

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

Sh'lach 5781

Our parsha contains a rather interesting mix of topics. In addition to the central and tragic story of the Sin of the Spies, the Torah discusses the mitzva of challa (15:17-21) followed by a lengthy treatment of the sin of idolatry and its atonement (15:22-31), concluding with the mitzva of tzitzit (15:37-41). Is there some common thread to connect these seemingly disparate subjects?

Let us initially focus upon the commandment which obligates the Jew to separate a portion of dough - challa - and give it to a kohen. This mitzva is unusual in many respects. First, unlike the other mitzvot which are dependent on the Land - MITZVOT HAT'LUYOT BA'ARETZ, challa applies even in the Diaspora, regardless of the source of the grain. Additionally, Rambam states that this Diaspora challa obligation was enacted so that this mitzva would not be forgotten (Bikurim 5:7). But why so this mitzva and not also the tithing of produce.

Some other intriguing aspects of this mitzva: The Midrash states: "In the merit of three things, the world was created. challa, tithes and the first fruits." (B'reishit Rabba 1:4) Clearly, the challa mitzva has some special heightened significance. Moreover, the prophet underscores the special bless-

ing accorded to one who observes this mitzva. "The first portion of all the first fruits of every kind and every offering of any kind is to be for the kohanim. You are to give the kohen the first portion of your grain. As a result, a blessing will rest on your household" (Yechezkiel 34:30). But perhaps the most enigmatic rabbinic comment comes from this Midrash: "One who fulfills the mitzva of separating challa, it is as if he nullifies the worship of idols; while one who does not fulfill the mitzva of separating challa, it is as if he sustains the worship of idols" (Vayikra Rabba 15:6). What possible connection could link challa with avoda zara?

Because most people associate the sin of idolatry with ancient pagan, cultic practices, it becomes difficult to translate the gravity of this transgression into a modern idiom that would make its violation no less severe and forbidding today than it was then. But make it relevant, we must, as the message of the Torah and her prophets are timeless. Among the many updated definitions of contemporary idolatry, S'forno (Bamidbar 15:22) offers this one: "... even though you will [technically] perform all the acts of the commandments, you will not be doing those commandments which Gd spoke to Moshe ..." In other words, the idolatrous act consists in detaching the mitzva performance from the commanding voice of the Almighty. The commandments are performed for cultural and

communal reasons. Their motivation is personal and subjective. The transcendental element, the awe-inspiring experience is absent. The sacred imperative, the pressing divine demand is neither heard nor felt. The mitzva has no Metzaveh (Commander)!

The making of bread represents man's technological genius in transforming inedible grain into life-sustaining food. From the planting of the wheat seed to the final baking of the dough, the production of bread is a complex man-made affair. As such, the farmer-baker may easily succumb to the boast of "My strength and the might of my hand has made me all this wealth" (D'varim 8:17), forgetting - either intentionally or otherwise - that "... it was He who gave you strength to make wealth" (8:18). Given the ubiquity and essentiality of bread, it became this "staff of life" that required a religious catharsis. That is, there was a need to forthrightly remind the maker of bread that no matter his considerable human effort, it is Gd who ultimately provides sustenance to all. Apportioning a small measure of dough for Gd's appointed servant - the kohen, would serve to instill and underscore this fundamental belief. Hence, the mitzva of challa would come to counteract the idolatrous temptation to create distance between man and Gd, thereby weakening the relationship and allowing man to do whatever he pleases regardless of the Divine law.

What indeed is the central purpose of a mitzva if not to forge a close intimate bond between the Jew and Gd! Indeed, the essential meaning of the word itself - mitzva - denotes a braiding and weaving together. When the Jew rebels against the mitzva, he is not so much denying Gd's existence as he is rejecting - unwilling to accept - a relationship with Gd that is all-pervasive, intense and demanding. He'd like a vacation from Gd every now and then, some space without the ever-present pressure to scrutinize his behavior to ensure that it meets with Gd's approval.

Was this not the reason the spies sought to return to Egypt? Once they discovered that the Land would not be a place to even partially escape Gd's Presence - for it is a place where "... the eyes of HaShem, your Gd, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the year's end" (D'varim 11:12) - they tragically chose to return to a place where they would be free from the yoke of the commandments. No wonder then, our parsha records (15:32-36) the violation of Shabbat - that day, more than any other, that was given to us as an "eternal sign" (Sh'mot 31:13) of our covenantal and deep attachment to HaShem! No wonder our parsha concludes with the mitzva of tzitzit which not only symbolizes the entire 613 commandments (Rashi 15:39), but whose t'cheilet-blue color was meant to continually remind us of Heaven (Menachot 43b).

In today's world where, because of the universality of social media, we are more than ever aware of our vulnerabilities, of lurking dangers and menacing threats that breed fear and uncertainty - in this overcast atmosphere of insecurity and distress, we need, as never before, the calm and inner strength, the optimism and hope that only a covenantal relationship with our Maker can provide. Such a relationship, however, can only be "bought" with the "coin" of the mitzva. Burdensome - of course, disciplining - yes, but also elevating and meaningful, redemptive and ecstatic, and the latter is worth the price and more!

If our spiritual and religious motto remains: "I set the Lord before me always", then HaShem's promise of "with Him at my right hand, I shall not falter" (T'hilim 16:8) will rescue us from the gloom of adversity. If our faith in HaShem expresses itself as David did: "Yet I am always with You, You hold my right hand... But as for me, my chief good is to be near to Gd; so, I have made the Lord my refuge ..." (73:23, 28), then we can be assured that Hashem will deliver us all to a place and time where His glory will redeem all our efforts and struggles, and vindicate our unwavering faith and trust in Him.