Avoiding The Bread of Shame: Thoughts for Behar-Behukotai

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Angel for Shabbat, Behar-Behukotai
by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In this week's Torah portion, God reminds the Israelites that He brought them out of Egypt. "And I have broken the bars of your yoke, and made you go upright (komemiyut)" Vayikra 26:13. The commentary, Hizkuni, notes that just as an ox lifts its head when the yoke is removed, so the Israelites' heads rose when they were freed from servitude in Egypt. Rashi comments that "komemiyut" means the Israelites could now walk upright, rather than be stooped over like slaves. Saadia Gaon notes that "komemiyut" indicates that the Israelites were now free people.

In kabbalistic thought, it is taught that when people receive something that they did not earn they are guilty of eating "the bread of shame". Thus, in order for the Israelites to walk upright and not be ashamed of their newly given gift of liberty, they had to "earn" their freedom by serving God through fulfilling His commandments. This was their side of the covenant with the Almighty. By living according to the Torah's precepts, they would "earn" the right to be a free and upright people.

This lesson applies to many aspects of life. We should not simply be "takers" who receive goods and services from others. We also should be "givers" who do our share to repay the many benefits we enjoy. If we take out of proportion to what we give, we are guilty of eating "the bread of shame". We don't live with the quality of being upright and free.

This is true on a personal level. We should not exploit the kindness of friends and acquaintances, but should return their kindnesses gladly and generously. This is

true on a communal level. We should not expect synagogues and schools and other institutions to be there for us when we need them, but we should be members and supporters so as to carry our own weight to the best of our ability. This is true on the national and international level. We should not expect others to provide for us, without our willingness to provide for their needs as well.

Sometimes people think they come out ahead if they take something without having given anything commensurate in return. They think they have "beaten the system". Actually, such people humiliate themselves because they are eating "the bread of shame". They do not realize that taking something without giving back to the best of their ability--is degrading and debasing. It is the behavior of people who lack pride and self-respect.

God wanted the Israelites to walk upright--komemiyut. He did not want them to have a slave mentality any longer. To give dignity to them, He gave them the Torah's laws and traditions--He gave them a way of "repaying" God, of earning their bread. They could create a righteous community; they could become a light unto the nations. By working for these lofty goals, they would avoid eating "the bread of shame".

Our lives should not be viewed as a contest to take as much as we can and to give as little as we can get away with. Rather, life is an adventure of human interrelationships where we all win when we all do our share. To walk in freedom and dignity, we need to avoid eating "the bread of shame".