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הגה

שבת..... *for Friday nights*..... קדש

Friday 18 May 2012 - 26 Iyyar 5772
Sedra Behar-Bechukotai

HUMILITY AND STRENGTH

THE FIRST SEDRA¹ THIS WEEK IS CALLED “AT THE MOUNTAIN”. This is especially appropriate a week before the festival of Shavuot (beginning next Saturday night), when we celebrate the giving of the Torah. Everybody knows that the Ten Commandments were given by G-d on Mount Sinai. But why Mount Sinai in particular?

The Midrash² tells us that Mount Sinai was not the highest and most splendid mountain. In fact it is described as being the lowest of all the mountains which might have been chosen. Nonetheless, G-d chose Mount Sinai for the Giving of the Torah in order to teach an important message: to tell us that humility is a prerequisite to the learning of Torah.

Torah comes from G-d. When hearing an instruction from the Torah, we need the ability to listen. This is a rare quality: usually our own ego gets in the way. We hear our own ideas, not what the Torah is saying. Humility is the step beyond our ego, a mood of selflessness, which makes us receptive to the Torah. Thus we say at the end of the daily Amidah prayer “May my soul be to all as the dust - open my heart to your Torah”. By being humble as the dust, our



In Loving Memory of Mrs Jeanne Gewolb-Sostrin
(Yenta bas Devora) ע"ה - 15 Tevet 5772
Dedicated by her Son Dr Roger Gewolb שי'

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hearts become receptive to the Torah.

A Chassidic comment on the idea of the ‘humility’ of Mount Sinai goes a step further. Surely, if the emphasis is on humility, why choose a mountain at all? Wouldn't the message have been more keenly felt if the Torah were given on a flat plain, or even better, in a valley?

This puzzle is explained as follows. While humility is important, there are also many occasions in Jewish life when a determined and forceful approach is demanded. Personal self-sacrifice, steadfastness in the face of ridicule or contempt, even the readiness to undergo real deprivation for the sake of Judaism (as, for example, Jews in Communist Russia did for many years) are responses that are sometimes required.

It is interesting that right at the beginning of the Code of Jewish Law comes the statement “Do not be embarrassed by mockery and ridicule”. If one were to waver in observance of a Jewish law simply because of the derisive criticism of others, there would soon not be much observance of Judaism left at all!

So one needs both qualities: humility and strength. The ability to listen to and absorb Jewish teaching, and also the firmness to be able to stand up against the current. Both qualities are expressed in the image of Mount Sinai at the beginning of the Sedra³.

THE MONTH OF SIVAN

This Shabbat we make a special blessing for the new Hebrew month. The New Moon of Sivan will be on Tuesday (22 May). This month of the Giving of the Torah has a special quality. On the first of Sivan the Jewish people reached Sinai. Rashi tells us that while generally there was bickering and argument among them, on that day they were at peace with each other, in preparation for receiving the Torah⁴. Today too, through unity and love we prepare for the festival of Shavuot which re-enacts the Giving of the Torah, renewing the intimate bond between the Jewish people and the Divine.

1. The first Sedra is Leviticus 25:1-26:2, the second 26:3-27:34. 2. Midrash Tehilim (Buber edition) 68:17. 3. Freely based on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot*, vol.1 pp.276-279. 4. Rashi to Exodus 19:2.

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SEDRA BEHAR-BECHUKOTAI

TAKING INTEREST

Benjy was feeling very pleased with himself. He was saving up to buy himself a new mountain bike, but it had been going very slowly. Only £17.56 at the last count in his moneybox - and he had been saving for the last three months. Now he had just that very day thought of a new way to raise money. Two things had happened that had helped him think of it.

First, his friend Daniel had come to him in breaktime and asked if he could borrow 60p to buy some coke from the coke machine, which he had lent him. That was one thing.

Then, after break they had been learning a new topic in maths - interest. His teacher had explained that interest was when Mr A lent Mr B money, and when Mr A paid back the money, he gave Mr B extra money in addition to the loan. The interest might be 5%, 10%, 15% and so on. Interest of 10% on £100 was £10. The interest might be charged per week, per month or per year. Then there was compound interest...

Then Benjy got his idea. He could use the money he had saved to lend out to boys in his class, but get them to pay interest. The money would soon mount up!

He was now busily preparing charts on the computer which would enable him to keep the accounts. Just think, if he could charge 10% per week, or maybe even 20%...

While Benjy was sitting bent over his computer, licking his lips, his sister Rachel came up and looked curiously over his shoulder. "What are you doing?" she asked.

Happily he explained his whole fantastic idea. "...Don't you think I would make tons of money that way?" he said eagerly.

"Well, you probably would," she admitted, "but Benjy, did you learn the Sedra this week?"

"Of course. We learnt all about the Seventh Year - how the farmers let the land rest in the seventh year. We haven't finished yet, though. Why?"

"Well, another thing it talks about in Sedra Behar is taking interest. It says you're not allowed to take interest on money lent to another Jewish person. I think what you're doing is not allowed, Benjy."

Benjy's face fell. "Wow, I didn't know that. Why not?"

"Some people say the reason is because we Jewish people should behave like one family. I mean, if you lent me money you wouldn't expect me to pay you interest, would you? And anyway, whether or not we really understand the reason, that is the rule of the Torah."

Benjy suddenly saw his new bike dwindle in the distance. For a few moments he was silent. At last he spoke. "I suppose you're right," said "I'd better not do it."

Then he cheered up. "Oh well, I'm sure I'll think of something else - you know what - it probably would have been a pain in the neck to get all the money back from all the people!"

All at once, the new bike seemed much closer and larger. He would find a way to get the money - a method approved by the Torah! And there was no doubt, the mountain bike would soon be his...

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