

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

Bamidbar / Shavuot 5782

Bamidbar - Humility

The reading of our Parsha prior to the Yom Tov of Shavuot is surely no coincidence. In many ways, the topics discussed in Bamidbar serve as an introduction - or better - a preparation for this Festival of the Revelation. Here is one insight which highlights an ethical virtue - a mida tova - that may very well be the central and most vitally crucial attribute a person can ever cultivate - the mida of ANIVUT, humility.

The Talmud tells us in (Eiruvim 54b) that if one makes himself, as it were, into a desert, Torah will be given to him as a gift and that gift will contribute to his greatness. How so? Just like a wilderness which everyone treads upon, so too, a person who doesn't mind - in fact, invites - being bested by a greater wisdom (i.e., is humble), is one who will listen and learn, and grow to be a person of distinction, both ethically and spiritually. In a word, the Torah cannot be acquired by someone who is haughty or arrogant. The reason is rather straightforward. If one is so full of himself, then there is simply no room to hear and be impacted by the d'var HaShem (Gd's word). When ego considerations, personal biases and self-interests dominate one's view of reality, all other matters are consciously or

otherwise shifted aside.

And what might those "other matters" be? Those matters comprise the truths and values we can learn from our sacred heritage. Indeed, if we feel we know it all, we will know nothing and become nothing of real worth! But being humble goes beyond the acquisition of important knowledge and wisdom. If being humble means that it's not about me, then genuine humility will inevitably point us in the direction of others. A truly humble person is always asking: "What best serves the needs of my family, my friends and associates? How must I address their concerns and problems? How can I alleviate their anxieties, calm their fears and add real value to their lives?"

Make no mistake here. This is not about ignoring who you are. Being humble and being outer/other-directed is part of our self-definition. Put differently, you cannot really be you, if you are only about yourself. You can only realize your true self when you embrace others in selfless chesed. And you can only do that if you are humble. What did Hillel say in Pirkei Avot (1:14): "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I ...?"

On Shavuot, HaShem gifted us with His most precious possession. He gave it. Whether we can receive it and be ennobled by it will depend upon our attainment of this great virtue.

Shavuot - The Physical and Spiritual

Shavuot is a quick, one/two-day holiday. If you're not careful, it'll be over before you've had much a chance to appreciate its message. Here's one powerful thought.

After the People received the Torah, as reported in Sh'mot (24:11), the Torah tells us that the leaders of the People beheld the Presence of Gd and ate and drank. Ramban, disagreeing with Rashi and others, asserts that this episode is proof positive that indulging in food and drink is not dissenting with the contemplation of the Divine. In fact, Ramban quotes R. Elazar to the effect that this verse is the source to celebrate, with food and drink, whenever a person completes a section of Torah study - the siyum.

This religious "layering" of the physical and spiritual is a fundamental Jewish belief, one that sets us apart from other religions. Here's what it means. It means that Gd certainly wants us to eat and enjoy ourselves, not as some sophisticated ape, but rather as an individual who unabashedly introduces Gd into the gastronomic experience via blessings, kashrut, divrei Torah. The table becomes an altar and the food, sacred victuals.

It means that making money is fine, even lots of it, but not at the expense of cut-throat practices, coarse behavior and plain bullying. In our way of thinking, HaShem is to be invited into our living

room and the marketplace. He is our welcomed guest at work, in the street and in the privacy of our home. In a word, the mission of the Jew is to take the Torah down from the mountain and transform it into a Torat Chayim, a life thoroughly saturated with Torah precepts and wisdom - everywhere and all the time.

This is why Ramban maintains that in the wake of Revelation at Sinai, the People sat down to a meal. That unusual mix of the physical and spiritual set a precedent and established a religious principle that was to be of the very essence of Judaism. It was to define our religious uniqueness and greatness that would charge us to sanctify the mundane and through that very act achieve an incredible closeness to HaShem.

This then is Shavuot. So, enjoy the blintzes and cheese cake, but make it a day of deep prayer and Torah study as well. What our saintly ancestors did at the foot of Sinai, we can replicate in our homes. 🙌