26:1-2)

At first glance, the beginning of this parshah is only about the mitzvah of Bikurim, the first-fruits that were brought up to the Temple each year as a gift to the kohanim, but as an expression of thanks to G-d. Why it follows last week's parshah of Mechiyas Amalek, the mitzvah to eradicate Amalek, and preceded the parshah of the blessings and curses about to follow, is a matter of drush, of which there are many.

However, perhaps the most compelling drash of all is the Vilna Gaon's pshat on the smichas haparshios - the connection of all these sections:

With regard to every man of Israel who was destined by Heaven to save Israel and gather in the exiles, Rabbi Eliyahu, the Vilna Gaon, knew well where his name was hinted at in the Torah . . . All the Gaon's knowledge which came to him through his holy spirit, are based on holy hints in the Torah and in the works of our Sages, in both what is revealed and what is concealed. Regarding himself, the Gaon said that his name is hinted at in the words "a perfect and just stone (evven shlaimah)" (Devarim 25:15) - a shortened form of his name. The following verse (Ibid. 17) speaks of destroying Amalek, and [this parshah] is immediately followed by the verse, "It will be when you enter the land" (Ibid. 26:1), which refers to the ingathering of the exiles. (Kol HaTor, Chapter 3)

Thus, the GR"A saw in these three sections a historical process, of which he potentially was the center. On a Pshat-level, the Torah was talking to Jews in every generation, about keeping fair and accurate weights for business purposes, of the mitzvah to eradicate Amalek when the conditions for doing so are satisfied, and about bringing up the first fruits during Temple times. However, on the level of Remez, the Torah was hinting to the potential for the Vilna Gaon, about 500 years ago, to trigger and carry out the Final Redemption, beginning with the eradication of the vestiges of Amalek, and ingathering Jewish exiles from all around the world!

The Gaon merited being the light of Moshiach Ben Yosef, in order to promote the ingathering of the exiles and to reveal the hints in the Torah regarding the footsteps of Moshiach Ben Yosef . . . All the hints about the beginning of the Redemption and the secrets concerning the footsteps of the Moshiach, until and including the very end were revealed to the Gaon. He wrote about the final end at length in his commentary on the Safra D'Tzniusa, adjuring others in the name of the G-d of Israel not to reveal it. (Kol HaTor, Chapter 1)

Hence, these parshios were important pieces of the historical puzzle as far as the Vilna Gaon was concerned, and so he devoted himself to the fulfillment of their allusions to the Final Redemption. He himself embarked on a trip to Eretz Yisroel to trigger the return of the exiles to the land, and when, for a technical reason, he had to return to Vilna, he made sure that his students understood the importance of carrying out what he began:

After many of his students had promised him faithfully to go to Tzion and begin working there on gathering in the exiles when the awakening starts from below, with the help of G-d, then the Gaon revealed to them all the steps of the beginning of the Redemption. According to a major principle of the Gaon that appears in Safra D'Tzniusa, everything that was, is, and will be in all the upper and lower worlds, as well as all the general and personal things that will happen in every generation - all of these are alluded to in the Torah (Ibid.)

SHABBOS DAY:

When you shall come to the land and you shall plant a food tree . . . (Vayikra 19:23)

This verse is comparable to "When you shall come to the land and you shall plant . . . (Vayikra 19:23), which means you must fulfill the commandments that depends on living in Eretz Israel. For, the ingathering of the exiles depends upon the blessings following the fulfillment of both verses according to the rabbis in the Talmud regarding the revealed end (Megillah 17b; and Sanhedrin 98a), and this was the Gaon's great aspiration. Even in the Haftarah of Parashas Ki Seitzei, the Gaon found his own name and his designation in the verse, "with abundant mercy I will gather you in" (Yeshayahu 54:7) which equals [606]. (Kol HaTor, Chapter 3)

All of a sudden, the mitzvah of Bikurim takes on a new meaning with added importance. Every mitzvah has its own sense of hiddur (beautification), but this mitzvah was particularly beautiful to partake of. Between the presentation of the fruit itself to the kohanim with specially adorned baskets and the procession that accompanied the one who brought the Bikurim to the Temple, to the saying of the special viduy at the time it was brought, the bringing of Bikurim was a unique experience.

However, now we can see another dimension of its specialness. The produce of Eretz Yisroel represents something far more than holier food; it symbolizes the very key to redemption! No wonder the redemption itself is often described in the Talmud in terms of the miracles that will take place with the produce of Eretz Yisroel, and as we have mentioned before, no matter how hard Moshe Rabbeinu longed to enter Eretz Yisroel in order to perform the mitzvos based upon Eretz

Yisroel.

It is also very interesting that prior to the arrival of the Vilna Gaon's students, that the land was so desolate, though it has always had tremendous potential to blossom. Between the deserts and the swamps, Eretz Yisroel was a kind of no-man's land for the longest time, despite recent Arab claims of having always been on the land, and Britian's willingness to support that false claim.

It is as if the land was made to hold back its agricultural beauty and bounty so that it could be made to bloom as a result of the Jewish people re-inhabiting the land. The process to develop the land involved hard physical labor on the part of the pioneers that came, American funds, and European know-how. Yet, ultimately, truly, it was all the result of Heavenly mercy-a true miracle.

About two years ago, we planted a garden in front of our home just outside of Jerusalem. Aside from being able to prove to our children that Corn Flakes and the like do not simply grow from the shelves of the local grocery store. They have seen first hand how vulnerable a farmer who depends upon his crops really is. This past Shabbos, as we enjoyed our latest crop of fresh cherry tomatoes, there was extra joy and desire to eat them, knowing that they were grown from the holy soil of Eretz Yisroel.

However, a highlight of the process for me is the taking of Terumas and Ma'aseros from what we grow, including the wonderful peaches we harvested over the last few weeks. Even though today, we are still missing the Temple, the mitzvah to tithe Israeli produce is only rabbinical, for all intents and purposes, it is carried out with the same seriousness as was the original Torah mitzvah. There is something very powerful and pleasurable in being able to perform this mitzvah. It creates a tremendous connection between a person and G-d, vis-a-vis the food one enjoys, and it is that connection that is the true source of Jewish joy.

As we shall see, it is the maintenance of that connection to G-d, and the joy it brings, that guarantees our survival as a people.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

All this is because you did not serve G-d, your G-d out of joy and with gladness of heart while you possessed good things. (Devarim 28:47)

On a simple level, the verse is reminding us of the dangers of becoming ungrateful for the good that G-d give us. It is not that G-d needs to be appreciated; He values our appreciation for our sake, not His own.

Human beings, for one reason or another, seek the approval of other humans. It validates their sense of being and makes them feel wanted. However, G-d knows He is good and that everything He does is good; He does not need us to confirm that and even when we do, we cannot make Him feel any better about Himself than He already does. For, G-d is perfect and never lacks anything, so what can we give Him that He doesn't already have?

Thus, if we are deemed culpable for not appreciating what we have been blessed with and showing joy for having it, then it is a clear indication that something is wrong with us. And, because that something is missing from us, it can turn our whole world on its edge, and rest in the worst of exiles and persecution against us. Doesn't it behoove us to try and figure out what that something is?

The answer to that question is in the verse itself: simchah. But simchah, like good health, is just an outer measure of what is going on inside. It is not the cause but the effect of something more profound, which if you think about it, is what life is all about: awareness.

The debate about free-will is as old as our awareness of it. Recently, I saw another article about it from the non-Torah world, where the debate still rages on. Do we have free-will, or is history pre-determined, either by G-d or by fixed laws of the natural universe?

For G-d to be G-d, for Whom nothing changes and nothing transpires, but for Whom past, present, and future are all the same, everything we will ever do is known to Him before we even have the chance to do it. Not only this, but everything we ever do is always contributing to a definite master plan for creation, which by definition means that we can never act randomly. Even when we think we are being whimsical, we are not.

We began this discussion about free-will back in Parashas Re'eh, and have also had it many times in the past. It is one discussion that is hard to avoid, especially at this time of year. It is one discussion that one has to constantly work to refine and know better, since it is the basis of what we are doing here, and that for which we will be evaluated on the Day of Judgment.

There is a fantastic example of what I am driving at, and it comes at a dramatically crucial moment in history for both the Jewish people and their savior:

Meanwhile, Moshe fed the flock of Yisro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. He led the flock behind the desert, and came upon the mountain of G-d, to Chorev. (Shemos 3:1)

There was Moshe, not yet Rabbeinu, past prince of Egypt, and now a simple shepherd man in the Sinai Desert. The only thing that we know about Moshe from this part of the story was that he was a very caring man. In fact, because he cared so much about the sheep he led, he chose to chase after one that had fled the flock, which literally brought him to the next stage:

The angel of G-d appeared to him in a flame of fire, out of the midst of a bush. He saw it, and noticed that the bush was burning, yet the bush was not consumed. (Ibid. 2)

No doubt all of us would have been amused, and perhaps have run for the Bucket Brigade to put it out. What does Moshe do next?

Moshe said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight - why the bush is not consumed." (Ibid. 3)

In other words, Moshe saw something in the bush that contradicted his vision of the world, and it made him realize that his level of awareness was lacking. He then chose to enhance his awareness,

to expand his vision of reality, and how G-d works in history. And that is, in the end, the main purpose of our free-will, to become more aware of G-d, or to remain less or even unaware of His Presence in life.

As we shall now conclude, it is that choice that determines whether we become willing soldiers in G-d's army, or unwitting pawns in His master plan for creation.

MELAVE MALKAH:

When G-d saw that he turned aside to see, He called out to him from the midst of the bush, "Moshe, Moshe." (Shemos 3:4)

This is such a significant verse. It's wording is so amazingly profound. "When G-d saw that he turned aside . . ." What is that supposed to mean, "when G-d saw?" G-d knew full well before Moshe even left home that day that He would turn to investigate the burning bush?

It means the following thing. It means that what we become in life and what we are able to do is based upon our level of awareness of what is really happening and why. Not why, as in the sense that we can figure out the reasons for why G-d does this or that, but why as in, given the rules of the way G-d runs His world, based upon what He has revealed to us, why this cause led to this effect.

That's what Torah is trying to teach us. It is really the burning bush calling out to each and every one of us to catch our attention. Like the bush that would not be consumed by fire, Torah is a unique supernatural reality, so unique and so supernatural that non-believers choose to believe that men doctored it to make it what it is.

The point of Torah is to achieve a heightened awareness of G-d, of His world, and the way that He runs it. You are never expected to understand that which is beyond your reach. However, we are expected to turn our heads and investigate that which cries out because of its unusualness, especially when it clearly exists, and runs contrary to our world-view.

Once G-d sees that we are not storks in search of a hole into which to place our frightened heads, then he calls out, to each individual Jew differently, according to the level he is able to accept the call. And once the call goes out, then we naturally find ourselves fitting into G-d's master plan to whatever level we are capable of helping out.

And, the best part is that, even though G-d does not need us specifically - He can always find someone to do the job, either willingly or unwittingly - and He rewards us as if He did need us, and as if the service we performed for Him and His master plan was indispensable.

Which brings us back to the concept of simchah. Simchah, as opposed to oneg, is a function of awareness, as we will discuss in the next few weeks. Succos is Zman Simchaseinu, the "Time of Our Simchah," and it follows on the heels of the Aseres Yemai Teshuvah. We will see that, although everyone wants to be happy, not too many people chase after simchah.

This is because simchah is the joy that results from being responsible, from knowing you are a partner with G-d in the fulfillment of the purpose of creation. It is the net result of one's awareness of truth, and the extent that one has this awareness, is the extent to which one can have simchah.

It is only with simchah that one can serve G-d, as it says, "Serve G-d with simchah" (Tehillim 100:2). And that is coming from Litvaks, of all people.

And now we have a perfect connection back to the beginning of the parshah, to the mitzvah of Bikurim, a mitzvah of simchah, and awareness, and according to the GR"A, of redemption as well.

Have a great Shabbos,
PW