

Reaching the Heavens

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

Sefer Vayikra comes to an end this week as we *lain* the *parshiyos* of *Behar* and *Bechukosai*. Both open with the obligation to go to extremes in *mitzvah* observance. The *mitzvah* of *Shmittah* demands that the land of Eretz Yisroel is to lie fallow for a year, with no work done on it and no commerce conducted with any fruits or vegetables that happen to grow during the year.

Hashem promises that those who follow the laws of *Shmittah* will not go hungry and there will be food for them to sustain themselves.

Similarly, *Parshas Bechukosai* begins, "*Im bechukosai teileichu – If you will walk in the path of My laws and observe the mitzvos of Hashem, then the rains will fall on time, the earth will produce its proper harvest...vishavtem lovetach be'artzechem. Venosati shalom ba'aretz ushechavtem ve'ein machrid – and you will live confidently and in peace.*"

Hashem tells us that if the *Bnei Yisroel* observe the Torah, they will merit peace in their land. They will be spared enemies on their borders and harmony will reign in the country. If they are lacking in their observance of the Torah, their enemies who seek to engulf them will be empowered and there will be conflict between brothers.

The *posuk* in the *Tochacha* (26:15) declares, "*Ve'im es mishpotai tigel nafshechem levilti asos es kol mitzvosai lehafrichem es brisi.*" The *Toras Kohanim* explains that the *posuk* is stating that someone who doesn't learn Torah and perform *mitzvos* will eventually develop into one who despises

talmidei chachomim and religious people. This is the meaning of the *posuk*: Initially, the nonobservant becomes disgusted by Hashem's *mishpotim* and says, "Es mishpotai tibal nafshechem." He then endeavors to prevent others as well from doing *mitzvos* – "levilti asos" – until, eventually, that person becomes a total *kofer* – "lehafrichem es brisi."

We see both extremes in Eretz Yisroel today, where there are more people since the *churban* scrupulously following the *mitzvos* of the Torah.

The *Toras Kohanim*, cited by *Rashi* (26:3), states that the *mitzvah* of *im bechukosai teileichu* refers to the obligation to toil in Torah study, *shetihiyu ameilim baTorah*.

Today, as well, we are *zoche* to multitudes of people who dedicate their lives to learning Torah in numbers unseen since *Klal Yisroel* has gone into *golus*. And indeed, we see the desert bloom and the land populated and built up as it has not been since we were sent out of the land at the time of the destruction of the *Bais Hamikdosh*.

But everything is not perfect and the majority of the Jews who live in Israel are not Torah observant. And although the *frum* community there, through organizations such as Lev L'Achim, Shuvu and others, work to bring Torah and *kedusha* to those who are far removed from their heritage, there is still a long way to go.

Those who despise the *mishpotim* of the Torah are fighting strongly to maintain an anti-religious stronghold on the Jewish state. Their current battle is played

out on the world media stage, as they hypocritically claim to be fighting for democracy, justice and equity.

Last week, their agenda flared up when the chairman of the board of Israel's largest bakery joined a protest outside the home of Rav Gershon Edelstein. He wasn't just innocently exercising his right to free speech. Omer Bar Lev was a minister in the previous failed Israeli government. He was a failure and couldn't get past the primaries in his Labor party. He did the next best thing and got himself a job with the famed Angel Bakery, which has the *Badatz hechsher* and is familiar all across Israel, selling much bread and many pastries in the *frum* areas as well.

Last week's protest in Bnei Brak was directed at the exclusion of *yeshiva* students from the army. Bar Lev posted a selfie of himself standing outside Rav Edelstein's house and wrote, "Beyond and in addition to the importance of military service for everyone, the law of '*lo shivyon banetel*' that the coalition intends to enact is the bribe being paid to the *chareidi* parties by Netanyahu and Levin so that they will vote in favor of the coup d'état."

"*Shivyon banetel*," translated as *equality of the burden*, is a code term used by Leftists as they demand that draft deferments for learning people be done away with.

A grassroots boycott against the bakery immediately sprung up, and on Friday, Angel products in religious neighborhoods sat untouched. Nobody bought their favorite *challahs*, cakes and other delicacies.

What any normal company would have done is apologize and say that Bar Lev doesn't speak for them, and they treasure all their clientele and look forward to things returning to normal. But not this company and not in this war. The hatred for the religious community by people who have been cut off from their grandparents' legacy and raised on a diet of spite and *tarfus* overcomes any thought of common sense and decency, just as the *posuk* foretells.

Yoel Spiegel, a grandson of the bakery's founder, went after the *frum* community, posting on Friday, "There is no limit to the *chutzpah* of part of the ultra-Orthodox public in Israel. They eat for free ... duck army service, have dark opinions and, above all, are hypocrites! Omer Bar Lev is the chairman of the board of the Angel bakery (the same bakery that my grandfather and his brother founded more than a century ago and of which my uncle has been the CEO for many years). But beyond his position as chairman of the board, he is a citizen of the State of Israel. As such, he has the right to protest wherever and whenever he chooses, as long as he does so within the framework of the law."

And so, the hatred of the religious people drives the battle between the Left and the Right over who will control the country. Will it be the elected representatives of the people, or will the self-selecting judges be allowed to continue to dominate what happens in the country?

But there is room for hope. The rejoicing and dancing on *Lag Ba'omer* in Meron and around the world this week were expressions of the *neshomah's* yearning, an appreciation of the great *Tanna*, Rabi Shimon bar Yochai, and the heights he scaled. He revealed the depth and potential of each Jew, assuring us that wherever we are, we can always raise ourselves ever higher. No matter how low

any Jew has sunk, there remains hope for him. These same Leftists, and if not them their children, can do *teshuvah* and live lives of Torah.

The words selected as Rabi Shimon's enduring legacy, emblazoned on the famous entranceway to his *kever* in Meron, quote his teaching, "*Ki lo sishochach mipi zaro,*" representing his assurance that Hashem's children will never forget the Torah, despite all that will befall them.

Look at the pictures of the fire in Meron and other large gathering places, such as the massive lighting in Kiryas Yoel which I attended several times, and you will see that at the center, spiraling up from the ground, is a glowing flame topped by rushes of thick smoke that rise towards the heavens, surrounded by tens of thousands of good people overtaken by song and prayer. This is a portrayal of the *neshamos* that are aflame all around us, as good Jews everywhere devote themselves to Torah and *mitzvos*, seeking to improve their lives with the Torah as their guide.

As the fame of the *Chofetz Chaim* grew, people flocked to him, asking for *brachos*. Many times, he would respond with advice. "Why did you come to me for *brachos*?" he would say. "I am just a simple human being. Real *brachos* can be obtained by following the *pesukim* in *Parshas Bechukosai*, which proclaim that all the blessings of the world will flow to those who observe Hashem's path – '*Im bechukosai teileichu.*' The Torah, whose every word is true, guarantees *brachos* for *shemiras hamitzvos*. If it is blessings you seek, you would be well advised to spend your time advancing your *shemiras hamitzvos* and forgetting about me."

The epitome of human existence is to sit with a *Gemara* detached from the physical world, connecting with Hashem, without anybody watching or paying attention to you.

Yeshivos and *kollelim* seek to function as islands of intense *limud haTorah*, inhabiting a realm more exalted than any other.

The *Erev Shabbos shmuess* at the home of Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel was a special time. The Mirrer *rosh yeshiva* would speak in English, unlike the rest of the week, and the audience included not only Mirrer *talmidim*, but also American and European *bochurim* from other *yeshivos* in Yerushalayim. Rather than offer prepared remarks, the *rosh yeshiva* would actually “*shmooze*,” reflecting on his week as if in conversation, sharing his impressions and insights on that week’s experiences.

One time, he told the assembled *bochurim* that the need arose during that week to seek guidance from Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv. This is what he said: “I came to Rav Elyashiv’s home and they let me into his room. He did not notice that I was there, so he continued learning. I listened to him, and this is what he was saying: ‘*Amar Abaye... Abaye says... Amar Rava. Voss zogst du Rava? Ah, ich her. Ubber vos enfert ihr Abaye. Nu, vos zogt ihr tzurik Rava? Abaye, how would you answer Rava’s argument? Nu, Rava, what would you say back to that? Ah, I hear. Abaye?*”

The *rosh yeshiva* continued describing what he had seen and heard. Rav Elyashiv was removed from his physical existence. He was inside the world of Torah with Abaye and Rava.

We can all go there. We can leave behind the nonsense of this world, the things that face and confront us all the time. All the pressures we are faced with and uncomfortable conversations we are forced to have melt away when we exit that world and enter the real world, the world of Torah, the world of *im bechukosai teileichu, shetihyu ameilim baTorah*.

Every time we open the *Gemara*, we are opening our way to a different world, the world of *brocha*. Every time we work to understand a dispute between Abaye and Rava, Rabi Yehudah and the *Chachomim*, the *Rambam* and the *Raavad*, the *Rashba* and the *Ritva*, we have left the mortal life behind and touched the heavens. There is no bigger or better *brocha* than that.

We are counting down to *Shavuos*. Every day, we raise ourselves one more step and get that much closer to being able to merit receiving the gift that raises our lives and our existence. Each day, as we count the *omer*, we are getting one step closer to eternity. Let us make those days count and appreciate what our goal is, so that we will be blessed with all the *brachos* included in the *parshiyos* of this week. *Amein*.