

BEING ONE: HAVE A GOOD HEART

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert, in the Tent of Meeting on the first day of the second month . . . (Bamidbar 1:1)

In two weeks time will be the holiday of Shavuos. Most years Parashas Bamidbar falls out on the Shabbos before Shavuos, but being a leap year an extra (Jewish) month has slightly altered the schedule of Torah readings. Parashas Naso will be the Torah reading in advance of Shavuos this year.

It doesn't really matter though. It is like showing up for an appointment a little early and having a bit more time to prepare. Besides, Parashas Naso is just an extension of the message of Parashas Bamidbar, so it too is part of the preparation process for Zman Matan Torasaynu—the "Time of the Giving of Our Torah."

To appreciate this message it is appropriate to recall what it is that we have been working on since Pesach. As the Leshem explains, the Final Redemption will begin on Pesach and end on Shavuos. Sefiras HaOmer, which began on the second night on Pesach, connects the two holidays together to allow us to complete on Shavuos what we began on Pesach.

It is more than coincidence that the Omer-Count is divided into two periods, pre-Lag B'Omer and post-Lag B'Omer. Most hold that Rebi Akiva's students died only during the first 32 days of this period, while others conclude that they continued to die until just before Shavuos. However, everyone agrees that Lag B'Omer is a unique day and occurs, as the name makes clear, on the 33rd day of the Omer-Count.

This means that there are 32 days in advance of Lag B'Omer and 17 days after it. As it turns out, the gematria of the word "leiv," or "heart," is 32, and the gematria of the word "tov," which means "good," is 17. It's as if to say that the first 32 days of the Omer-Count is to give us a "heart," and the last 17 days is to make sure it becomes a good one, spiritually-speaking.

Nice, but is it important? According to the following, very:

He [Rabban Yochanan] said to them [his students], "Go out and see what is a good way to which a person should cleave."

Rebi Eliezer said, "[To have] a good eye."

Rebi Yehoshua said, "[To be] a good friend."

Rebi Yossi said, "[To be] a good neighbor."

Rebi Shimon said, "[To be] one who considers consequences."

Rebi Elazar said, "[To have] a good heart."

He said to them, "I prefer the words of Elazar ben Arach over your words, for included in his words are your words." (Pirkei Avos 2:13)

Two questions: What is a spiritually good heart and how does a person achieve one?

As obvious a question as this may seem, it is not. First of all we see from Parashas Noach, as Rashi points out, that righteousness is relative. Secondly we see from the Kabbalistic work Sha'ar HaGilgulim on the topic of reincarnation that a person's soul can hold him back from being righteous, at least in appearance to those who around him.

It would help to understand what it means to be righteous. If we were to poll billions of people and ask them for a definition of a righteous person most answers would overlap one another. If we gathered together the most prominent responses they would probably come down to one underlying principle, to which, apparently, Lag B'Omer holds the key.

In the course of thousands of years of history mankind has tried different methods to achieve unity, with little or no success. Whatever unity may have been achieved was usually short-lived and eventually usually disintegrated into war that brought even less peace than what originally existed.

A good case-in-point is the U.S. and Russia today. After working together during the second world war to stop the Nazis, ysv"z, they quickly fell into a state of "cold war." This lasted for decades, often with extreme tension and even a nuclear crisis, until the 1980s when during the Reagan-Gorbachev Era the two countries warmed up to each other.

Today it's the U.S. versus Russia once again, and the Mishnah explains why:

Any love which is dependent on something, when the "something" ceases the love ceases. Any love which is not dependent on anything will never cease. (Pirkei Avos 5:19)

The U.S. and Russia are two very different nations with very different philosophies about life. However, in the 1980s imminent financial collapse forced Russia to look outside for assistance which the American's readily provided on the condition that the Russians make certain concessions in the name of "world peace."

Like Eisav before them, who sold his birthright to Ya'akov in desperation for lentils to survive, the U.S.S.R. agreed to the concessions to avoid disaster. As a result the U.S.S.R. was dismantled somewhat and Jews were finally allowed to emigrate. The Russians got their bailout and back on their fiscal feet once again.

Russians today no longer needs the world's help, or at least not as much as they and would like to believe. Consequently they are threatening world peace once again, just as Eisav, after getting back

on his feet went back to his old ways.

Another case-in-point is society itself. There is a reason why police forces have to keep the peace even in civilized countries, and why when there is a breakdown of law and order that many citizens break the law. Apparently the "common good" is not as common as people would like it to be, which is why even the leaders themselves often get caught bending the rules in their own direction.

There was one time in history, to my knowledge, when true achdus was achieved. It was thousands of years ago when the Jewish people stood at the base of Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah, as Rashi points out:

They traveled from Refidim and came to the Sinai Desert, and they camped in the desert; they (read: he) camped opposite the mountain. (Shemos 19:2)

He camped opposite the mountain: k'ish echad, b'leiv echad—like a single person with a single heart. (Rashi)

Remember the joke, "two Jews, three opinions"? How did the situation become at Mt. Sinai, 3,000,000 Jews and only one opinion? The answer is short but incredibly deep: G-O-D. The experience of God transformed everyone at Mt. Sinai, even the Erev Rav, at least for the moment, resulting in unprecedented human unity.

Most people have probably experienced this phenomenon on a smaller scale, like when someone great and very respected enters a room. I have been there when a great Torah scholar, usually one who is a leader of the generation and rather elderly, has entered the room. All of a sudden hundreds of people go silent in awe of such a presence.

It's different than when a very wealthy person or a famous movie star enters a room. True, there is also a sense of awe when they do, but it is different, evident by the reaction of the people. After all, how many when seeing their favorite star or billionaire become inspired to become more righteous, or wiser? Being around fame inspires a person to become famous, and around wealth to become wealthy.

In the presence of a venerable Torah scholar, all of us there were inspired to become morally greater and wiser individuals. We were lifted out of our own personal and more selfish realities and united in a common, Godly cause. For the moment we all became different as we became the same, united in a singular purpose that allowed us to become k'ish echad b'leiv echad. We achieved, albeit temporarily, "good hearts."

The Maharal, in Nesivos Olam, explains it similarly. In his sefer, he deals with what a person must do if he wants to not only learn Torah, but "keep" what he learns as well. There he explains in detail how the body and the mind are at odds with each other, and the impact of choosing one over the other.

What this means is that the body loves physical comfort and is willing to sacrifice spiritual greatness

to achieve it. The mind, on the other, the realm to which Torah study belongs, is perfectly prepared to sacrifice such physical comfort to pursue a broader and deeper understanding of Torah and closeness to God.

The Maharal explains that the extent to which person is willing to sacrifice the physical comforts of life is the extent to which Torah will enter and remain with him. Clearly when it comes to the learning and integrating of Torah, as the expression goes, "you can't dance at two weddings" simultaneously. One world will always come at the cost of the other.

It is not a coincidence that someone who feeds the body and starves the soul tends to have a difficult time being selfless. Or that someone who starves the body and feeds the soul has a difficult time being selfish, the result of which, of course, is a "good heart."

Hence, the Talmud tells us:

Rav Yosef said, "Explain to me the verse, 'From Midbar [to] Matanah, and from Matanah [to] Nachli'el, and from Nachli'el [to] Bamos.' " (Bamidbar 21:19). Rav said: "When a person makes himself ownerless to all, like a midbar—desert, Torah is given to him as a matanah—a gift. When he receives the gift of Torah, it is like a nachalah—inheritance—to him. Once it is like an inheritance to him, he rises to bamos—a high position." (Nedarim 55a)

Thus the starting point of reaching the level of a "good heart" is becoming like a midbar, like desert, like someone who cares more about others than himself. He can be a talmid chacham, a great Torah scholar, as were the 24,000 students of Rebi Akiva who died during the first 32 days of the Omer. But he also has to be like a midbar, which apparently the Rebi Akiva's students had not been, evident by how they had not accorded the proper respect to one another, dying as a result.

Next week, b'ezras Hashem, we'll see the role Lag B'Omer plays in this process of developing a truly good heart.

Text

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