



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

DISTRIBUTION DATE:

TUESDAY AUGUST 18, 2009 / כ"ח אב תשס"ט

PARSHA:

SHOFTIM / שופטים

SERMON TITLE:

THE FROZEN CHOSEN

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman אה ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

SHOFTIM

THE FROZEN CHOSEN

Once again, Alaska (and Sarah Palin) is in the news. When a Lubavitcher hears, "Alaska" we automatically think about the Chabad connection.

Twenty years ago, Rabbi Yosef Greenberg decided to become the Rebbe's emissary to Alaska, and a lot of people thought he'd gone crazy.

One needs to remember that the Rebbe never told Chabad rabbis where to go. (Only in the early years did he personally instruct a handful.) Many years ago, the Rebbe said at a public address that one should "pick up the map, see where an emissary is needed, and go there. Don't wait for invitations."

Again, there were select individuals whom the Rebbe instructed precisely where to go. The rest simply found their places on their own, and only then asked for the Rebbe's approval. And when the Rebbe would give his approval and blessing, it was finalized.

That's why, when Rabbi Greenberg announced that he was going to Alaska, a lot of people made fun of him. Even at 770, Rabbi Greenberg got comments like: "There are more Jews on one street in Brooklyn than there are in the whole state of Alaska!", or: "Are you going to open a Chabad center for Eskimos?", or: "You'll have nothing to do there after a few years and you'll come back to New York!", and so on.

The Rebbe would greet the public every Sunday to dispense blessings and dollars for charity. One Sunday after his decision, Rabbi Greenberg passed by the Rebbe, and the Rebbe's secretary informed the Rebbe that Rabbi Greenberg was going to Alaska, the Rebbe smiled broadly, gave Rabbi and Mrs. Greenberg his blessing, and added: "Warm up Alaska!" And indeed, even the climate in the great state of Alaska has been getting warmer ever since.

But we can ask a valid question here: why indeed go all the way to Alaska to worry about a very limited number of Jews when you can help so many more Jews in New York? Why indeed did the Rebbe not send his Shluchim specifically to cities with lots of Jews? There is much more opportunity to help many more Jews in those places than in little towns where there are few if any Jews.

And this question is valid not just for rabbis, but for any person in the business of serving others, such as doctors, for example. When a doctor has to decide whether to live in Wasilla, Alaska or New York City, he has to consider the fact that in New York, he can help many more people than in some small suburb in Alaska—so shouldn't the correct decision for him be to live in New York?

Now, on to this week's parshah.

In this week's Torah portion, we read about the mitzvah of appointing a king.

The parshah tells us that the king only needs one criteria: to be born Jewish. Nothing more—it doesn't say anything about experience or anything else.

So let's take a look at the Jewish People's first king and how he was appointed.

In the first Book of Shmuel, Chapter 8, we read how the Elders of Israel got together one day for an important meeting with the prophet Shmuel. They said to him, "You have become old... set upon us a king!" What they were saying was, "It's time for you to start collecting your pension—we need something new. We want a king!"

Shmuel, of course, was hurt. The verse tells us, "the matter seemed bad in Shmuel's eyes." But G-d told him, "If they want a king, then give them a king! Just warn them that a king will suck the soul out of them—the day will come when they will regret asking for a king."

Still, the Elders wanted a king. Fine. So Shmuel agreed to appoint a king over them, and they all went home.

The story continues. There was a man from the tribe of Binyamin whose name was Kish. Now, our Mr. Kish had a son named Shaul, or Saul in English. The verse tells us, "He was a good lad... head and shoulders above all the people." One day, Kish's donkey's got lost. So Kish asked his son Shaul to take one of the farm boys and go look for them. So they took some food to last a couple of days and they headed out. For three days, they looked for the donkey but didn't find them. So Shaul told the farm boy, "We need to head back before my father stops worrying about the donkeys and starts worrying about us."

But the farm boy tells Shaul, there's a "man of G-d" in the area here—a holy man who helps people. "Let's go ask him—maybe he'll be able to help us," said the boy. Upon arrival in the holy man's town, they meet several girls drawing water from the local well, and they ask them where the "seer" lives.

The girls explained at length that the seer had just come back to town today. “Go to him quickly before he heads out to some public event!” they told them.

Now, the day before this, G-d had “opened Shmuel’s ear,” telling him, “Tomorrow, a man from the land of Binyamin shall arrive at your door—this is the man I want appointed as king over the Jewish People; this is the man whom I have chosen.”

So as Shaul approaches Shmuel’s house, Shmuel steps out towards him. The two men had never met before and did not recognize each other. It may seem strange, but G-d told Shmuel by prophecy that “this is the man I mentioned.” So Shmuel tells Shaul that G-d wants him to be king, and the very next morning, Shaul was appointed—and anointed—King of Israel.

That’s the whole story, a nice but slightly strange story. Why did G-d need to create such a strange story in which Shaul’s father’s donkeys would get lost so that Shaul would have to look for them for three days and thus meet Shmuel? Couldn’t he have met Shmuel some other way? Couldn’t have G-d just sent Shmuel directly to Shaul’s house?

Seemingly, the story could have been a lot simpler, like it was when G-d told Shmuel to appoint the Jewish Nation’s second king, King David. In the first Book of Shmuel, Chapter 16, G-d tells Shmuel: “Fill your horn with oil and go forth as I send you to Yishai Beis HaLachmi, for I see a king for myself among his sons.”

There, G-d simply gave Shmuel an address: Go to Bethlehem, to the clan of Yishai, and appoint one of his sons as king. So G-d could also have told Shmuel, “There is a worthy Jew named Kish—go to his house and appoint his son Shaul as king.” Why did G-d need to complicate the job?

Various sources explain that this story contains a wonderful lesson. Who is fit to be king of the Jewish Nation? One who seeks out the lost. If it bothered Shaul so much that his father’s donkeys were lost, so much so that he searched for them for three days, then he is one upon whom one can rely to lead the Jewish People. He won’t compromise on “those lost in the land of Ashur,” meaning those far away. That’s why G-d made the story of the appointment of the first king unfold in this way—to establish the rules for all Jewish leaders in the future so that they would know what was expected of them.

We find a similar story with Moshe Rabbeinu. The Midrash (Shmos Rabbah 2:2) tells us what caused G-d to choose Moshe as a Jewish leader.

The Midrash states that Moshe was a shepherd of Yisro's sheep. Once, a little lamb bolted from the flock and Moshe chased it. He realized that it was thirsty and was running to find water. Moshe had such pity on it that after it finished drinking, he picked it up and carried it on his shoulders. At that point, G-d said that if he is so merciful to a little sheep, he is fitting to be a shepherd of Israel.

The Rebbe once asked in a talk: What's really so special about having compassion for a sheep? There are plenty of people among us here who would also carry a little sheep on their shoulders out of kindness for animals. So what's so special here?

But really, there's a tougher question here: if Moshe was responsible for the entire flock and didn't have anyone else with him, then how could he have abandoned the entire flock just to run after one little lamb? Apparently, that's completely irresponsible! It makes sense to say that ten more sheep could have run away from the flock while Moshe was chasing the one sheep. So let's say that actually happened: how do you think Moshe's boss, Yisro, would have reacted to such a story? He would have told Moshe that he had acted irresponsibly—it's better to give up one little sheep and whatever happens to it, happens, but don't abandon the entire flock!

But Moshe knew that the flock, since it stood together, would stay put. The little sheep all by itself, however, would be lost. That's why the right thing to do was to run after the little sheep and save it.

This was the foundation for the Rebbe's entire philosophy of sending emissaries specifically to small cities and distant places where Jews are hard to find—because it is these Jews who are in danger of spiritual absorption and might easily assimilate.

In New York, the Jew would remain Jewish. He might go to a bar on Yom Kippur instead of to shul, but he would go with his Jewish friends. The Jew in Alaska, though, would forget he is a Jew altogether if the Chabad rabbi wouldn't show up.

That's why the Rebbe especially treasured the shluchim who went to distant places—as the Rebbe himself once said, "The farther you are, the closer you are."

Let us hope that the Rebbe's vision of Jews tended to far and near realizes G-d's ultimate plan for His world, with the coming of Moshiach, speedily in our days, amen!

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