Behar Bechukotai 5780

BS”D Parashat Behar Bechukotai 5780

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Old is Beautiful

The underlying theme in parashat Behar, according to the Gemara (Kiddushin 20a), is the punishment of the sinner whose life goes from bad to worse but refuses to realize that the cause of his suffering is his continued negative behavior.

Who is there to point out to the sinner the secret of his despair?

Vayikra 19,32:

מפני שיבה תקום והדרת פני זקן ויראת מאלהיך אני ה’

> ***Arise in the presence of the aged and admire the elderly and revere your G-d. I am the L-rd.***

This term appears often in our sources:

יין ישן שדעת זקנים נוחה הימנו

> ***Old wine that provides pleasure for the elderly***

Why is the pleasure of old wine associated with the elderly, when there are many young people who enjoy a good glass of old wine?

I suggest:

The elderly are often sidelined to a spectator status after experiencing decades of participation in active life and society. Often depression sets in, with the feeling that their importance has diminished to the extent that they are more a burden to society and family than an asset; their future is behind them. Many are resolved to the feeling that this is the fate of all things old in a world geared to the young, fresh, and new.

The rabbis, in their great wisdom, were revealing an important lesson that is inherent in a glass of old wine. An elderly person sips a glass of old kiddush wine, and it is good and sweet. Suddenly, he realizes that "old" is not necessarily worthless. On the contrary, just as old wine has greater value than freshly produced wine, so too can the elderly perform functions in society which the young are unable to do.

Our Jewish great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers have always been held in high esteem and love for their chachmat chayim (life's wisdom), but much more so in our time. For they perform, effortlessly, what is probably the highest and most eminent function possible. They are the living proof, indeed the only tangible, irrefutable, undeniable proof, for any objective mind, that God exists and that He is a religious Zionist.

The Midrash Tanchuma (parashat Noach) and other sources cite three righteous individuals who saw their former lives destroyed and then rebuilt through HaShem's mercy.

Noach lived in a highly developed society. He saw the world utterly destroyed, and then merited to live after the deluge to experience humanity flourishing once again. Daniel saw the

first Temple, its destruction and galut of seventy years, and merited to see the rebuilding of the second Temple. After living the good life, Eyov (Job) experienced the death of all his family, abject poverty and sickness, and then saw his life rebound in all its glory.

Today's elderly are living proof and irrefutable testimony that HaShem is the God of Israel and that we are His chosen nation.

Octogenarians of sound mind can tell you what Jewish life was prior to the Second World War. One did not have to be an observant Jew to have been aware of the strength of Torah in Eastern Europe and in most Jewish communities in Moslem lands. The Jewish genius was recognized even by those who hated us for it, and there was a feeling of pride in belonging to the Children of Israel, whose roots went back 3500 years.

Then the heavens fell from their pillars and the Jewish people were engulfed in devastation. When the air cleared in 1945, and we counted our losses, the enormity of the Shoah became unescapably clear. One of every three Jews who were alive on September 1, 1939 was murdered; so that the Jewish people were less than 12 million at the war's end.

Pride turned to shame. The Torah was trampled upon with the destruction of the Torah centers of Europe. The sackcloth replaced the tallit, when it became known that over twelve thousand Jews were murdered daily in the Auschwitz camp alone, not to mention the hundreds of additional slave and death camps the Germans activated all over Europe. And the remnant asked, "Who will and who can resurrect the Jewish spirit to reinforce our belief that we are HaShem's chosen people?"

But the elderly of today join with Noach, Daniel and Eyov in forming a very elite group of Jews who saw the Jewish world brought to its knees, but miraculously spread its wings to gain ever higher levels of Torah and faith in HaShem.

One need not do more than be aware of their presence amongst us, and then realize that the elderly venerable man or woman before you, is living testimony to the living God of Israel.

The miraculous rejuvenation of our nation occurred after the defeat of the German-Amalek with the rebirth of Medinat Yisrael. The greatest proof that the Creator exists, and that the world is determined by His will is the improbable survival and flourishing of the Jewish people, as stated by the prophets.

The younger generation that has not personally witnessed the extreme changes of the last 70-80 years in Jewish history can indulge itself in the false "luxury" of bashing Medinat Yisrael; from the black-garbed Chareidi communities of the galut, some of whom make pilgrimages to the Hitlers of Iran, down to the majority of US Jews under 35 years of age, who reportedly would not feel any great loss if there would not be a Medinat Yisrael!

I suggest that they sit down with the "old folks" and learn from them the wisdom gleaned from personal experience; what it felt like to be a Jew without Medinat Yisrael and what the Medina has contributed to our lives.

Amalek is not a myth. Indeed, he is alive. He is present in Islam and Christianity. He is forever planning, contriving and designing to destroy the Jewish people wherever the Jew might be found: at Ground Zero; in Dearborn, Michigan; in the White House or the U. N., Amalek constitutes an ever-present danger to the Jewish people, regardless of whether the individual Jew is a Torah-observant person or if he is a sworn atheist.

The Medina was restored to Am Yisrael to be, among other things, the Noah's ark for our people to survive, and then to thrive, as we had not done for over the last 2000 years of galut.

When my mother was ninety, she told me that, inside, she felt

the same as when she was 18! So young men and young women, sit down and glean the wisdom of your “old” 18-year-olds. You will go away a better Jew, and a better person.

Learn the secrets of a meaningful life from those who have gone the distance, those elderly who are a “deposit box” of wisdom and experience.

Parashat Be’Chukotai

This parasha is a lesson in crime and punishment. HaShem recalls all, even an inconspicuous blade of grass that grew and dried up in the grasslands of Argentina, and certainly the conduct of an unrepentant sinner.

To remember and not to forget is also a characteristic of the Jewish people. We forever remember our friends and never forget our enemies. It is a command of the Torah to remember the evils of Amalek; but also, to reciprocate to the nations that aided us in our times of strife.

It is a necessary part of Jewish education to learn the history of our people. Who were our ancestors and what did they do to cause the Creator to enter into an eternal covenant with their children whose centerpiece is the holy Torah? What about the wanderings and the return to Eretz Yisrael, where we established the Jewish monarchy, the two Temples and their destruction, followed by our 2000-year exile and return home?

To be aware of our history is to become connected with all our rabbis and kings, saints and soldiers. To forget who we are and from where we came is the “cutting of the ribbon” to the exit door from Judaism.

One small example:

This week I had reason to recall that ten years ago in 2010, our national all-star basketball team trounced the national all-star team of Latvia, winning by 35 points. So what?

At the time when I heard the results on the news, it immediately brought to mind another basketball game in that part of the world. It was held in 1941, between the Lithuanians (who together with Latvia and Estonia comprise the Baltic States) and the occupying German army. Just to refresh your memories, the Baltic peoples are among the most incorrigible anti-Semites that slither on this globe. My mother a"h, who was born in Dvinsk, Latvia at the time when two Torah giants resided there; the "Or Sa'mayach" and the Rogechover Gaon, made a count of 200 of her relatives in Dvinsk and Riga who were murdered by the local Latvians before the Nazi invasion. On the tenth of Tevet, the general Kaddish day, I recite kaddish for the 200 members of my mother's family and the hundreds more of my father's family, who were murdered in the region of Galicia, Poland.

Returning to the basketball game of 1941. The prize that was awarded to every member of the winning team was the opportunity to shoot ten Jews! The events surrounding that basketball game were detailed in a 1948 book by Josef Gar, a Lithuanian, describing how the victorious Lithuanian team herded Jewish residents into a tower, where each player took his turn shooting ten Jews.

This was a little "spark" in time. One incident in the innumerable sadistic acts of evil perpetrated against our people: the winning prize in a basketball game was to shoot Jewish people!

We can and must remember the evils done to us and – prepare for the day of heavenly retribution. Is the coronavirus that is attacking Europe, Turkey, Iran and many other of our enemies the beginning of the final chapter in the history of anti-Semitism?

When one considers the evils perpetrated upon us over the generations for which the evildoers will be punished in this world or the next, one immediately thinks of Germany, Spain, Poland, Russia, as well as Arabs, Romans, Greeks, etc. But these sadists are only a small part of the larger picture.

The Gemara (Avoda Zara 71b) states that any Gentile who causes tza'ar (pain, hardship, embarrassment, ridicule or any emotional distress) to a Jew has perpetrated a capital crime and will be punished accordingly; either in the halachic court of this world or the heavenly court, a bit later.

This is the most powerful expression of HaShem's love for the Jewish people!

"Never Forget and Never Forgive. Retribution will be forthcoming"!

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

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