BS”D

Parshas Matos

*The wealth of the tribes of Reuven and Gad was not used properly. The two tribes separated themselves from the rest of the Jewish people in order to maintain their wealth which consisted of sheep and cattle.*

The Three Gifts and the Three Weeks

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

The Midrash Rabba of this week’s Parsha says,

Three gifts were created in this world. If you have one of them, you have everything:

If you acquire wisdom, you have everything.  
If you acquire strength, you have everything.  
If you acquire wealth, you have everything.

This is true only if these are the gifts of Heaven and come from the power of Torah… If these gifts are not from the Holy One, however, they are but temporary.

The Midrash is referring to the three gifts discussed in the fourth chapter of Pirkei Avos: “Who is a wise person? One who learns from everyone.” A person who seeks Torah wisdom because he loves and cherishes it is humble. He seeks wisdom from anyone that has it. It makes no difference to him about the rank, status, or age of the person from whom he can learn. He loves wisdom and seeks it anywhere it is to be found.

The strong person is one who has the power of self-discipline and restraint. He is a master of his own soul, of his own character. Thus, he is free to pursue all of his goals without interference from his own weaknesses. He overcomes those weaknesses. He is indeed a strong person.

A rich man is one who is satisfied with what he has. He is at peace with himself and his place in the world. He is not driven with the obsession of acquiring more and more wealth. He uses his wealth wisely, for his wealth is a means to do good and not an end in itself.

If a person has any one of these attitudes and values—a love of wisdom, self-restraint, and peace with his place in life—he will automatically eventually acquire the other two values and “have everything.”

The Midrash continues:

There were two wise men, one a Jew and one a non-Jew, Achitofel and Bila’am. Both were destroyed. (Achitofel used his wisdom against King David, and Bila’am used his wisdom against the Jewish people.)

There were two strong men, one a Jew and one a non-Jew, Shimshon and Goliath. They were both destroyed. (They did not use their strength properly.)

There were two wealthy men, one a Jew and one a non-Jew, Korach and Haman. They were both destroyed. (Korach’s wealth made him arrogant, and Haman used his wealth in an effort to destroy the Jewish people.)

In our Parsha too, the Midrash says that the wealth of the tribes of Reuven and Gad was not used properly. The two tribes separated themselves from the rest of the Jewish people in order to maintain their wealth which consisted of sheep and cattle. It turned out that years later they were the first to be exiled by the Assyrians.

This week we started the first of the three Haftorahs dealing with the destruction of the Temple. These Haftorahs are followed by seven Haftorahs that deal with comforting the Jewish people and ending the long exile. The total of ten Haftorahs correspond to the Ten Attributes (Sefiros). The first three of Kesser, Chochmah, and Binah correspond to the three expressions used in the beginning of today’s Haftorah. The first expression in today’s Haftorah is speech, as it says, “*Divrei Yirmiyahu*, the words of Jeremiah.” The second is hearing, as it says, “Hear the word of G-d.” The third is seeing, as it says, “*Chazon Yeshayahu*, the vision of Isaiah.”

We have to fix our failure to listen to G-d’s words, our failure to hear properly, and our failure to see. That is, we must internalize what we hear from Him. Once we are listening, we have the comfort of the next seven Haftorahs that correspond to the seven divine attributes and to our own seven character-traits. When all of this is corrected, we enter Rosh Hashanah with teshuva. Proper teshuva leads to redemption as Rabbi Elazar taught: “The redemption will take place in Tishrei.”

Historically speaking, one of the events commemorated by the Seventeenth of Tammuz is the shattering by Moshe of the tablets with the Ten Commandments. On the face of it, this ruined the purpose of the Exodus from Egypt which was to receive the Torah at Sinai. And yet at the same time, the shattering of the first tablets led to a deepening of our connection to Torah, for when the second tablets were given, the oral Torah was also given. We were not great enough to merit the first tablets in which all of Torah was instantaneously revealed. But we were given the opportunity to work slowly but surely on internalizing the Torah through engaging in the study of the oral Torah which requires our own minds , our own understanding, to grapple with G-d’s will.

So, too, the tragedy of Tisha B’Av has a bright side. The Midrash says that on Tisha B’Av, Moshiach was born. This means that we did not merit to hold on to the first and second temple. But the destruction itself set up the process of the ultimate redemption when Moshiach comes. All of the bitter exile can be seen as the process of teshuva, of internalizing the Torah’s truth and of arriving at the point of true spiritual and physical redemption. (The discussion of the ten weeks is based on the Pri Tzadik, Pinchos 7, 9.)

Although the Midrash cited earlier only talks about three gifts and how they should be used properly, this teaching applies, I think, to every aspect of our character and personality. It applies to speech, hearing, and seeing. It applies to the seven character-traits that include love and awe of G-d. Whatever qualities each of us possesses, they should be viewed as a gift from G-d. They should be developed and used to make us better people, to make the world a better place. If we have a true consciousness of how each aspect of our personality is a G-d-given trait, then we shall be blessed, as the Midrash says, “with everything.”