

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub:

Shabbat B'har-B'chukotai | 22 Iyar / May 15-16

The Rear View

It's hard to imagine worse.

In this week's Torah Portion, Leviticus Chapter 26, G-d spells out the punishments that Israel can expect if they forsake the Torah. They will suffer from burning fevers and swelling lesions. They will sow; their enemies will reap. They will be so terrified that they will run even when no one pursues them. Their skies will become like iron, their land like copper. Roads will be emptied and cities will be ruined. Wild animals following their nature, and Israelite adults, maddened by hunger, will eat the sons and daughters of Israel.

Suddenly, in the midst of these horrifying predictions, G-d brings up Z'chut Avot, the merit of our ancestors. "I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and even my covenant with Isaac, and even my covenant with Abraham I will remember" (26:42). Then, after the mention of the patriarchs, the message softens. G-d will not "reject them to obliterate them" even when Israel is exiled, and G-d will remember (for their benefit) the covenant of the ancients, those whom I took out of the land of Egypt". (26:44-45).

In the traditional Jewish community, one of the guiding social values was yichus. Yichus, which comes from the root "to be related" essentially referred to one's pedigree. For example, marrying into a family of prominent scholars or business people was marrying someone with yichus. This value once struck me as elitist, even cruel. Why favor someone just because their father or great-great-grandfather was learned or wealthy? In reality, however, we all have yichus. We are all descended from greatness, as we all call Jacob, Rachel and Leah, Isaac and Rebecca, Abraham and Sarah our ancestors. Note that verse 42, quoted above, begins with Jacob, the nearest patriarch, not Abraham, the first. The Torah is implying that we may not have to look "all the way back" to find excellence. Anyone who searches back into their personal and family history will find heroism.

As we drive ourselves relentlessly towards meeting projections, "conquering obstacles" and gaining what is bigger or better, we may be ignoring the greatest success, the most enlightening wisdom, which is behind us, and so already available.

Can you recall, for example, that early employer who believed in you, the grandparent who taught you self-sacrifice, the stranger who saved you at risk to herself, the teacher who inspired you, friends who stood by you, and so on? These memories help people feel special and loved, especially when they are barreling ahead so blindly that they always feel tired and empty.

In Judaism, ethical behavior, gratitude and peace of mind are all rooted in remembrance. All of us have "yichus". We have all been blessed with more hope and security than we usually remember. We can save ourselves and our future by preserving "B'rit Rishonim - the covenant of the ancients" (26:45)--the Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai with minimal engineering or science but with hearts opened to fundamentally improving the world.