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A Happy Ending!

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Reah

A Happy Ending!

Good Shabbos!

You wouldn't believe it. But recently, Josef Stalin, of all people, has become popular in Russia.

As such, it was not long ago that Russian President Vladimir Putin appointed Olga Vasilyeva as Minister of Education. Ms. Vasilyeva is famous, or rather, infamous, for being an unabashed Stalin apologist. She even once said that Stalin was “a blessing for the state.” (Tell that to the millions of Russians he murdered.)

But anyways, Mr. Stalin now has a bit of a cult following across Russia.

So let's take a look at the real Josef Stalin, whom many historians consider a greater force of evil than Hitler.

Josef Stalin was the dictator of the Communist Soviet Union for nearly 30 years, from 1924 to 1953—during which he managed to kill millions of innocent people and imprison millions more in the gulags, where most died of slave labor.

By any measure, Stalin was one of the worst single influences on the world in the last century.

Now, Josef Stalin was the individual who realized Communist ideology. But who invented Communism? None other than Karl Marx, himself a German Jew. So let's digress and talk about Marxism a bit here.

Karl Marx argued that the world is divided into “rich” and “poor,” or the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

According to Marx, the bourgeoisie was the rich upper class of society, the property-owning class—which used and abused the proletariat, the poor lower class of society, as a permanent industrial working class.

Marx saw these two groups as the oppressors and the oppressed, and he believed that the oppressed would ultimately rebel against their oppressors and spark a revolution. He therefore believed that to build a just world, you need to establish a socialist society in which there are no users and used—a world in which there is no small group of rich people who control most of the country's wealth while everyone else works for them. Marx believed that wealth should instead belong to everyone—that no one should have any control over any wealth and that it all belongs to everyone equally.

But here's the interesting thing. In theory, at least on paper, Marx was at least partially right. And not only that, but his concept of social and economic justice comes from the Torah. (Not surprising, considering that he was Jewish!)

The Torah tells us that in the Shmitah year, every field became free for all and no longer the property of its owner. In other words, in the Shmitah year, everyone had equal right to the produce of each field.

The only thing is that the Torah tells us to observe Shmitah once every seven years, while Karl Marx took the mitzvah completely out of context and turned it into a way of life requiring a constant "state of Shmitah." He took an idea whose origin and root is in the Torah and contributed it to the world—only in a perverse way.

But he wasn't the only to do so.

Anyone who's ever watched enough American movies knows that Hollywood invented the concept of "happily ever after"—you know, the happy ending in which everything works out perfectly and the couple live happily ever after.

I don't mean to sound like an anti-Semitic Jewish conspiracy theorist, but the fact is that the motion picture industry was largely invented by Jewish people, and it remains dominated by Jewish people. (Steven Spielberg, anyone? Or for those of you who know your Hollywood history, Swifty Lazar (I think that was his last name; he was Humphrey Bogart's agent).)

So the Hollywood concept that the main characters ultimately live happily ever after, and the good guys ultimately defeat the bad guys, is a concept whose source is in Judaism.

Ultimately, "happily ever after" and "the good guys win" boils down to belief that "this house has an Owner"—that there is a G-d, that there is justice in this universe, and that ultimately, the one who does what is right, even if he or she is the underdog, he or she will win. And that's why many movies have an optimistic ending.

Now, the concept of "ending on a positive note" is also a concept rooted in Judaism. And not only that, but—whether we realize it or not—we Jews live by it on a daily basis.

For example, on Tisha B'Av, we read Megillas Eichah, the Scroll of Lamentations. The very last verse of Eichah concludes with these difficult and painful words: "*Ki im ma'os ma'astanu, katzafta aleinu ad me'od*"—for if You have repulsed us, You have gotten angry enough at us. And so the custom is that when Eichah is read publicly, we don't end with that last verse—instead, after reading that verse, we go back and read the second-to-last verse.

And that verse, in contrast, is very optimistic. It states, "Bring us back to you, O L-rd, and we shall return; renew our days as of old." Why do we do that? Because, as the Talmud tells us in Tractate Brachos 31a, "We find that the first Prophets would end their words with words of praise and consolation."

And we find that custom whenever we read from the Tanach in public—if the reading does not conclude on a positive note, we repeat a previous verse just so we "end on a positive note."

Another example of this concept is found in the Haftarah that we read on Shabbos HaGadol, which is the Shabbos before Passover.

That Haftarah comes to us from the last chapter of the Book of Malachi—which ends with the words, “I might come and smite the land.” But, of course, we can’t end a reading like that and leave the crowd with such a message—and so we go back to the verse before that.

And the verse before that, a most positive verse, is also a very well-known verse: “Behold, I send to you Elijah the Prophet...” This verse tells us that Elijah the Prophet will come and report to us the coming of Moshiach—and it is that verse with which we end the Shabbos Hagadol Haftarah. Thus, when a Jew goes home from shul on Shabbos Hagadol, what’s echoing in his head is that Elijah the Prophet will come on the night of the Seder and notify us of the coming of Moshiach.

As a matter of fact, we find this custom in play in the Haftarah that we read whenever Rosh Chodesh (the Jewish New Month) falls on a Shabbos.

Whenever Rosh Chodesh lands on a Shabbos, we take not one but two Torah scrolls out of the Ark. In the first, we read the regular Torah portion of the week. But from the second one, we read a special Maftir that is only read on Rosh Chodesh. That’s because the Haftarah is always connected to subject of the Maftir—meaning, the conclusion of the Torah reading.

And so on a Shabbos Rosh Chodesh, we don’t read the regular Haftarah but rather, a special Shabbos Rosh Chodesh Haftarah.

Now, the special Haftarah that we read on Shabbos Rosh Chodesh comes to us from the last chapter of the Book of Yeshayahu, the Prophet Isaiah. And the Book of Yeshayahu is the biggest book in the Tanach—the Prophet Yeshayahu prophesied more than any other Prophet, and recorded 66 chapters. And so on Shabbos Rosh Chodesh, we read Chapter 66 of Yeshayahu.

Chapter 66 of Yeshayahu begins with the words “HaShamayim Kisi”—the Heavens are My Throne—but the same chapter (and the entire Book) doesn’t quite end on such a soaring note. In fact, the last verse of Yeshayahu says, “And you shall go out and see the corpses of the people who sinned against Me... and they shall be a [example?] to all flesh.”

Not exactly optimistic at all!

And so when we read this Haftarah, we go back and read the second-to-last verse: “And it shall be that every month by month and Shabbos by Shabbos, all flesh shall come and bow before me.” There, the Prophet prophesizes in the Name of G-d that when Moshiach comes, “all flesh”—not just the Jewish Nation—will visit the Beis Hamikdash in Jerusalem every Shabbos and every Rosh Chodesh to bow to G-d. Now that’s a much better message.

The concept of “ending on a happy note” was something very important to the Rebbe. The Rebbe lived by this concept, and tried to influence everyone else to also “end on a happy note.” If the Rebbe was handed an advance copy of a new book, regardless of what the subject was, if it ended on a negative note, the Rebbe would write to the author that he or she should try end the book on a positive note in the next printing.

When the Rebbe himself would speak about painful subjects at farbrengen, the Rebbe would always end with some positive subject so as to “end on a happy note.”

But we can ask: Why indeed is it so important to “end on a happy note”?

So we can perhaps answer that, as the Talmud (Tractate Brachos 12a) tells us, “Everything follows the closing.” In Halachah (Jewish law), a contract that contains a contradiction between its beginning and its end goes according to its closing—whatever is written on the last line is the bottom line.

Why is this so? The Rebbe explains (Sichos Kodesh 5731, Vol. II, Shabbos Parshas Naso, pg. 244, et al) that it’s human nature to summarize everything at the end of whatever it is that you’re doing.

And so whatever the last line of the contract says ultimately reflects what the writer of the contract really wanted. As we commonly see after negotiations and talks, people ask, “Okay, what’s the bottom line?” What’s the conclusion? What’s the sum total of all the talk?

And so when we “end on a happy note,” it means that the bottom line is good and the conclusion is a positive one.

And to all that, the Rebbe added that when we “end on a happy note,” it triggers a response of equal measure from G-d Himself. When we end with positivity and optimism, G-d sees to it that our day, week, month or even year likewise ends on a positive note.

And in doing so, we ultimately merit the ending of Exile “on a positive note”—with the coming of Moshiach, speedily in our days, amen! (11 Nissan, 5733.)