


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

Friday 16 May 2014 - 16 Iyyar 5774
Sedra Bechukotai-Lag B'Omer

HOW TO ENJOY JUDAISM

THERE IS AN ART IN ENJOYMENT. IF YOU WANT TO ENJOY exotic food, delicate wine, music, mountains, paintings, poetry - there is a way to go about it, so that you *really* enjoy it. So too with Judaism.

“You mean cheesecake on Shavuot and things like that?” someone might ask. “You don't need much skill in enjoying that. Just *eat* it and the enjoyment will come by itself...” “I agree about the cheesecake. But I mean other things in Judaism, you know, the Mitzvot, the Commandments. There’s an art to enjoying them....” “Tell me more...”

Well, we gain an insight into the enjoyment of Judaism from the Sedra¹. This begins with a passage in which is usually translated like this: “If you walk in My statutes and keep My laws, then I will give you rain in the right time and the earth will give its produce...”

This sounds like a condition that G-d is imposing: if you, the Jewish people, keep G-d’s laws, then He will reward you. The essential term is “*if*”. If you do good, everything will go well.

This is the usual, literal way of translating the text. However, the sages of the Talmud add a further perspective. The word we are translating “if” should be translated quite differently: “*Please*”. The sages state that in these words G-d is asking or even entreating the Jewish people to study His Torah and keep His laws: “please, walk in My Statutes... then I will give you rain in the right time..”

When G-d asks us to do something, saying “please” entreatingly, what does it mean? The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that it means G-d is *helping* us to do it. G-d’s entreaty to us makes us feel happy to do it, we gain a sense of pleasure. The pleasure derives not from the details of the action, whatever it might be, but from the sense of contact with G-d which it provides. It might be something we cannot understand at all, it might even entail hardship and difficulty. Nonetheless the fact of G-d’s request gives the person a warm feeling. He or she enjoys fulfilling the command - even if it could make them grumble and complain on other levels.

So, what is the secret? How do we feel this sense of contact? The answer is in the word “Statutes”. The Jewish concept of a Statute is a Divine decree for which no reason is obvious. The laws of business ethics have a clear point; the festival of Pesach is also understandable as celebrating the birth of the Jewish people. But there are many laws which have no simple rational explanation.

But every Mitzvah, every Command, is really an intimate connection with G-d. This is emphasised in the spiritual dimension of Jewish thought, which was taught by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in the Zohar, and is now revealed openly in Chassidic teaching such as in *Tanya*, by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi. Indeed, this Sunday 18 May will be the Yahrzeit of Rabbi Shimon, on Lag B’Omer, a time of celebration of the inner dimension of Judaism.

The Sedra is telling us that if we approach all Jewish law as something which comes directly from G-d, through which we have a true connection with the Divine - then we will really enjoy it. We will ‘walk’, we will advance in keeping the laws, with true pleasure. Then the rain will come at the right time as well, meaning that G-d will provide our needs so that we can keep the laws of Jewish teaching in comfort. We will appreciate that every detail of Judaism connects a person with G-d. So... *enjoy!*

1. Leviticus 26:3-27:34. 2. Avodah Zara 5a. 3. See *Likkutei Sichot* vol.1 pp.281-3.

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SEDRA BECHUKOTAI – LAG B'OMER

AGREE TO DISAGREE

“So, where do you guys want to go today?” Sunday is a special day for the Cohen family: Lag B’Omer, the 33rd day of the Omer. They will go to a Lag B’Omer Parade which their school is organizing, and then on a family outing. But where will they go?

“I want to go to Duxford air museum,” David says.

David had just recently got interested in the warplanes of the Second World War and he wanted very much to see the collection of planes they have in Imperial War Museum Duxford, and he'd been looking forward to this day for ages.

Rachel on the other hand says, “Ugh, I hate Duxford! Can we please go to the London Transport Museum? My friend Sara went there last week and she told me it was amazing and besides Duxford is so far away and even if we go there we won’t have any time to see anything anyway”.

Mrs Cohen groans. Why do they always argue? But, suddenly, she gets a brain wave. “Do you know what is special about today?” she asks.

David and Rachel turn round and look at her. “Of course, it is Lag Be’Omer but what has that got to do with anything?”

“Well,” begins mother “many years ago in the times of the Sages of the Mishna there was a plague which killed many people. In fact, the Talmud tells us that twenty four thousand of the students of Rabbi Akivah died in one period starting

from Pesach. But on Lag beOmer the plague stopped.”

“But tell me,” David asks, “why did could so many people die in one time? What did they do so wrong”?

“I know!” Rachel lifts up her hand and calls out, forgetting for a second that she isn't in class right now. “My teacher told us that it is because they didn't treat each other with respect”.

“But why? Surely if they were students of the great sage Rabbi Akivah they must have had respect for each other?”

“Ah ha!” Mrs Cohen smiles. “This, my dear children, is the point. It is possible for someone to come up with a idea, even a Torah thought, and according to this person it makes one hundred percent sense and in fact it is so right that every one has to agree with me and no one is allowed to have a different opinion. So he wants to help everyone by showing them the right way of thinking. And this was the problem of the students of Rabbi Akivah. They didn't give each other room to have different opinions.”

“But listen,” Rachel says, “If what I am saying is right, it must mean that what the other person is saying is wrong?”

“G-d made the world in such a way that everyone is different and people can think differently and act differently from each other; but at the same time they can be connected, because we are all created by G-d. And this is the way that G-d wanted it to be. Imagine if we would all be the same. What choice would there be? Only G-d made us so that we are different. So you like the London Transport Museum and David likes Duxford and we can still overcome our differences and give each other room to disagree. And even, if we try hard enough, we might learn to enjoy it and see it how the other person sees it....”

“Ok” David says with a smile. “Let's go to the London Transport Museum”.

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