

Bamidbar 5775

BS"D Parashat Bamidbar, Yom Yerushalaiym and Shvuot 5775

Rabbi Nachman Kahana

A MANY SPLENDID THING

We have no way of understanding the ways of HaShem, much less His essence. However, HaShem appeared to the prophets through human characteristics to enable us to relate in some small way to the infinite and unimaginable. The prophets perceived the Infinite at times acting towards us with compassion, or courage, or anger, pride, or disappointment, and above all, love.

The parasha begins with HaShem's command to Moshe to conduct a national census. Rashi adds that this was repeated several times during our sojourn in the desert, which conveyed to the nation the sublime love that HaShem felt for His people, as a man who repeatedly counts his valuable possessions.

In the evening prayer we say:

ברוך אתה יהוה רב האהבה 'ה אלהינו

Blessed are You HaShem who loves His nation Yisrael.

In the morning we say:

ברוך אתה יהוה רב האהבה 'ה אלהינו

Blessed are You HaShem who has chosen His nation Yisrael in love.

Overpowering Love

In parashat Vayeitzay, Ya'akov arrives at the city of Ur Kasdim at the town's meeting place – the city well, just at the time when several shepherds were lingering around. When Ya'akov questioned them about their seeming indolence at the middle of the workday, they replied (Beraishiet 29:8-11):

אָנן אַלס וועלכע אַלע שפּעטער וועלן אַרבעטן
וועלן אַלע אַרבעטן אַלע אַרבעטן אַלע אַרבעטן
אַלע אַרבעטן אַלע אַרבעטן אַלע אַרבעטן:

“We cannot (water the sheep) until all the flocks are gathered and (all the shepherds) will roll the stone from the mouth of the well. Then we will water the sheep.”

And the Torah relates that while he was still talking with them, Rachel came with her father's sheep. When Ya'akov saw Rachel, he approached the well, rolled the large stone away and watered the sheep. How could Ya'akov, the yeshiva bocher, roll away a huge stone that required the combined strength of many grown men?

I will return to this.

King Solomon wrote many things in his lifetime including Shir Ha'Shirim (Song of Songs). The illustrious Rabbi Akiva

comments on this magnum opus of King Solomon in the Mishna (Ya'adim 3:5):

כָּל סִפְרֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ קְדוֹשִׁים הֵם, וְשִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים קְדוֹשׁ מֵעֲלֵיהֶם.

All scriptures are holy, but Shir Ha'Shirim is the holy of holies.

Rabbi Akiva's soul was moved by Shlomo Ha'Melech's description of HaShem's love for the Jewish people (8:6-7):

וְהָיָה כְּסֵל עַל לִבְךָ, כְּסֵל עַל זְרֹעֲךָ; כִּי חֲמַד כְּמוֹת מוֹת, חֲמַד כְּמוֹת קֶבֶר.
וְהָיָה כְּאֵשׁ בֹּרֶז, כְּאֵשׁ חֲמַד; מַיִם רַבִּים לֹא יִכְבְּדוּהָ, נָחַל רַבִּים לֹא יִסְוֶהָ.
וְהָיָה כְּאֵשׁ בֹּרֶז, כְּאֵשׁ חֲמַד; מַיִם רַבִּים לֹא יִכְבְּדוּהָ, נָחַל רַבִּים לֹא יִסְוֶהָ.

Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave.

It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away.

It is not surprising, that R. Akiva was the one who was so touched by Shlomo HaMelech's description of love; because R. Akiva knew that true love was indeed "a many splended thing".

The Gemara (Ketubot 63a) relates that the young and beautiful Rachel, who was to become his wife, gave up her family, wealth and youth for love of Akiva, the shepherd. She believed that he could be a Torah giant in the generation of Torah giants,

and struggled alone for 24 years so that her Akiva could learn Torah in Yerushalayim without interruption.

At the end of that period, Akiva the shepherd, who was now the world renowned Rabbi Akiva, returned home to be reunited with his beloved wife. The Gemara relates that he arrived with 24 thousand disciples. All the town's people came out to honor the great Rabbi. Rachel approached her husband and bent down to kiss his feet. When the ushers pushed her back, R. Akiva brought the crowd to silence. And standing before the throng of thousands of his students and onlookers, he pointed to his beloved Rachel and declared: "My Torah and your Torah is all her Torah".

What Shlomo Ha'Melech was saying, which was so well understood by R. Akiva, was that the love HaShem feels toward Am Yisrael moves the Creator to perform mighty acts not within the framework of the natural world He created; just as the love of a man for a woman can move him to perform remarkable deeds.

Ha'Shem, in his love for Am Yisrael, changed the natural order that He Himself created: The ten plagues, splitting of the Red Sea, the Manna and quail to support millions of people for forty years, the destruction of the Canaanite kingdoms and the uncountable miracles up to this very day.

As stated above the Torah relates that when Ya'akov saw Rachel, the sudden surge of overpowering love that Ya'akov felt empowered him with the strength to roll the rock, as easily as one would pull up a cork from a bottle (Rashi).

Signs of True Love

What are the telltale signs of true love? They are: the desire to be close to the person one loves; the need to communicate,

to be understood and to understand each other; the desire to give more and more without expecting anything in return; and to see only the good and forgive that which is less than good.

After listening to many religious leaders and their students from the galut, I can only conclude that although they learn Torah and keep mitzvot, they do not love being Jewish. Many have an acquaintance with Judaism, some even like Judaism, but most do not love being Jewish.

If they loved being Jewish, then in no way could they remain in the galut. To love being Jewish is to strive to be as close to HaShem as humanly possible. And to be close to HaShem means to live in the land of which the Torah states (Devarim 11:12):

ארצנו ארצנו לא ארצנו-ה' ארצנו ארצנו לא ארצנו-ה' ארצנו ארצנו
ארצנו ארצנו ארצנו

A land the LORD your God longs for; the eyes of the LORD your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end.

To love being Jewish means returning to the Holy Land without calculating its personal or professional expedience, just as a young couple very much in love throws expediency to the wind in order to fulfill their desires.

To love being Jewish means to know and to communicate with the God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov in the holy language of HaShem. I would not be wrong in stating that the overwhelming majority of religious leaders in the galut cannot hold a Hebrew conversation on the level of a four year old Israeli child.

To love being Jewish is to remain home and prepare for the

beautiful meaningful holiday of Pesach, and not to take flight to a hotel or resort in order to escape the ghosts of chametz.

To love being Jewish is to look forward, every week, to Shabbat and regard the kitchen preparations as a personal simcha for the great merit of being part of God's chosen nation.

To love being Jewish is to be part of a daily minyan that imparts to the congregation a spiritual experience, not to seek out the fastest minyan in town in order to begin work early.

To love being Jewish is to behave in reverence and silence when present in a bet kneset, not to sit and talk; stopping only to partake in the "kiddush club".

To love being Jewish is to be part of the defense of Eretz Yisrael as soldiers of Tzahal.

To love being Jewish is to notice the faults and shortcomings of the Israeli leadership and to join with Israelis in our efforts to redress the mistakes they commit.

To love being Jewish is to learn Torah in the special environment of the land where the Torah was intended by HaShem to be kept.

If your rabbi or rosh yeshiva in the galut does not encourage your aliya to Eretz Yisrael, it has nothing to do with the land or its people – it simply means that your mentor is acquainted with, or may even like being Jewish, but he does not love being Jewish and everything that Judaism demands.

Love is indeed a "many splendid thing". It is a call from the depths of one's soul to announce that it has been touched, and resonates to the mind and emotions. If one does not feel love for Judaism in its wholeness, then that person's soul has not

been touched.

Ya'akov's soul was touched when he met Rachel, as was Shlomo Ha'Melech when he felt the love of HaShem for Am Yisrael, and the soul of Rabbi Akiva towards the woman who made him the scholar that he was.

We who have returned to the Land of Israel in love, are continuing to forge ahead in the authentic Jewish history that was so violently and cruelly disrupted 2000 years ago.

No obstacle will impede our determination to restore the former glory of Am Yisrael as God's chosen people – neither gentile enemies from without, nor Jewish traitors from within.

As Shlomo Ha'Melech wrote: It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away.

Love for complete (not piecemeal) Judaism is indeed a many splendid thing!

Shabbat Shalom

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