

Parschas Ki Sisa 5772 ARE WE READY?

A most familiar passage is the three-word phrase: “*l’einei kol Yisrael* (to the eyes of all of Yisrael).” Its fame stems from the fact that these are the final three words of the entire Torah. As the completion of the Torah is the cause for the elaborate and emotional celebrations of *Simchas Torah*, the actual reading of these words – followed by the resounding “*Chazak chazak v’nischazeik*” of the congregation – is a most dramatic and climactic moment on this festive occasion. One would assume, therefore, that the message contained in these words would be most apropos for the tenor of the moment. Let us thus examine this phrase in its fuller context.

GOING OUT WITH A “BANG”

The Torah concludes with the passing of Yisrael’s great teacher, Moshe Rabbeinu, and marks the unequalled achievements of this great leader to the Jewish nation. The final verse thus speaks of “All of the mighty deeds and all of the great spectacles, which Moshe wrought **in front of the eyes of all Yisrael**” (*Devarim 34:13*).

To what, exactly, does the Torah refer by these appellations? Rashi identifies the monumental episode which is the subject of the Torah’s concluding phrase. He contends that the episode referred to here is one of the singular events of this week’s *parshah*: Moshe’s smashing of the *Luchos* (tablets containing the Ten Commandments) in response to the grave sin of the golden calf (*Shemos 32:19*). As Moshe himself describes the scene: “And I grasped the two tablets, and I hurled them from my hands, and broke them **in front of your eyes**” (*Devarim 9:17*).

And so the obvious question arises: Is this how the Torah

chose to end off? Why was the destruction of the *Luchos* in reaction to this ignominious deed deemed to be the best vehicle to deliver a parting message on the awesome feat of concluding the Torah?

The *Sifsei Chaim* (vol. 1, pp. 353-6) explains Moshe’s calculation in taking the drastic step of breaking the *Luchos*, a decision that won the approbation of Hashem Himself (cf. *Shabbos 87a*). It bears mentioning that the sin of the golden calf – its heinousness notwithstanding – was really the work of only a small segment of the nation. Only 3,000 souls – roughly one-half of one percent of the population – actively participated in its worship. Yet Moshe was taken aback by the very fact that it was possible for this act to occur amongst the people. This was a clear indication in his eyes that there was something lacking in the very fabric of the nation itself. Had the people as a whole attained a more enhanced level of appreciation for the gift of Torah they were about to receive, the crime would never have been perpetrated. That an environment existed within which a misdeed of such magnitude could be committed was a clear indication of a certain degree of spiritual deficiency amongst the people.

In short, Moshe perceived through the sin of the golden calf that B’nei Yisrael simply were not yet ready to receive the Torah. He therefore “cancelled” the transmission of the Torah to them, until such time that they would complete the necessary preparations for this awesome milestone (which occurred on the following Yom Kippur). This became the timeless lesson of the *Luchos*’ destruction: Torah is an entity that demands proper regard and preparation. Without readying oneself by engendering a commensurate level of estimation for the Torah, it will not be possible to successfully imbibe its teachings. And this message is a particularly appropriate one to be delivered upon the

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occasion of celebrating the completion of the Torah, when we reflect on our past achievement and future commitment to its study and observance.

This notion is succinctly and poignantly expressed by our Sages. The Mishnah in Avos (2:12) states:

התקן עצמך ללמוד תורה, שאינה ירשה לך.

“Prepare yourself prior to learning Torah, for it is not granted to you as an automatic inheritance.”

It is apparent from the Mishnah that one who simply expects to be able to acquire Torah without exertion and preparation is clearly mistaken. Only through the process of spiritual refinement and adoption of Torah attitudes can one be considered truly ready to attain the Torah’s treasures.


THE RIGHT TIME

It is noteworthy to mention the background to the founding of the original *yeshivah* – Volozhin, known as the “mother of *yeshivos*.” R’ Chaim Volozhiner, primary disciple of the renowned Vilna Gaon, had long been pained by what he saw as the decline of Torah’s stature in the world. This was manifested by a severe neglect in Torah study and a prevalent and unfortunate state of ignorance amongst the populace. If nothing would be done – R’ Chaim feared – it was only a matter of time before Torah would be completely forgotten and forsaken.

He devised a plan with the goal of increasing Torah scholarship: establish a *yeshivah* of such caliber as to produce true Torah scholars and raise the level of Torah learning and estimation throughout the world. To this day, the remarkable proliferation of Torah institutions in the imprint of the original *yeshivah* of Volozhin is great testament to R’ Chaim’s vision.

But there was a very interesting aspect to the founding of that first *yeshivah*, which parallels the sentiment expressed above. When R’ Chaim first presented his idea, with great passion, to his venerated mentor, the Vilna Gaon did not initially display much enthusiasm for the project. The lukewarm response gave R’ Chaim pause; he spent much time rethinking the whole plan, searching desperately for the weak points his teacher must have detected. When he returned some time later to the Vilna Gaon, a much

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sobered R’ Chaim delivered a more muted and cerebral presentation. This time, the Gaon gave his heartfelt approbation. R’ Chaim, while relieved, was also somewhat perplexed. In his estimation, the details of his plan had not been significantly altered. What could account for his mentor’s change of heart?

The Vilna Gaon arrested his disciple’s confusion: “When you first approached me,” he explained, “you spoke with such passion and feeling, I suspected – despite the noble goal and tremendous benefits of your plan – that deep down, some personal interest of yours had become invested. An undertaking of such import cannot succeed if tainted by even minimal dreams of personal grandeur.

“The next time, however, you were focused solely on the particulars of the furtherance of Torah’s stature; all traces of personal sentiment were gone. Then, you were truly ready to embark on this monumental milestone of Torah transmission” (R’ Dov Eliach in *Avi Hayeshivos*).