

KI SAVO (DEUTERONOMY 26:1-29:8)

Watch Out For WHAT Car?

2000 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

As Moses speaks to the Children of Israel shortly before his death, advising them as to how they should live their lives in the Land of Israel, he discusses with them the Mitzvah of *Bikurim* -- First Fruits.

When a landowner noticed the first fruits of wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, or dates, he would tie a thread around them to mark them as *Bikurim*. When the fruits were ripe, they were brought to Jerusalem to be given to the Temple.

Large groups of people would march together to Jerusalem, where they were greeted with great pomp and ceremony. After the Kohain took a person's basket of fruit, it would be placed next to the Altar in the Temple. At that point, the donor recited the following declaration of appreciation of G-d's Providence:

"An Aramean tried to destroy my father. (This is a reference to Laban of Aram who tried to destroy Jacob.) He (Jacob) went down to Egypt with a small population, and lived there as an immigrant, but he became there a great, powerful, and populous nation. The Egyptians were cruel to us, making us suffer and imposing harsh slavery on us. We cried out to ... G-d and (He) heard our voice... G-d then brought us out of Egypt He brought us to this ... land flowing with milk and honey. I am now bringing the first fruit of the land that G-d has given me." (Deuteronomy, 26:5-10)

When presenting our first fruits to G-d in the Temple, we are making a small gesture of thanks for all the miracles that He has performed for us throughout history. He has protected us and allowed us to flourish despite the efforts of our enemies to destroy us.

However, the reference to Laban is surprising. In Genesis, Chapters 29-32, we are introduced to Laban, the uncle and father-in-law of Jacob. We know him to be a swindler. We see throughout his connection with Jacob that he did everything he could to take unfair advantage of him. Laban promised his daughter Rachel to Jacob as a wife, only to trick him into marrying her older sister Leah instead. He negotiated one salary with Jacob and paid him a lower one. But nowhere do we find any indication that Laban actually wanted to KILL Jacob.

Yet, the Torah tells us that *"An Aramean tried to destroy my father!"* In fact, at the Seder on Passover, we read in the Haggadah that Laban was worse than the Pharaoh..."because Pharaoh condemned only the male children but Laban sought to obliterate everyone!"

Where do we see any indication that Laban's intentions were to destroy us? A thief? No doubt. A scoundrel? Absolutely. But a murderer?!

The Vilna Gaon answers that this is exactly the point. This is the extent to which G-d watches over us. Not only does he protect us from our known enemies; He also protects us from dangers we don't even realize exist!

When I was a Yeshiva student in Israel in 1975, I was awakened one morning by a loud explosion that shook the building. A few miles away, two Arab terrorists had just blown themselves up. They had been carrying a significant amount of explosives and were on their way to downtown Jerusalem. In a "freak accident," the explosives "happened" to detonate as they were crossing through a large empty field that was best known for the fact that American Yeshiva students used to gather there on Fridays to play baseball. Due to the large expanse of empty area around the explosion, the only consequence of this event was to give these terrorists their just reward.

Now this was a miracle that we found out about. But I began to wonder ... How many times does G-d create little "coincidences" that save us pain and annoyance that we never even know about?

We all know stories about people who cursed their bad luck in missing an important flight, only to discover later that the plane would end up crashing. But how often does it happen that tragedies are avoided and the fact that we were saved remains a secret known only to G-d? You are late for an appointment because the light turned red. Do you have any idea what accident almost happened around the next corner? Someone called your company and you made a sale and got that big promotion you were hoping for. Did you know that the only reason they called you is that your competitor made a last minute decision to go to a ball game and forgot to charge the battery of his cell phone?

By telling us that "*An Aramean tried to destroy my father*," that Laban was prevented not only from harming Jacob, but from killing him, the Torah is informing us that G-d is constantly tending to the needs of His flock; that there are times that we don't even realize how endless an obligation we have to be thankful for His watchful eye.

A Thought For The Month Of Elul

Rabbi Israel Salanter, one of the great sages of the 1800's, writes of an experience he had during the Rosh Hashanah season. This time of the year, our Rabbis tell us, is a period of self-examination. In anticipation of G-d's Judgment of our actions, and deciding our fates based upon those actions, we are

advised to consider very carefully our every move, and to see where we need improvement, and what aspects of our personalities should be altered for the better.

Rabbi Salanter writes that one day, while walking down the street, he observed a man who was deep in thought and introspection. He was a very religious man and was obviously concentrating on matters of deep spiritual significance. As a result of this gentleman's pre-Rosh Hashanah soul searching, he didn't hear Rabbi Salanter's greeting and walked right by without acknowledging him.

On the surface, it might seem that this person was taking the idea of Teshuva, repentance, very seriously, and was so in tune to thoughts of G-d that he didn't notice his mundane, physical surroundings.

Unfortunately this fellow missed the whole point.

Man, our Sages tell us, is a "*ladder that stands on the ground, while its head reaches to heaven.*" (See Genesis 28:12) But that doesn't mean that our heads should be in the clouds. While as the children of G-d, we have the ability to raise ourselves to Heavenly heights, we must always recall that our feet are on the ground and be cognizant of the needs and desires of our fellow man.

Our relationship with our Creator should never allow us to ignore our relationships with His children. The best way to serve G-d is to show our recognition of the greatness of His creatures and to show them as much respect and love as we expect for ourselves. By looking out for the needs of others, and showing them warmth and concern, we are showing that we are the G-dly beings that G-d wants us to be.

Have a great Shabbos.

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