

The Pulse of the World

Category: Devarim, Shoftim

Gorbachev, the Rebbe, and how to be a “heart” of the Jewish people.

G-d's Messenger

This week, Mikhail Gorbachev, the former Russian president, died. He was the president who served as G-d's messenger to free Russian Jewry from the prison known as the Soviet Union, and thanks to him, over one million Russian Jews were able to immigrate to the United States and around the world.

I would like to share with you a story that was told at the time by Professor Yirmiyahu Branover. Branover is a native of the former Soviet Union, an important scientist who became a Chabad Chassid and a famous refusnik back in the days of Soviet Russia. He immigrated to Israel and then, upon the Rebbe's directive, founded Shamir, whose mission was to spread Judaism among Soviet Jewish emigres. He was also very active in bolstering Jewish observance within the Soviet Union, writing and translating many Jewish books into Russian and so on.

By virtue of his position and also by virtue of his personality, he essentially became the Rebbe's representative to the Jews of Russia; if the Rebbe wanted to send a message to Russian Jews, he would send it through Branover.

In 1985, when Gorbachev rose to prominence and was appointed leader of the USSR, people were worried. The two previous leaders had been old and infirm, and each had not served for more than two years, allowing for a slight relief for Judaism in Russia. But here comes a young leader, about 55 years old — and he might be determined to turn the wheel of progress back, in which case the situation of Jews and Judaism would deteriorate.

In April of that year, a month after Gorbachev was appointed president, Branover visited the USA, and the Rebbe asked to see him privately. The Rebbe told him to inform those involved in spreading Judaism in Russia that the situation in Russia was going to drastically improve; immigration would be allowed, and freedom of religion would become a reality.

Branover called his contacts and passed on the Rebbe's message, but they couldn't believe it. It sounded too fantastic. One fellow responded that there was a KGB car parked in front of his house at that very moment, and it remained there for twenty-four hours a day. Another said that his wife had been taken in for questioning two days earlier and still hadn't returned. They had heard about the Rebbe and believed that his words would come true, but still, it seemed too unrealistic.

Branover wrote to the Rebbe about the responses he had received, and the Rebbe replied that he should call them back and tell them that despite appearances, the process had begun and the situation was going to improve (Living Torah Magazine).

What is interesting is that in 1992, when Gorbachev visited Israel, he also visited Beer Sheva University where Branover served as one of the senior professors. Branover was appointed to hold the reception, and at the end of the evening, he pulled Gorbachev aside and said to him, "Mr. Gorbachev, do you know that the Lubavitcher Rebbe foresaw what would happen in Russia in April 1985?"

Gorbachev could not believe his ears. "Tell me more about this person! How could the Rebbe have known it even when I did not foresee it, not in 1985, 86, or 87?" He couldn't believe it.

Indeed, in 1991, when Russian Jews began to leave the former Soviet Union en masse, the Rebbe said that it was "similar to the Exodus from Egypt." In his own words, "After so many years of the opposite behavior, in which Jews could not leave freely, the country has suddenly opened its gates and freed its Jews to travel to the Holy Land... to the extent that the government itself helps them leave, just as it was the case during the exodus from Egypt. A person witnessing these miracles should be inspired to break out into a dance — to recognize that G-d has demonstrated open miracles and those deserve to be joyously celebrated" (Toras Menachem 5751 vol. 3 pg. 106).

Three Leaders

In our parsha, Parshat Shoftim, the Torah talks about three types of leaders:

In the beginning of the portion, the Torah speaks about judges, which in our day

are called rabbis — the ones who teach Torah and issue rulings in Jewish law.

Later, it speaks of prophets, teaching us how to determine who is a true prophet who speaks in the name of G-d, and who is false.

In between these two segments, the Torah speaks about a king — what will happen to the Jewish people when they decide to appoint one, who can be king, and a variety of laws on the subject: that he must be Jewish, that he must always have a Torah scroll with him to remind him Who gave him the power to reign, that he should fear G-d, and so on.

When the Rambam speaks about the role of the king, he gives an amazing definition. He says, “The king is the heart of the entire Jewish people” (Hilchos Melachim 3:6).

The Rebbe asks (Sichos Kodesh 5737 vol. 1 pg. 29): Why do we emphasize that the king is the heart? After all, the brain is a more important organ of the body and is considered the “king” of the individual. Why does Maimonides specify that the king is the “heart” of the people?

The Rebbe gives a wonderful answer.

There is something special about the heart that is not true of any other organ, and in fact, not of anything in the world at all. The heart is always in motion; it never rests. This is its defining role — to constantly work and be active. The brain is the complete opposite: the brain has no movement; it can contemplate deep matters and come up with brilliant ideas, but it doesn't have a pulse like the heart. Scientists are always amazed by this fact: Everything that moves for some time must ultimately rest, but the heart never does.

What is the lesson?

A king must always be “in motion.” His entire identity should be dedicated to the benefit of the people. The king is the one “who brings them out and brings them in” — his entire life is dedicated to the people.

Every Jew — a Heart

There is a story in the Zohar that a philosopher once asked Rabbi Elazar ben

Rashbi: “How can you claim that the Jews are superior to all nations, when, in reality, they are physically weaker than the other nations and suffer far more than them?”

Rabbi Elazar replied that the people of Israel are the “heart” of humanity. Just as the heart is, by nature, a very sensitive and weak organ, the people of Israel are the weakest of the nations.

He also gave the same answer to a similar question:

The philosopher asked: “Jews eat kosher foods and avoid other foods in order to be healthy, but in reality, there are many non-Jews who eat non-Kosher foods and are much healthier!”

Rabbi Elazar gave him the same answer:

The Jews are the heart of the universe which gives life to all existence, but it is sensitive and weak, and therefore can only eat very select and delicate foods, while the other organs can eat anything.

What is the lesson for us?

The Jewish people are the heart of the world. Just as the heart always works and does not rest even for one minute, so too, we Jews need to constantly fill our roles. This doesn't mean to constantly be involved in our businesses, but rather to always be in a state where we bring spirituality to others. Just as the heart animates the entire body, we need to bring joy and enthusiasm to every human being.