

PARASHAS BECHUKOSAI

Familiarity Breeds Respect

Anticipation. What a wonderful feeling. As the long-awaited event draws ever closer, we cannot help but count the days. Five days left. Four days. The excitement builds and builds until it is almost unbearable.

We experience this excited anticipation at this time of the year, during the days of Sefiras Haomer, when we count down towards the Giving of the Torah on Shavuot. But the count does not follow the expected pattern. We do not count 49, 48, 47 and so on, calculating the diminishing number of days remaining. Instead, we count 1, 2, 3 and so on, calculating the days that have already passed. Why is this so?

A look into this week's Torah portion offers an illuminating insight. Hashem reassures us that if we are faithful to the Torah, He will shower us with blessings. Among these is the promise to "place My Abode among you, and I will not be revolted by you." The choice of words here is quite puzzling. If Hashem chooses to establish His Abode among the Jewish people, why in the world would He be revolted by them?

The answer lies in a very familiar concept. We have always been conditioned to believe that "familiarity breeds contempt," and indeed, it is true in most cases. When we observe a person from afar, we develop an idealized impression formed of his most striking characteristics. But as we become more familiar, as we draw closer, we begin to notice the minute faults, the moles and warts, both literal and figurative, that are not visible from afar. We no longer think of this person as such a paragon of virtue but as an ordinary person with human failings - if not worse. Furthermore, a relationship that falls into familiarity loses its glamour and mystique. The old thrill is often gone.

One might have thought, therefore, that when the Creator chose to establish His Abode among the Jewish people it would spell the beginning of the end for His special relationship with them. Although, He certainly is all-seeing and all-knowing, when the shortcomings and foibles of the Jewish are not brought into the spotlight of the Divine Presence, so to speak, they are not as easily dismissed. When Hashem actually dwells among the Jewish people, a higher standard of behavior is required; anything less would be "revolting" to Him. From the side of the people, furthermore, one might have thought that the thrill of having the Divine Presence among them would eventually dissipate, and the people would take it for granted, once again causing Him to be

“revolted,” so to speak. Therefore, Hashem reassures us that this will not happen. The relationship would grow ever stronger, breeding respect not contempt.

During the days of Sefiras Haomer, our counting is not merely an emotional outburst of impatience and anticipation. Rather, it is a sober expression of a gradual process of drawing closer to Hashem, whereby each day is a building block resting on the previous day and forming a foundation for the next.

As we contemplate the approach of the awesome Giving of the Torah, as we condition our inner selves to become attuned to the eternal truths of the universe, we undergo a process of growth. As we draw closer to the Creator, we are increasingly overwhelmed by His infinite greatness. And we become ever more purified and more beloved to Him. The Count of the Omer, in its ideal form, is the record of this growth, of this blossoming relationship.

Two cross-country travelers met in a roadside inn.

“Tough trip,” one of them commented to the other. “But just one thousand miles to go, and I’ll reach the coast. How about you?”

“I’m also heading for the coast. I’ve covered two thousand miles already, and I’ve had a very good trip.”

“Really? Say, if we’re both going coast to coast, how come I find the trip tough and you don’t?”

The other thought for a moment, then he said, “It’s really quite simple. You say you have a thousand miles to go, which shows your mind is totally focused on the destination, and the entire trip is just terrible drudgery. I say I’ve already covered two thousand miles, which shows the trip itself has value to me. I enjoyed the spectacular vistas, seeing new places and observing their ways of life. I look at my two thousand miles as an accomplishment, and so, I’m having a very good trip.”

In our own lives, we acknowledge that we need to strive toward idealistic goals, to a life of goodness and spirituality, but we sometimes lose sight of the transcendent value of each passing day in helping us achieve those goals. We think that at some future time we will become more spiritual, that we will live a higher and better life. But these goals cannot be reached by a mere decision and a snap of the fingers. Only by painstakingly building a structure of days set upon days can we reach the peaks to which we aspire. And in the process, we will discover that getting there is itself a very rewarding and enriching experience.