



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

חג השבועות – ב' / 2 - SHAVUOS
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DISTRIBUTION DATE:

TUESDAY JUNE 3, 2008 / כ"ט אייר תשס"ח

PARSHA:

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SERMON TITLE:

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Emil W. Herman who loved and supported Torah learning.



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What is a chossid? We know what a tzadik is and who the Rebbe is but what are the characteristics that define a chossid? Some say that someone who lets his beard grow is a chossid. But there are many people in the world who grow long beards who are not necessarily Chassidim and are not necessarily Jewish.

A story is told of an old rabbi who arrived to give a speech. During his long and tiring talk, many people fell asleep while some even got up and left. The Rabbi noticed a man in the back of the hall who kept nodding his head throughout the speech, sometimes agreeing, sometimes disagreeing. The speaker spoke to him, arguing his point when the man disagreed and continuing when he agreed. So the speech continued this way for a long time until finally the man nodded in agreement and a big smile spread across his face. Now the rabbi could end his speech.

Afterwards, the rabbi approached the man and thanked him for his attentiveness. "Nu! It looked like you enjoyed the speech! I saw you really concentrating on my words," he said to him. To his surprise the man replied "I don't know what you're talking about!"



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"What do you mean?" asked the rabbi, "You indicated whenever I brought up a question whether you agreed with it or not and again when I answered it, you showed whether or not you felt it was a satisfactory answer!"

Again, the man replied, "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"So tell me this," the rabbi asked him, "what were you nodding about?"

The man answered, "This morning my favorite goat got loose and I've spent all day looking for her with no luck. All day my thoughts were occupied with thoughts of where she might be, then, when I showed up to your speech I noticed an uncanny resemblance between you and my goat! Both of you have a beard! But then I said to myself that it's not possible; you're talking and my goat doesn't talk. So I decided you weren't my goat. But then a thought came to me that perhaps my goat really does know how to talk and you were in fact my goat....but then I noticed you had been standing on two feet for a long time and concluded that you were not my goat. However, your mannerisms and gestures are so like my goats! I nodded or shook my head with each of my arguments. That's what you saw."

"What was your final decision that so obviously satisfied you?" the rabbi asked one final time. "I decided that you are a goat, just not my goat."

So even goats have beards.....

Some will say that a chossid is someone who wears black. I also thought so, until one day at a train station, I saw a whole group wearing the black hats and suits, with



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long beards. I got so excited; right here in my city there's a whole group of Chassidim! I ran to greet them but then noticed suddenly that they were Amish.....

Then there are those Chassidim who don't wear a black hat. So the hat doesn't make a Chassid.

There are those who will tell you that it's the language; all Chassidim speak Yiddish. But we all know that nowadays, there are thousands of Jews around the world who speak Yiddish and are not Chassidim. There is even an area in Siberia which Stalin made an autonomy for the Jews and the official language was Yiddish. People from that region speak Yiddish, not only the Jews.

* * *

Today is the holiday of Shavuos on which G-d gave the Torah to His nation, the Jews. There is a well known question: what was the whole idea of receiving the Torah? Do we not know that Avraham kept the whole Torah, before it had been given? This could only be because he studied the Torah, otherwise how would he know these mitzvos? We know, too, that he taught the Torah to his son, Yitzchok, and that they studied in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever. The same is true regarding Yaakov. If this is so, what was the great novelty in giving the Torah?

What was so special about the Jews getting a Torah that they already knew? They had been taught by their parents as it had been handed down through the generations from Avraham's time. We read about Lot that when the angels visited him he baked Matzos for them and they ate. Rashi tells us that indeed it was Pesach



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time. This means that Lot, too, fulfilled some mitzvos. About Yaakov we read, "I've lived with Lavan and still kept all 613 mitzvos." Yaakov also sent Yehudah ahead of the family on their move down to Egypt "to prepare Goshen for them." "To set up a house of study". Again, what was so great about receiving the Torah?

From the Gemoro it's clear that on the day of the giving of the Torah something happened that had never happened before, as the Sage Rabbi Yosef says, "Were it not for this day, I'd be just another Joe on the street."

What was this new thing? Did they not already know not to kill and not to steal? Did the Jews stand at Mount Sinai and receive the great revelation of not to kill or steal?

There are many answers to this question but, perhaps the answer lies in the great show that G-d put on at Mt. Sinai. He gathered all the Jews to one place and He Himself, in all His glory, descended on to the mountain and, like it says in the text, "It came to pass on the third day when it was morning, that there were thunder claps and lightning flashes, and a thick cloud was upon the mountain, and a very powerful blast of a shofar... And the entire Mount Sinai smoked because the Lord had descended upon it in fire, and its smoke ascended like the smoke of the kiln, and the entire mountain quaked violently and the sound of the shofar grew increasingly stronger."

The gemoro also relates, when G-d gave the Torah, His voice was heard from one end of the world to the other and all the kings of the idol worshippers



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trembled....people rushed to Bilaam the wicked and asked him what was happening. He answered them, "G-d had a special gift in His treasury and He wished to give it to His children."

From all these descriptions of the giving of the Torah, we see that the novelty here wasn't the laws; it was all known before. They already knew not to steal and to honor their parents. Even from the days of Noach they knew it was a sin to worship idols. What the Jews received then was the energy and the enthusiasm to keep the Torah and fulfill its mitzvos.

It's impossible to compare fulfilling mitzvos that one heard from his grandfather who learned it a few generations before him that was given through prophecy to one man, to Sinai, where the whole nation stood and saw the thunder and lightening and the great fire. As the Torah describes it later, "For ask now regarding the early days.....whether there was anything like this great thing, or was the likes of it heard? Did ever a people hear God's voice speaking out of the midst of the fire as you have heard, and live?..... From the heavens, He let you hear His voice and upon the earth He showed you His great fire, and you heard His words out of the midst of the fire."

At Sinai, the Jews received the energy and fire to keep Torah and mitzvos with enthusiasm. This fire was planted inside the heart of each and every Jew at Sinai. This fire did not exist before we received the Torah on Shavuos.



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This is also one of the reasons why there is the Written Torah and the Oral Torah and why it was forbidden to write down the Oral Torah. It was because G-d wanted that the experience of the revelation at Sinai should be given over from teacher to student, from parent to child. Such an experience cannot be given over through paper, which is cold and lacks vitality. The enthusiasm for the Torah can be passed only from person to person, from parent to child, from teacher to student. This enthusiasm is infectious; you get it from someone, and in turn, someone else will be "infected" by you. This is what the Giving of the Torah is about.

Today is the Yartzeit of the Baal Shem Tov. He brought a vitality and enthusiasm to keeping the mitzvos. Until he revealed himself, the Jewish situation was very bad; they were in a spiritual slumber and suffering from all sides. The Maggidim, the traveling preachers would go from city to city giving sermons, threatening the simple Jews with terrible punishments for their spiritual state. Understandably, something like this doesn't cause any enthusiasm or vitality.

Along came the Baal Shem Tov and breathed new life into the Jews. He went around to different villages, telling the Jews how much G-d loves them and how much pleasure He derives from every little mitzvah they do. To the scholars, he taught the power and influence of fulfilling every mitzvah. When a Jew does a mitzvah, he elevates all worlds, physical and spiritual.

Suddenly, with the establishment of the Chassidic ways, a new wind started to blow within the Jewish nation. No longer was Torah only for the learned. No longer

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was doing a mitzvah dry, a technicality. The Chassidim couldn't wait for the next holiday to come around, when they'd be able to say the blessing over the lulav or eat matzo. This enthusiasm became a trait recognizable in Chassidim, a great excitement for mitzvos. As is known about Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev that he was so excited to do a mitzva with his esrog that he thrust his hand through the glass door of his closet...

A chassid wakes up in the morning and remembers that he is a Jew. Filled with great joy, he can begin to dance, because he has been taught how precious it is to be a Jew. He feels the fire that was instilled in him at Mount Sinai. We need to pass this fire on to our children. If we will be enthusiastic and joyful about every mitzvah we do and come to the synagogue happily, our children will do the same.