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### TRANSFORMING THE WORLD

**I**S THE GOAL TO ANNIHILATE EVIL OR TO TRANSFORM IT TO GOOD? This question concerns us as individuals, sometimes struggling with difficult aspects of our own personalities; and also as members of society as a whole. What is our dream? A world where all the nasty elements have become extinct or one where they have been changed into something good and wholesome?

The beginning of the Sedra<sup>1</sup> presents a beautiful image of peace and goodness. It tells us that if we follow G-d's laws there will be material abundance and peace. It then tells us something about dangerous animals: that G-d will make them cease from the land.

The Sages discuss this passage<sup>2</sup>. One view is that this means the dangerous animals will disappear. The vipers and scorpions, lions and tigers will become extinct. As one reads this, many people might feel an immediate twinge of regret. In some sense we are all conservationists. Surely, if G-d created them there must be something positive about them?

Well, there is also another view, that of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, whose Yahrzeit is remembered this Sunday, on Lag B'Omer. He says these and other dangerous animals will continue to exist, but will no longer cause harm. This is similar to Isaiah's prophecy about the time of the Messiah. Isaiah (11:6-8) tells us that wolves and other fierce animals will cease to be carnivores, and a child will be able to play with vipers and scorpions.

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Rabbi Shimon's concept of transformation of the negative into positive, rather than its extinction and annihilation, while always relevant, in fact relates particularly closely to this time of year. Lag B'Omer celebrates Rabbi Shimon and the Zohar which he wrote, the central work of the inner dimension of Torah teaching. The thrust of this dimension of Torah, especially as it is explained by the Chassidic masters, is to transform negative into positive in all aspects of life.

This theme is also relevant to the forthcoming Shavuot festival (June 8-9). Pesach and Shavuot are linked. From the second night of Pesach we start counting the seven weeks of the Omer which finally leads us to Shavuot, the fiftieth day. This time of counting represents a time of inner change. On Pesach we came out of Egypt, yet in a sense we still carried the ugliness of Egyptian slavery within us. During the seven weeks of the Omer we transform our inner selves, preparing for the Giving of the Torah on Shavuot.

This relates also to the theme of leaven and leavened bread. For Pesach we have to get rid of this completely. It represents a person's puffed up ego. We do our best to get rid of every scrap of leaven. It represents the egotistical negative forces within us.

But the leaven does not remain forbidden. After Pesach it is permitted, and on Shavuot an unusual thing takes place: two leavened loaves of bread are offered in the Temple. Due to the transformation during the seven weeks between the two festivals, leavened bread now signifies not negativity but instead something holy.

The Rebbe explains this means that the ego itself has been transformed. Instead of having a primarily selfish focus, it has now become a force for goodness. It is no longer raw ego, but an inner strength, helping the person serve G-d in a true and wholesome way<sup>3</sup>.

The concept of transformation of bad into good helps us appreciate Lag B'Omer, Shavuot, and ultimately the concept of the time of the Messiah, when the beautiful prophecy in the Sedra will finally be fulfilled and every kind of negativity in the world will be transformed.

1. Leviticus 26:3-27:34. 2. Sifra on the Sedra, 2:1. 3. See *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 7 pp. 195-7.

Torah teachings are holy - please treat this page with care

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*SEDRA BECHUKOTAI*

**GATHERING THE SPARKS**

"Oh look, Mum," Sammy showed his mother a postcard he had just received. "This is from Uncle Bernard, and it's from Shanghai."

Uncle Bernard was Sammy's favourite uncle. His job as a journalist often took him on trips all around the world. He often sent Sammy postcards of the exotic places he visited.

"Wow!" Sammy was reading the postcard.

"He says he even found a synagogue and got invited to someone's house for Shabbat. I didn't even know there were Jews in China."

Sammy began picturing to himself Chinese Jews wearing long flowing Chinese robes.

"Well, there used to be a community of real Chinese Jews," said his mother, "but today I think many of them are likely to be American businessmen. Still, who knows?"

Sammy changed his mental picture of Shabbat in Shanghai. The host now looked a bit like the father of the American Jewish family which had recently moved in to Sammy's street.

"It's really interesting," said his mother. "There are Jews all over the world, in some of the strangest places.

"In fact, that's something that's talked about in the this week's Sedra.

"First the Torah describes all the good things that will take place when the Jews follow the Torah, and then it tells us that if we do *not* keep the laws of the Torah, we will go into exile."

"So that means that we must have not followed the Torah properly, since we're in exile now," Sammy said sadly.

"Yes, but even though you can say that this is a punishment, there's also a good side. Chassidic teachings explain that all over the world there are scattered sparks of holiness. Since we're spread out in all of these different places, we're able to elevate these sparks. The quicker that we do that, the quicker the Messiah will come."

"So how do we elevate these sparks?" Sammy asked.

"By studying the Torah and keeping the Mitzvot, of course. And Lag B'Omer, which is going to be on Sunday, reminds us of the spiritual teachings which tell us about our task to elevate the spiritual sparks."

Sammy looked pleased. "Well, I bet Uncle Bernie will be happy to know that he's doing so much to elevate the sparks of holiness, because he always makes sure to do lots of Mitzvot wherever he goes."

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