

# THE GOOD HEART

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, each took his pan, put fire in them, and placed incense upon it, and they brought before God foreign fire, which He had not commanded them. (Vayikra 10:1)

A LEIV TOV. A good heart. That's what we are after each year at this time. There are 32 days of the Omer until Lag B'Omer, the gematria of "leiv." There are 17 days of Omer after Lag B'Omer, the gematria of "tov." We have the first 32 days of the Omer to develop a "heart." We have the last 17 days of the Omer to turn it into a good one.

It can be assumed that it was the Seder that was supposed to give us our hearts. This is evident by the fact that we read Shir HaShirim on Pesach, the love song of all love songs. The Seder reminds us of just how much God loves us, and our desire to maximize the spiritual experience reveals just how much we love Him.

It's not an overnight thing, this heart business. It takes time to build and develop. So, we have 32 days of the Omer and the Middos HaYom to help us to do that. But, though 32 days may be enough time to build a heart, it does not guarantee that it will be a good one, as we learn from Nadav and Avinu in this week's parsha.

It was Nadav and Avinu's love of God that drove them to bring what was, in the end, an "unauthorized" fire. They hadn't been troublemakers and they certainly hadn't been looking to die. They had wanted to serve God, and acted zealously to do so.

Zealously, but incorrectly. Microcosmically, they had seemed to act admirably. Macrocosmically, they acted incorrectly, and paid the price. The WHOLE nation paid the price, evident by the shock and mourning that resulted from Nadav and Avihu's sudden deaths. Having a heart is not enough. It has to be a good one as well.

If it is the Seder that gives us a leiv, what is it that makes it a "good" one?

Lag B'Omer answers that question. The 33rd day of the Omer is the threshold over which we pass from the the first 32 days of the Omer to the last 17. And, it is not just ANY day of the Omer, but one that is celebrated by Jews around the world. It is the WHY that is interesting.

Tradition says that the great Tanna and Kabbalist Rebi Shimon bar Yochai died on the 33rd day of the Omer. He did not leave this world however without first revealing to his students the basis of what we call the "Zohar." Though it would take over a thousand years to officially publish, the work

was already famous by the time Rebi Shimon died.

The Zohar, of course, is the basis of Kabbalah. It's origin goes back to the giving of the Torah, but it crossed over from the realm of the completely hidden to that of the the "revealed" the day the Rashb"i chose to reveal it. It was a history changer.

While, revealed in terms of content, it was not that revealed in terms of understanding. Kabbalah is VERY difficult to learn, pretty much impossible without a teacher. Most other areas of Torah learning can be figured out with time, but a person can spend an entire lifetime trying to understand Kabbalah and succeed just barely, or not at all. Oftentimes it seems like a different Torah altogether, though it is the basis of all that Torah teaches.

Most people will probably go their entire lives without learning either Zohar or Kabbalah. Even in the world of yeshivos, Kabbalah is not learned in any formal manner, or even at all. It is viewed by many as a very specialized area of Torah that is not crucial to know to be a "good Jew." It is proverbially the "icing on the cake."

The Kabbalists disagree. The Vilna Gaon, for one, compared Torah without Kabbalah to a body without a soul. A body cannot live without a soul, so how can a person who does not learn Kabbalah live a true Torah life? The Zohar even goes so far as to say that the Final Redemption will only come mercifully in the merit of the Zohar, not Chumash, Mishnah, or Talmud.

But then again, what do you expect a Kabbalist to say? Then again, Rebi Shimon bar Yochai was a Talmudist as well as a Kabbalist. If anyone should know the place of Kabbalah within the world of Torah, he would know best, not people who comment on it without knowing Kabbalah on the level that the Rashb"i or the Arizal did.

An initial problem for many is the language. The Zohar was written in Aramaic, and one that is not that similar to the Aramaic used in the Talmud. Therefore, even being well-versed in Talmud does not guarantee a person easy access to the Zohar. Today, however, many Hebrew translations have been written that also explain the Zohar's cryptic statements.

Still, the language is a problem. Not the words themselves, but the ideas being communicated. Much of the Talmud can be intuited based upon context and overlapping ideas. This is not the case with the Zohar. A person is either aware of its concepts or not. If they are not, they will not have the foggiest idea about what they are seeing.

This is less so when the Zohar speaks on the parsha itself. Those sections insert some technical material here-and-there, but many times it is a comment that can be understood from the reading itself. But the parts that explain how God made Creation from level-to-level are like nothing a person who has already learned Chumash, Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash have ever seen. It's a whole different mindset.

Even for someone who learns Kabbalah it can be slow-going. It's like mountain climbing versus

climbing stairs. The incline of a staircase is minimal, so if a person wants to skip stairs he can. If worse comes to worst, they will misstep and fall down, perhaps bruising their leg in the process. But, they will not fall down to the bottom of the staircase.

Mountain climbing is a different story, at least when it is up the side of a vertical drop. There is no skipping steps there. On the contrary, each peg has to be firmly planted in the side of the mountain before the climber can begin to work on the next peg higher up the mountain wall. It is tough work, and progress comes VERY slowly. But the end result, and even the journey itself makes it all worthwhile. Unquestionably, such an experience, even though not for everyone, is rewarding beyond belief. It is high risk, but those who take it argue that it is well worth it. Sometimes you have to come close to death to really appreciate life. Besides, the beautiful solitude afforded by being away from society and doing something very challenging is euphoric in its own right.

Still, at the end of the day, a person does not have much more than the experience itself. Not to downplay the accomplishment in any way, or to belittle the pleasure such an experience provides as extreme mountain climbing. But while a tough experience does make a person wiser about life, it is only in a limited way.

Climbing the "mountain" of Kabbalah may not offer the same kind of physical challenge, but the end result is beyond awesome. It may not provide the thrill of hanging thousands of feet above the ground by ropes and cables, but it provides an even greater thrill: to be able to better understand the "mind" of God.

Everyone loves a good mystery, but there is no greater mystery to unravel than God Himself. Chumash, Mishnah, and Talmud help us with this, but not to the extent that Kabbalah does. Not even close. And, yet Kabbalah is so closed off to so many people! How can THAT be fair?

That will be the topic of NEXT week's Perceptions, b"H.