

A Jewish Education Doesn't Go To Waste

Category: Behar, Vayikra

What property law teaches us about G-d's relationship with the Jewish people?

He Will Yet Return

Many times, I have had conversations with embittered parents who've sent their children to Hebrew School and then watched them completely lose interest in anything Jewish after their Bar/Bat Mitzva. The parents not only worry that they've lost their children for good but that the years they've invested in their child were for nothing! Why is it that children lose all interest in Judaism when they hit 14?

Let me share a story with you that will change this way of thinking.

This was back in the '50s in the city of Agadir, Morocco. Yehuda Elcharer was a Jewish boy of 14 who learned in a private non-Jewish high school. One day he was approached by 17-year-old senior, Yitzchok Ochiyon, a tall, pleasant boy from a respected family. Yitzchok told Yehuda about a group that was forming to study Judaism and invited him to join them. Yehuda agreed and started participating in the group study. The teacher of this group was Rabbi Ezriel Chaikin, then the Rebbe's Shliach to Agadir. Yitzchok Ochiyon was the leader of this group, arranging farbrengens and always urging the boys to come ever closer to Judaism.

A few years later, the Elcharer family was preparing to make aliyah to Israel. When Yehuda said his goodbyes to Yitzchok, now grown, the older boy asked him to keep in touch even after they settle into life in Israel. Indeed, they kept up a constant stream of letters. Yehuda had many difficulties acclimating to his new life and searching for a Yeshiva that suited him, and he looked forward to Yitzchok's constant letters of encouragement and support. He treasured these letters that he received from his beloved mentor, and thus, a few years passed.

In 1960, an earthquake registering 11 on the Richter scale hit Agadir and

thousands of people lost their lives, including many Jews. The Yeshiva building was destroyed and many teachers and students were buried under the rubble. Miraculously, Rabbi Chaikin had been expelled from Morocco only a few months prior under suspicion of being an Israeli spy and thus was saved from this disaster. Yehuda sent a letter to his friend Yitzchok hoping to find out how he was faring but received no reply... Yehuda began to fear that perhaps Yitzchok was one of those killed. A while later, Yehuda's uncle made Aliyah from Agadir and when he was asked about Yitzchok, he did, in fact, have news. Yitzchok had survived the earthquake but as a result of the tragic deaths of nearly all the students of the yeshiva, he lost his faith and left Judaism completely.

Yehuda could not believe his own ears! His beloved mentor, who had brought him to Judaism and encouraged and supported him through all his struggles, had abandoned his religion. This caused great pain to Yehuda. In 1965 Yehuda made his first trip to see the Rebbe and decided that he would tell the Rebbe the story of Yitzchok Ochiyon and ask for the Rebbe's blessing on Yitzchok's behalf. He entered the Rebbe's room for the meeting holding all the letters he had received from Yitzchok. The Rebbe then told him that Yitzchok had written to him, too, and greatly enjoyed reading the letters. The Rebbe asked Yehuda to leave the letters with him.

Yehuda was very moved to hear the Rebbe's words and as the meeting was ending, the Rebbe looked into his eyes and said "Yitzchok will return."

As the years passed, Yehuda wrote to Yitzchok in Morocco, trying to restart their friendship — but never heard a word from him. From time to time, he would remember his old friend, and he missed him. Many years passed and Yehuda was now a shliach himself and had a large family. In 1991 he traveled to New York to attend the international Convention of Shluchim. At one point, he suddenly came face to face with Rabbi Chaikin in the company of someone who did not look like a Chassid from his appearance. Rabbi Chaikin turned to Yehuda and said, "Recognize him?" Because of Rabbi Chaikin's obvious emotion, Yehuda immediately suspected this might be Yitzchok and indeed turned to the man and asked, "You are Yitzchok Ochiyon?!" The man smiled at him and confirmed that yes, he was Yitzchok. It took a few moments until Yitzchok recognized Yehuda — and then they fell into each others arms and cried tears of joy.

Yehuda learned that Yitzchok had become very successful in his business but then

had reached a crisis which drove him to renew his relationship with Rabbi Chaikin. Rabbi Chaikin urged him to see the Rebbe, who remembered him from his letters and showered many blessings on him.

Foreigners

Where had this belief that “Yitzchok will return” come from? Perhaps in this particular situation the question isn’t such a difficult one. The Rebbe said explicitly that he would return. And truthfully, we say that about anyone who has strayed from the path of Judaism, especially someone who has had exposure to Judaism or at least a basic Jewish education. Why?

In this week’s Parsha we read that in the Shmita year, every seventh year, a Jewish slave is free to return to his home. In the Jubilee year, every 50th year, even a slave who doesn’t want to go home, must do so.

Similarly, in the year of Yovel, (Jubilee), land in Israel that had been sold is returned to its original owner. This means that a person cannot sell his land permanently. He can basically lease it out for up to fifty years but then the land is returned to the original owners. G-d gives a reason in the Torah, saying, “The land cannot be sold permanently for it belongs to me, for you are foreigners and residents with me.”

About this the Rebbe poses a question. How can it be said that “the land is not yours”? Didn’t G-d actually give the land to the Jews, as He promised Abraham? So what does it mean that it’s “not yours”?

The Rebbe explains that the answer is found in the rest of the verse, “For you are foreigners and residents with me.” At the time G-d made the promise to Avrohom that the land would belong to his children, we were foreigners — the land didn’t belong to us. When we received the Torah at Mount Sinai, we were foreigners — the land didn’t belong to us. Now that we live in the land, we are indeed residents, but only “with me” — with G-d. We only have the land as a partnership with G-d. He decided that the land was to be leased and never sold for good — and as His partners, we must comply.

How are these concepts expressed in our service of G-d? Every Jew is called the “property” of G-d as is written ‘for Israel is my nation and property.’” Therefore,

although a person's evil inclination can take him far away and make it appear as though he had forsaken everything, we know for a fact that he will return to his rightful owner, G-d, because in the end all things need to go back to whom they originally belonged.

How is this so? "For you are foreigners and residents with me." When a Jew finds himself in a place not befitting him, he feels strange and out of place. No matter how hard he tries to fit in and forget his source, there will always be that little something that reminds him that he is a foreigner and doesn't belong in this new place that he's trying so hard to fit into. When does a Jew feel like a 'resident,' at home? Only when he is "with me," with G-d. A Jew can only feel like he belongs when he is doing what G-d wants. So, a child who had a Jewish education will never truly feel at home in any other environment. He will always feel like a stranger — and ultimately, he will come back.