

Beshalach - A Thought for the Week

Rabbi Jay Kelman - Jay Kelman. Importance of focus in daily life

A Thought for the Week - Beshalach
Rabbi Jay Kelman

The ten plagues were meant to bring home the message of the supremacy of G-d to Pharaoh and the Egyptian people but more importantly to the Jewish people. Despite witnessing the plagues the Jews still did not really trust G-d or Moshe. "Weren't there enough graves in Egypt " they cried upon seeing the approaching Egyptians chasing them. "It would have been better to be slaves in Egypt than to die here in the desert" (14:12). Even after being the beneficiaries of a splitting sea and seeing the Egyptians drown, there was little faith in G-d. A scant three days later "the people complained to Moses: What shall we drink?" believing that they would meet an untimely death. Less than a month later when food was in short supply they suddenly remembered the good old days of Egypt: "There, at least we could sit by pots of meat and eat our fill of bread." (16:3). Clearly the miraculous events were having little effect on the behaviour of the Jewish people.

Recognition and acceptance of the will of G-d can only come about if it is the focus of our daily attention. It is not the rare miracles which induce faith in G-d. It is rather the daily acknowledgement that nature and natural events are due to the will of G-d. By realizing each and every day that we are dependant upon G-d we will come to embrace His will in our daily activities. This apparently was the purpose of the manna bread - to have a daily reminder that all of our blessings, while requiring our own input, are dependant upon the will of G-d. "I will make bread rain down to you from the sky. The people will go out and gather enough for each day. I will test them to see whether or not they will keep my law" (16:4).

The commentaries struggled explaining the "test" of the manna. After all what could be easier than waking up in the morning and seeing that your basic needs have been amply provided for you? While many answers are suggested let us focus on just one. Several commentaries explain that the test was the fact that the Jews had to depend on the manna each and every day. The manna could not be stored for tomorrow - it would become inedible. The manna was meant to teach us that each and every day we must rely on G-d for our sustenance. Though we may be uncertain as what tomorrow will bring we must have faith that G-d will provide for our needs.

Modern man is unfortunately failing the test of the manna. We accumulate all we can today because we lack faith in G-d's benevolence tomorrow. While Judaism teaches that we must plan for the inevitable downturns - after all this was the brilliance of Yosef - we seem to have totally lost faith in G-d's ability and willingness to provide our basic needs and then some. How else to explain the pervasive cheating, tax evasion, cutting of corners that afflict so many of us? How else could an otherwise observant Jew neglect so much of the choshen misphat - the laws of Jewish business dealings? Why is it that we seem to find so much stringency in the practice of ritual law but so much "leniency" in the practice of monetary law?

It is well known that the first question G-d will address to us on the final day of judgement is

nasata venatta b'emunah - were your business dealings conducted "faithfully"? Those whose dealings are not 100% glatt kosher demonstrate a lack of faith in G-d. If one believes that G-d provides for us, that we will have manna each and every day (and sometimes even a double portion) there is no room for anything but the highest standards of ethics and morality. A Jew must have faith that making a living while important is secondarily so. Our first priority must be to our family, our community and our Torah. While we must have faith that by keeping a proper balance in our lives our needs will be provided for, we must not rely on faith in ensuring that the needs of others are met. It is up to us to make sure that they too can enjoy the manna. Shabbat Shalom!