

PARASHAS VEZOS HABERACHAH

Total Dedication

Last impressions are impressively lasting. They linger on long after other images and memories have faded away. Parting words are, therefore, exceptionally important and are usually chosen with the utmost care. So what are the parting words of the Torah?

In the portion read on Simchas Torah, which is the concluding portion of the entire Torah, we read the blessings Moses bestowed upon the Jewish people just before he passed away. We also read about his death, the grief of the people and the passing of the mantle of leadership to his disciple Joshua. The final verses are a tribute to the greatness of Moses. "Never again did there arise a prophet in Israel such as Moses, one who knew Hashem face to face . . . the signs and wonders which Hashem sent him to inflict upon the land of Egypt . . . all the feats of his powerful hand and all the great awesomeness he performed before the eyes of all Israel."

What is the significance of the last phrase, "before the eyes of all Israel"? The Sages explain that this is a reference to the Tablets of the Law which Moses smashed "before the eyes of all Israel" when he came down from the mountain and saw they had made a Golden Calf.

Amazing! These are the last words of the Torah? A reminder of one of the most shameful episodes in Jewish history? Why couldn't the Torah have ended on a positive note, a note of hope and inspiration?

Let us consider for a moment the Shema, the confession of faith we say daily, which begins, "And you shall Hashem your Lord with all your hearts . . ." Hearts, in the plural. Does a person have more than one heart? Yes, say the Sages. Every person has both positive and negative tendencies, and he must love Hashem with both of them. How is this accomplished?

The commentators explain that every characteristic, both positive and negative, can be used both for the good and the bad. Appetite for food can manifest itself in gluttony, but it can also be sanctified in the context of the Sabbath, the Festivals and the making of blessings. Expressions of anger, although generally negative, can be constructive in the appropriate situation. Mercy, although generally positive, can be very harmful if it leads to allow dangerous criminals to go free. Telling the truth is generally positive, but should we reveal the truth if it will cause others unnecessary pain and embarrassment? The ideal then is

to subjugate all our tendencies to the service of Hashem so that everything becomes a force for the good.

Moses, more than anyone else, had refined himself to the point where every fiber of his being was attuned to the service of Hashem rather than to his own needs and desires. What would a lesser man have done had he come down from the mountain to find the people worshipping a Golden Calf? A lesser man might easily have reacted with kindness and sympathy. Perhaps they should be treated with compassion. Perhaps they should be given the Tablets in any case to guide them gently in the right direction.. But not Moses. Moses suppressed any feelings of mercy and compassion and reacted with righteous indignation. This is the positive message with which the Torah concludes. As much as it hurt him personally to break the Tablets, he reacted with total dedication to Hashem.

A great sage once held a major public address about the importance of serving the Creator with all one's resources, both positive and negative.

When the crowd had all dispersed, a single man remained. Tentatively, he approached the sage and said, "You said that we must harness all our faculties and characteristics to the service of the Creator. Well, I want to ask you how you would apply that to me. I'm not exactly an atheist, but I have doubts about His existence. How would I harness my doubts to serve Him?"

The sage peered intently at the man. "I believe your question is sincere," he finally said, "and I'll answer it. The next time a poor man asks you for a contribution, don't send him away with an assurance that Heaven will surely help him. Give him a generous amount."

In our own lives, we are forever faced with situation where political correctness and various social sensitivities incline us to certain courses of action. But the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Before we rush down these paths, we should first stop and reflect. Are these seemingly high moral attitudes misdirected? Are they truly leading us to do the right thing? Let us put them to the test. Only if they support the values and ideals of Hashem's Torah can we be sure that they will lead us in the right direction.