**Blessing “Substitutes”?**

A Joke to Begin With…

The famous Chassid, Reb Zalman Moshe HaYitzchaki, was not known as someone who was particularly stringent about using only “clean language.” His juicy farbrengens were interwoven with a wide range of choice words dedicated to the Yezer Hara and his allies. Words that the average person would refrain from saying, to say the least…

One Shabbos, a number of students from a Litvishe yeshiva were guests at his town. The organizers pleaded with R’ Zalman Moshe to be so kind as to refine his mode of speech to bring these Litvishe bachurim closer to Chassidus. R’ Zalman Moshe consented, but when he started to farbreng, nothing could stop him…

Harsh words and expressions of degradation about the evil side flowed endlessly from his mouth in halting Yiddish, and the organizers didn’t know where and how to bury themselves in shame. “What would they think of us?”

On Motzaei Shabbos, when they asked the bachurim about the experience and their first encounter with Chabad, they said that they enjoyed themselves very much. “We were most impressed by the Chassidic way of life, particularly from the farbrengen!” they said.

When one of the organizers asked: “And what did you think about Reb Zalman Moshe’s language?”

“Sharp expressions?” they replied. “What sharp expressions? We thought if such a holy man says such words, they must have been combinations of holy names based on the Kabbalah!”

Parshas Re’eh opens with the words: “Behold, I set before you today a blessing and a curse” (Devarim 11:26). Moshe Rabbeinu turned to the Jewish People and transmitted the words of G-d. However, the end of the pasuk is a little unpleasant to the ear – “curse”!? Since when does G-d bestow “curses” upon His children? Isn’t it stated explicitly in Torah, “By the command of the Most High … evil [shall] not come” (Eicha 3:38), and “No evil descends from Above” (Tanya, Iggeres HaKodesh 11)?

The great Tanna Yonasan ben Uzziel, a student of the great sage Hillel, also had some difficulty with this topic. In his translation of the Torah, he translates the word “k’lala” (curse) in a most interesting, innovative, and thought-provoking manner. According to Yonasan ben Uzziel, the true meaning of “k’lala” is not “curse,” but “substitute,” a substitute for a bracha!

This begs the question: Since when is a curse a substitute for a bracha? Soymilk can substitute for cow’s milk; baby formula can replace mother’s milk. However, is there any reasonable person who would request a substitute for G-d’s blessings – in the form of a torrent of curses?

A curse is not a substitute for a blessing – quite to the contrary! So what does Yonasan ben Uzziel’s novel interpretation come to teach us?

Targum Yonasan was written out of an understanding of the inner dimension of the essence of evil and exile, and the desire to explain and bring this profound insight to ordinary Jews. Dwelling in the Holy Land, Yonasan ben Uzziel felt that the anguish and suffering of the exile was a process of purification the nation needed to endure to reach their long-promised objective, the True and Complete Redemption. He didn’t keep this secret to himself. He made sure to write this in plain common folk language, suitable for those Jews who don’t even know how to speak in Hebrew, the Holy Tongue.

Just like when using a substitute for cow’s milk, the objective remains to provide healthy nourishment for the body, so too, the curse of exile is just a “substitute for a bracha.”

The objective is the same; the method is different. Sometimes these methods are pleasant, and sometimes – they are quite harsh.

There are two types of Jews:

“The Galus Yid,” a realistic and calculated Jew who “translates” life’s occurrences according to their most straightforward interpretation. Good is good, and bad is terrible.

Alongside this Jew, another Jew is living his life in an entirely different manner:

He’s “The Geulah Yid” – a Jew who looks upon everything differently. He “translates” the events taking place during the time of the exile as a “substitute Redemption,” as did Yonasan ben Uzziel.

This reverse form of Redemption has a very lofty source, rooted in Hashem’s very essence. Only G-d Himself, in all His power and glory, exalted beyond all measure of both revelation and concealment, the limited and the unlimited, light and darkness, good and evil, can make such “substitutions” …

This is alluded to in the Haftarah we read most years for Parshas Re’eh, opening with the words, “I, yes I am He Who consoles you” (Yeshayahu 51:12). According to the Pesikta, this is G-d’s response to the claim of the Prophets: “Oh poor tempestuous one, who was not consoled.” The Jewish People refuse to accept the (limited) consolation of the Prophets. They demand more – much more!

The Jewish People understand and feel the darkness of the exile in its most physical sense. They know that this is merely a “substitute.” The tremendous spiritual punishment and descent are just concealment of great kindnesses, so great that they can only come from G-d Himself. Therefore, they refuse to settle for the consolations of flesh-and-blood human beings, even if they are prophets. “Our wish is to see our King,” they demand…

G-d promises: Don’t worry, “I, yes I am He Who consoles you” – the absolute revelation of His Blessed Essence is on its way!

And what about us?

We have the option of being a “Geulah Yid.” We must try to see and understand the good in everything and everyone; to be joyful even if we have all kinds of “substitutes” coming our way. When we know that they come from a mouth so holy and exalted, they apparently are… combinations of holy names of angels…

To Conclude with a Story

To conclude with a story, related by a famous Jewish community activist:

There was a poor Jewish woman who had an only son, a sweet and intelligent child born to her at a relatively advanced age. One day, the boy became seriously ill, lying in bed with a high fever, crying weakly. His poor mother managed with some difficulty to summon a doctor to her son’s bedside to give a diagnosis. The doctor wrote her a prescription for a very, very expensive medication. He estimated that it would cost the equivalent of about six months’ salary, but he added that this was the only way that might save her son’s life.

The mother didn’t hesitate for a moment. She pulled all her savings out from under the mattress, pawned her jewelry and Shabbos dishes, borrowed whatever else she could, and after considerable pleading, she managed to convince the pharmacist to prepare the medication for her in exchange for the paltry amount she had been able to collect. Not long afterward, she was handed a small glass bottle wrapped in brown paper. The mother ran through the village streets, quickly and carefully. Then, suddenly, a passer-by, who was not quite so careful, came dashing out into the street and collided with her. This caused her to drop her precious cargo, and in one sweeping motion, he smashed all the woman’s hopes into tiny little pieces…

Although she had no way of obtaining any more money, this mother’s heart would not let her abandon her son. Wasting no valuable time, she gathered up the shards of the broken bottle and headed back to the pharmacy.

This time, the head pharmacist was standing at the counter. In a voice choking with emotion, the mother pleaded with him to help save her son’s life. The pharmacist checked the broken bottle pieces and turned completely pale. With one brief look, he managed to notice that his assistant had made a serious mistake in the dosage. One drop from this concoction could have killed even someone totally healthy. Demanding no payment, he prepared a new and correct medication.

“That child is me, and the heroic woman was my mother,” the askan said as he concluded his story. “Thus, the bottle breaking, which seemed like the worst possible disaster, turned out to be a great salvation that saved my life.” ■

Good Shabbos! ***Based on Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 19, first sicha, Parshas Re’eh.***