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TOO MUCH IS NEVER ENOUGH

by Dr. Joel Berman

When I was a graduate student at Rutgers, I had a good friend whose name was Baruch (not his real name). Baruch was a brilliant young chemist, and in the 70's, he discovered a catalyst that proved useful for the oil industry. This earned him a lot of money, and if I had his resources at my disposal I would trot directly off to Kollel. Baruch, however, has since then spent the preponderance of his time trying to protect and expand his wealth. The last we spoke, he was pursuing a law degree to that end.

By contrast, I remember how one of my Rebbeim, Rabbi Naftali Reich, emphasized to us in shiur the amount of faith that was required for Jewish farmers to abandon their fields during the Sabbatical (seventh) or Shemittah year. What were they supposed to eat? How were they to support their families?

Rabbi Reich explains that the farmers are supposed to be at ease, because Hashem promises to deliver bumper crops during the sixth year. But we find this puzzling, because it is the eighth year that is in jeopardy, not the seventh. The sixth year's bumper harvest assures food for the seventh year, and the seventh year's harvest would have provided the food for the eighth year. Temporarily abandoning the fields would have placed the eighth year in jeopardy, not the seventh. Why be concerned over the seventh year, and not the eighth?

The answer, according to Rabbi Reich, is that a person who has faith in Hashem is not overly concerned about the future. He is fully aware that he does not control his own fate, and that everything is in Hashem's hands. He puts forward his best efforts, follows Halacha, and leaves the rest to Hashem. A person without such faith finds himself operating under enormous pressure and anxiety, believing that he alone stands between his

responsibilities and starvation. This in turn led to Baruch's unhealthy and all-consuming drive to protect his wealth.

Baruch's attitude is exactly what the Torah was anticipating concerning the Shemittah year. Rabbi Reich continues by explaining how farmers of weaker faith worry irrationally about the seventh year, even though the granaries are still full from the sixth year's harvest. It is of course wise to save and invest, but if the future is perceived as an endless succession of unrelenting attacks on our resources, a person could wind up throwing his life at his business. Rabbi Reich ended shiur by noting: "At times like these, we need to reaffirm in our own minds that everything comes from Hashem and that there are no rainy days for Him. If we relegate the final responsibility for our lives to Hashem, He will enrich our lives with tranquility and prosperity."

HASHEM DOES NOT PLAY DICE WITH THE UNIVERSE

by Shmuel Ross ('18)

The Tochachah, one of the more famous sections of the Torah, is written in this week's Parashah, BeChukotai (VaYikra 26:14-46). However, while many people are familiar with the general themes of this gruesome series of warnings, most are unaware of the exact text of the Pesukim themselves. These people are not to be blamed, as the Tochachah is, in fact, read quickly and in an undertone by the Ba'al Korei, but nevertheless, it would be beneficial to get a better understanding of the warnings that Hashem gives to Bnei Yisrael should they go astray.

One of the major recurring motifs that describes the actions of a sinful Bnei Yisrael throughout the Tochachah is the word "Keri," translated by Rashi (VaYikra 26:21 s.v. VeIm Teilechu Imi Keri) as "BeMikreh," "happenstance." This means that one of the most major sins that Bnei Yisrael can commit is to treat Hashem's presence and impact as merely a coincidence, by chance. At first glance, this does not seem like such a terrible sin; simply neglecting to truly see HaKadosh Baruch Hu's impact on our lives does not seem to be as severe a sin as other Aveirot listed in the Torah, such as killing another person or engaging in incestuous relationships.

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However, many serious sinful acts that are prohibited by the Torah are rooted in the issue of treating Hashem's presence as happenstance. By not properly recognizing Hashem, it will become easier for us to do as we please without the fear of consequence or punishment. This will eventually lead to us doing the gravest of Aveirot, such as the ones mentioned prior. At the beginning of the Tochachah, Hashem attacks the root of all sin—a lack of fear that goes hand in hand with treating His presence as happenstance. Human nature fears punishment from higher authority; this is the reason for legal codes, police, and judges. Of course, Hashem is the highest authoritarian, and if we do not fear Him, we will not fear anyone else, and the world will be one of chaos and disarray.

In today's world, with all of the distractions and temptations to go astray, it is extremely difficult to constantly realize that we are living in Hashem's presence. "How can Hashem allow for high murder and crime rates, scandals, and inappropriate television?" they ask. Very few — if any — open miracles still occur today. For these reasons, many Jews have erroneously concluded that Hashem either does not exist or has little to no impact on the world. Sadly, this has led to an appalling number of Jews who have assimilated and do not even know they are Jewish. Even the ones who remain and identify themselves as Torah-abiding Jews often struggle with their faith and wonder whether Hashem still has an impact on the world in which we live.

As the Tochachah attests, this is exactly where things will turn against the Jewish people; not being fully aware of Hashem in all of his glory and doubting Hashem in any way will lead to severe punishment. However, if we understand the severity of our actions and are able to come to the realization that Hashem's existence is not happenstance but rather the central figure of our daily lives, it will naturally become more difficult to violate His Torah. And once we have achieved this understanding, we will find it easier to follow the Derech Hashem.

IT'S HASHEM'S WORLD; WE JUST LIVE IN IT

by Eli England ('18)

A major theme that runs through Parashat BeHar is the need to realize that the world in which we live is ruled by Hashem, not by us. This theme is expressed through two Mitzvot that appear in the Parashah: the prohibitions of charging interest on loans to another Jew and working the land during the Shemittah year.

One Mitzvah that appears in Parashat BeHar is the ban on charging interest on money that one Jew lends to another

(VaYikra 25:37). The core idea behind this Mitzvah is that all money that we possess truly belongs, not to us, but to Hashem — and if the money we lend is not truly ours, who are we to charge interest upon it? Moreover, by accepting this Mitzvah, we acknowledge that only Hashem can tell people what to do with their money; we cannot. This affirms that it is Hashem's world, and we just live in it.

The second Mitzvah in this week's Parashah that shows that Hashem is in charge of the world is Shemittah. At the beginning of the Parashah, we are commanded that once every seven years in the land of Israel, we should not plant or harvest produce in our fields (25:4). By acquiescing to this command of Hashem, we assert that the land belongs only to Him and that He is free to tell us when to work and when not to work at His will.

Sometimes, people let their egos and desire for material goods take over their lives. But by saying that everything belongs to Hashem through the Mitzvot of interest and Shemittah, we let go of these material possessions and depend completely on Hashem, which is the ultimate act of Emunah and humility. When we take these Mitzvot to heart, we will finally understand the true meaning of Emunah and will bolster our connection to Hashem.

WHEN MOSHE ASCENDED TO RECEIVE THE TORAH: A TALMUDIC HORROR STORY?

by Rabbi Dr. Michael Chernick

The following aggadic passage appears in Bavli Menahot 29b:

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav:

Scene I: When Moshe ascended to the heavens, he found the Holy Blessed One tying crowns to the letters of the Torah. He said before him, "Master of the World, what is wanting in the Torah that this is necessary?" He answered, "There will arise a man at the end of many generations by the name of Akiva son of Yosef, who will expound on each jot and tittle heaps and heaps of laws." He said before him: "Master of the World, permit me to see him." He responded, "Turn to your back."

Scene II: Moshe went and sat down behind eight rows of R. Akiva's students [and listened to the *shi`ur*]. He couldn't understand what they were saying and [trying to understand,] he became exhausted. When they came to a certain law, R. Akiva's students said to their master, "What is the source for this law?" He answered them, "It is a law given unto Moshe at Sinai," and Moshe's mind settled down.

Scene III: Thereupon Moshe returned to the Holy Blessed One and said, Master of the Universe, You have such a man and

generation as Moshe was in R. Akiva's *beit midrash*. In short, Moshe is the right man for his moment.

God does not respond nicely to Moshe's question because it was a question Moshe could have answered by himself. "Silence! This is My decree (lit., thus has the thought arisen in My mind)" was God's challenge to Moshe to be dissatisfied with the statement of "Because" as the answer to "I said so." But instead of seeking the meaning of his being chosen, Moshe docilely accepts God's decree.

Scene IV: Perush

In this last scene of what becomes a tragedy, Moshe asks to see R. Akiva's reward for his brilliance in Torah learning. He is shown R. Akiva's flesh, reduced to dog food by his body have been combed with iron combs at his martyrdom, being sold in the Roman marketplaces. He exclaims in horror, "This is Torah and this is its reward?!" And God replies, "Silence! This is My decree (lit., thus has the thought arisen in My mind)."

That repetition indicates, as it did the first time, that Moshe does not understand R. Akiva's martyrdom and sees it as an act of injustice on God's part. But the story is about meaning that is meaningful, not about capitulating to the belief that what seems to be unfair tragedy is not meaningful.

God's response is again a challenge to Moshe to properly understand the meaning of R. Akiva's death. God's real answer is, "You have asked the wrong party when you ask Me. If you want to know if this is the proper reward for R. Akiva's Torah learning, you should have asked him."

What would R. Akiva answered?

One of his answers we know: When his students asked him how he could smile under the torment he was receiving at his martyrdom R. Akiva replied, "All my life I waited to fulfill 'with all your soul'—even if He takes your soul,' and now that the opportunity has arisen, will I not fulfill this commandment?" He then recited *Shema*, holding the word *echad* long enough to die saying it (Bavli Berakhot 61b). His death was not viewed by him as an act of injustice on God's part or a matter of God's rejection, but rather as a person of ultimate faith he perceived the event of his own horrendous martyrdom as an opportunity to do what he wanted to do most during his life: to observe Torah and *mitzvot*.

An unspoken answer hinted at in this aggadah relies on the play on words between "*tilei tilim*", "mounds and mounds" and "*taltalim*", "curls". In Shir HaShirim, the female lover describes her Beloved's hair as "his locks are curled (Heb., *taltalim*), black as a raven (Heb., *oreiv*)" (Shir Hashirim 5:11), and the midrash, Shir Hashirim Rabbah (Parashah 5), interprets this thusly: "Even things that seem limited (i.e. of no consequence) in the Torah produce mounds and mounds (of teachings.) And who preserves

these teachings? Those who rise early and stay late (Heb., *ma'arivin*, a play on *oreiv*) [in the *beit midrash*]."

The connection between the love relation between the lovers in Shir Hashirim and the creation of mounds and mounds of Torah teachings speaks volumes about how R. Akiva experienced the intense pleasure of learning Torah, which he enjoyed for eighty years of his life. If one had asked him, "R. Akiva, you are dying such a horrible death. Is this the proper reward for your Torah study?" given who he was, his response likely would have been, "Nothing in my life could properly repay God for the pleasure I had in my life studying Torah. If these few moments of pain are the price I must pay for all that pleasure, the pleasure was worth it."

When Moshe asked God, "Is this Torah and this its reward", he was talking to the wrong entity. The *aggadah's* message teaches us that Moshe should have asked R. Akiva, whose assessment of the meaning of his life and his death was where a life's meaning really lay.

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Questions, comments? Contact us at:
Kol Torah

c/o Torah Academy of Bergen County
1600 Queen Anne Road
Teaneck, NJ 07666
Phone: (201) 837-7696
koltorah@koltorah.org

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