

CHABAD
DED
RESEARCH UNIT

קדש..... *for Friday nights* שבת

Friday 15 May 2009 - 21 Iyar 5769
Sedra Behar-Bechukotai

INNER REALITIES

There are beautiful and harmonious aspects of life and of history. There are also some very uncomfortable, painful or even horrific episodes or periods of time. We tend to start out with rosy ideals or images of how good everything is going to be. Then, at some point, for many of us, we are challenged by situations which seem almost unbearable.

A similar pattern is seen in the double Torah reading¹ this week. The second Sedra begins with a beautiful depiction of happiness and harmony. We are told that through keeping Divine law there will be wholesome blessings, resulting in material plenty, peace, security and a tangible sense of holiness².

Then follows a long section which describes the opposite scenario. The text depicts desolation and famine reaching unspeakable extremes. The Reader in the Synagogue chants this ostensibly gloomy section in a low voice. No-one would feel honoured to be called up to the Torah for this passage, so the Reader himself says the blessing without being 'called up' by name in the usual honorific way³.

How do we face this kind of dark patch, whether in the Torah, or G-d forbid, in life?



Dedicated by Mrs Tzipora Sufrin װװ, to the memory and merit of her father k"z ihætk rgcus lfsrcn װ װ װ j"vrv

One approach is, so to speak, to justify the negativity. The Torah itself says the famine and horror come as a result of disobedience to G-d. So a person can blame the Jewish people for their past errors which led to exile, or oneself or others for the mistakes which led to their own current sad situation.

Yet the Lubavitcher Rebbe presents another alternative⁴. Chassidic teachings disclose another interpretation of the text, a hidden inner reality. The words which on the surface sound negative can be interpreted to mean something positive. Thus “ten women will bake their bread in one oven”⁵ signifying a lack of food, can be explained to mean that the ten aspects of a person’s soul, represented by ‘ten women’, are unified together in personal spiritual fulfilment. The goodness of the blessing cannot be expressed in ordinary ways, and has to be cloaked in a veil which hides it completely.

A similar incident is reported in the Talmud. Two Rabbis wanted to give a wonderful blessing to the son of a colleague, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the author of the Zohar. Yet what they said sounded like the opposite of a blessing, and the son was shocked. His father was able to see through the disguise, and explained to his son that really these words expressed great blessings⁶. The concealment of something positive in that which looks the opposite seems to be a paradoxical aspect of Torah and of all existence.

As real people, facing the ups and down of life, we often encounter the challenge to try to perceive the positive inner reality, or at least, to recognise that there *are* positive inner dimensions, even if we cannot actually see them and even cannot imagine what they might be. The inspiration of the Zohar, the Book of Radiance, expressed in Chassidic teachings, can help us make that step. Let us try to look beyond appearances, without blaming ourselves or others. Beyond the cloak of concealment there is infinite light.

1. Leviticus chs. 25-27. 2. Lev. 26:3-13. 3. Another such passage is in Sedra Ki Tavo (Deut.28:15-68), read a few weeks before Rosh Hashanah. 4. See *Likkutei Sichot* vol.1 p.283-4, citing Rabbi Shneur Zalman’s *Likkutei Torah* Bechukotai 48a. 5. Lev. 26:26. 6. Talmud Moed Katan 9a-b.

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SEDRA BEHAR - BECHUKOTAI

ENGRAVED FOREVER

Mrs. Katz had her arms full as she walked into class four. She was about to teach her girls about this week's Sedra, and she had many hands-on materials that she would use during her lesson.

The first thing Mrs. Katz did when she walked in, was write "BEHAR-BECHOKOTAI" across the white board. She then underlined the word BECHOKOTAI and turned to the girls. "I have written down the name of two Sedra portions, because this week has a double Sedra! Who can tell me what the word I have underlined means?"

Sandy, who had spent time in Israel, raised her hand. "CHAKUK means engraved – does it share the same root as BECHUKOTAI?"

"Excellent! And CHUKIM also means laws. G-d is telling us that we must follow His laws in a manner that it should be engraved within us. Can anyone tell us what that means?"

Twenty girls looked blankly at Mrs. Katz.

With a smile, the teacher took out some engraving tools, a flat sand-stone, as well as a feather quill, ink, and a piece of parchment.

"Can I have two volunteers please?"

Debby and Naomi were chosen. Debby was told to carefully try to engrave her name on the stone. Mrs Katz had brought with a special vice which she fixed to the table, to hold the stone firmly. There was a narrow chisel and a little

hammer. First Debby marked her name on the stone in chalk. Then she tried to bang the chisel so as to chip away where she had written, and engrave her name in the soft sand-stone.

Naomi was instructed to try and write her name with the feather quill and ink on the parchment, which was pinned down to a drawing board.

Giggling, the whole class watched as the two girls clumsily did what they were instructed.

After 5 minutes, something had been achieved. Mrs. Katz held up the stone and the piece of paper. Debby's name could clearly be read on the stone, although some letters were rather jagged. Naomi's name could be read on the parchment, rather unevenly. There were a few extra blotches, but she scraped them off with a knife which Mrs Katz gave her.

"Girls, who can tell me what the difference is between these two?"

Shany raised her hand. "Now that Debby has chiselled her name into the stone, it is really part of it! However, the ink can get scraped off the parchment. We saw that it was easy for Naomi to scrap off the blotches."

"Super!" Mrs. Katz was pleased. "Girls, can you see what Hashem is telling us? We have to follow His laws, His Mitzvot and Torah in such a way that they are engraved within us, in our hearts. So that they are part of us. We must try our hardest to make sure that Torah teachings are so much a part of who we are, that they can never leave us."

Debby smiled happily. She had never engraved anything before. But, under the careful supervision of Mrs Katz, she had not cut herself. And her name was forever in the stone. Like Torah and Mitzvot, engraved in the heart of the Jew.

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