

YOUR CUSTOMER HAS A FAMOUS FATHER

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Behar

Your Customer Has A 'Famous Father'

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The pasuk [verse] in Parshas Behar says, "When you make a sale to your fellow or make a purchase from the hand of your fellow, do not aggrieve one another." [Bamidbar 25:14]. When we sell an object to our brother, there is a Biblical prohibition against cheating him. Three pasukim later, the pasuk says: "Each of you shall not aggrieve his fellow, and you shall fear your G-d, for I am Hashem your G-d." [25:17].

The Sforno offers an insight into the connection between the warning against cheating and the statement "For I am the L-rd your G-d." Obviously, such a statement could be attached to any prohibition in the Torah: Do not eat pig for I am the L-rd your G-d. Do not wear shatnez [linen and wool mixtures] for I am the L-rd your G-d. Why is this statement specifically mentioned in connection with the prohibition of cheating?

The Sforno explains: It is as if to say: "I am the G-d of the purchaser and I am the G-d of the seller and I am particular about either party being cheated." In other words, if someone comes to purchase an item from a store and the storekeeper is debating whether to cheat him or not, G-d is telling the storekeeper: "Remember, this customer is my son."

If someone comes into a Jew's store and the storekeeper notices that it is a simple person who is not keen in the ways of business, he may be tempted to take advantage of the customer. If however, if the customer happens to be the son or grandson of a great Rosh Yeshiva, the storekeeper might hesitate before trying to pull a fast one. "I'm not going to cheat the son of Rabbi Ploni. That would just not be right!"

That is exactly what the Almighty is telling us here. Do not cheat your fellow Jew, because I am the L-rd your G-d. "It is My son who is buying that suit from you. Do not cheat him!"

A Consoling Interpretation To A Scary Pasuk

There is a very scary pasuk in Parshas Bechukosai. In the midst of the terrible tochacha [curses], the pasuk says: "And you will eat the flesh of your sons; and the flesh of your daughters will you eat." [Vayikra 26:29]

The Medrash in Eicha Rabbah (Chapter 14) gives a different interpretation of this pasuk than the literal one. The pasuk in Eicha states: "The hands of merciful women boiled their children; they became their food (hayu levoros lamo) in the ruination of the daughter of my people." [Eicha 4:10] This is really a restatement of the same idea that we find in the tochacha, quoted above.

The Medrash interprets homiletically: The Almighty said, "I was prepared to destroy the world and My own children did not let me do it. Because of their activities, I could not do what I wanted to (so to speak). In what sense is this true? A woman had a single loaf of bread that would last for her and her husband and children one day only. But when this couple saw that their next door neighbor's child died out of starvation, they took their own bread - literally out of the mouths of their own children -- and took it next door to their neighbors, thereby providing them with a meal of consoling (seudas hav-ra-ah), to console them for the loss of their child. [According to the laws of mourning, the first meal partaken of by a family returning from the funeral of a loved one should not be their own food but should be provided by their friends and neighbors.] The Medrash compares the root of the expression in Eicha - hayu levoros lamo [they became their food] to the root of Seudas hav-ra-ah [the meal of consoling].

When the couple that barely had enough bread for their own family saw what happened to their next door neighbor, took their meager rations and provided their neighbors with the Seudas hav-ra-ah, to help them get over their terrible loss. The pasuk credits such a sacrifice with that of boiling their children. When G-d saw such sacrifice, He concluded: Such a (wonderful) nation I cannot totally wipe out.

Juxtaposition of Eruchin With Tochacha

Immediately following the tochacha is the section about Valuations (Eruchin): "Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: If a man articulates a vow to Hashem regarding a valuation of living beings..." [Bamidbar 27:2] The chapter then enumerates the "worth" of each person based on age-gender considerations as it impacts the amount of their assessed valuation when someone pledges to donate a person's worth to the Temple.

The late Rabbi Moshe Sherer once gave the following insight on the proximity of this chapter to the tochacha: The Torah is alluding to the fact the time when it is possible to truly determine a person's "value" is after the person goes through a crisis such as the tochacha.

When we speak about the merciful women, who, under the worst of conditions, took bread away from their children and gave it to their less fortunate neighbors, we truly begin to appreciate the worth of such people. It is only after hearing of some of the heroic acts during the Holocaust and

similar incidents throughout Jewish history that we can determine and appreciate the true value of such people.

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