

The Fight of the Waters

Category: Vayikra, Vayikra

When a group of Yeshivah boys were feeling discriminated against, the Rebbe taught them that G-d always repays His debts.

The Kvutze

The debate about drafting yeshiva students is once again in Israeli headlines.

Many people assume that religious Jews just have a get-out-of-jail-free card, but in reality, it is a yearly deferment for anyone of draft age who signs a document affirming that he studies Torah full-time.

In addition, the army does not allow anyone of draft age to leave the country. In order to go abroad, a draft-age young man needs written approval from the military and is only allocated up to 60 days from the day he turns 18 until he turns 22.

For Chabad yeshiva students, this posed a problem. The Chabad yeshiva boys wanted to travel to New York to study in 770, near the Rebbe, but it was simply impossible. And in the 50s and 60s they were very strict about it.

The Chabad community had very good relationships with many government officials at the time. Some of them were themselves from Chabad families, the most famous among them being Zalman Shazar, who later became the president of the state of Israel; he came from generations of Chabad Chassidim and was himself very close with the Rebbe.

After pulling some connections, several Chabad activists succeeded in getting the army's approval for a group of Yeshivah boys to leave the country for several months so that they could study in the Rebbe's presence, pray with him, and most importantly, attend his farbrengens.

This group became known as the "Kvutzah, The Group." At age twenty, the yeshivah boys would have finished their regular yeshivah years, and then they would embark on a trip to New York to be near the Rebbe. At first, it was only for

several months, but the Rebbe impressed upon Mr. Shazar that it was important for the yeshivah students to spend an entire year in 770, so that they would experience the full year-round experience of Jewish holidays in the Rebbe's presence—to hear the Rebbe blow the Shofar, to join the Rebbe's hakafot, and to watch the Rebbe's seder.

In the end, the state recognized the value of the project, and approved it for a full year.

The Division

When it was just a small group, they simply joined the existing yeshivah at 770. But as Chabad, and the Yeshivah, grew, the yeshivah's hall in 770 began to be very crowded, and it became clear that a group of students would need to move elsewhere.

The Israelis were chosen for the move. They were already a large group; they spoke their own language and were 'culturally' different. It was natural that they be chosen to move to a different location down the road.

The "kvutze" boys were very upset. They had come from Israel to spend the year with the Rebbe, and that's exactly what they experienced in 770. They literally saw the Rebbe every time he arrived in the morning and left at night. In their new location, this would no longer be the case. They made a strong case against the decision and fought against the move—to the point that the Rebbe himself addressed the situation at a farbrengen on Purim 1972 (Toras Menachem vol. 67 pg. 314).

The Rebbe spoke about jealousy and competition. From a religious perspective, those are normally considered negative character traits. The Mishnah says that jealousy is one of the things that will "take a person out of this world" (Pirkei Avos 4:1). However, the Rebbe noted that there is a form of positive jealousy; the Talmud says that jealousy between scholars will bring further wisdom to the world; as soon as there is competition, each side will endeavor to accomplish more than the other!

In the case of the Yeshivah students, the natural way to increase competition would be by dividing them into two groups and the new decision was obviously

therefore in the best interest of both groups.

The problem was that one group was being sent further away from 770, with the natural disadvantage of being further from the Rebbe. In response to this issue, the Rebbe brought a fascinating thought from the story of creation.

The First Conflict

The first division, the first “conflict,” in creation took place on the second day. On the first day, only one thing was created: light. But on the second day, G-d divided the lower waters from the upper waters. The Zohar relates that the lower waters were upset. They cried out, “We want to be closer to G-d! Why were we chosen to be further away?”

The Rebbe paraphrased the complaint of the Yeshivah students in the words of the “lower waters”: “as long as they were all together, the lower waters were on a higher spiritual plane...” but now, they would all lose out. Nonetheless, the Rebbe said, that desire and yearning would give them a drive to achieve greater accomplishments.

What was the end of the story for the lower waters? How did they get compensated for their “demotion”? The answer comes in this week’s Torah portion.

Vayikra is the book of sacrifices. One of the first rules about sacrifices is that they were all brought with salt. Why salt? Rashi explains that it was a promise made to the “lower waters” on the second day of creation: As compensation for being separated from G-d, it was determined that every sacrifice would include salt, (which is made by evaporating seawater). In this way, the waters are brought closer to G-d. (Vayikra 2:13).

This is also the source for the Jewish custom to dip bread into salt after the hamotzi blessing. Jewish law explains that the table upon which we eat is comparable to an altar. Just as on the altar, the sacrifices were brought with salt, our meal—which is in a certain sense, comparable to a sacrifice—should be dipped in salt.

Now, this compensation for the “lower waters” existed mainly in the time of the

Holy Temple. Today, when we no longer offer sacrifices, what is the compensation for the “lower waters”?

The Baal Shem Tov taught that indeed, the lower waters of the world cry for holiness and the sense of closeness to G-d. The way to accomplish this is by using them for holy matters. When one washes his hands before prayer, immerses himself in the water, washes his hands for bread with a blessing, drinks water while reciting a blessing before and afterwards—this is how those waters are elevated. The Baal Shem Tov taught that a single stream or river could wait for thousands of years for a single Jew to come and wash his hands in it and recite a blessing (Likkutei Dibburim (Hebrew) pg. 785).

G-d Always Repays

I think this is a very important message.

Very often, people feel they didn't receive the credit they deserve for doing a mitzvah. They did something good, but G-d doesn't seem to have paid them back in return. Sometimes it's even worse, and they feel that they've been hurt by it; as the saying goes, “no good deed goes unpunished.”

This story with the water teaches us an important lesson. Water is an inanimate object. It doesn't speak, and it doesn't hear, it doesn't have the ability to be emotional. Yet, the Creator of the World makes sure to compensate it on the altar, and to continue “compensating” for it even thousands of years later.

How much more so, when a Jew does a good deed, and especially when he works hard to do it; G-d will surely pay him back, and many times over.