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TORAH STUDY

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Viewing the world with an optimistic eye

Behar/B'chukotai, Leviticus 25:1-27:34

RABBI SHRAGA YANKELEWITZ

When we read the second part of this week's Torah portion, we are overwhelmed by the number and intensity of the tragedies listed.

The Torah tells us that if we walk in the ways of God, then the world will function in an ideal state, but if we stray from His ways, our world will be filled with suffering and misfortune. No one can read these words without being affected in some way. In fact, there is a custom in many synagogues to call on the reader himself to say the blessings on this section of the Torah. The reason is that it is unfair to call up any member of the congregation specifically for this section.

The classic view of the optimist is to see a half a cup of water as a glass half full, not half empty. Perhaps there is an even more profound viewpoint: to see the glass as completely full - half filled with water and half filled with air. This is a challenge many of us may not be ready for. The question is: What can we focus on to see the goodness in this world and feel confident that we are in the hands of a kind and loving Creator?

One possible area where we can begin is by appreciating nature and recognizing God's handiwork in creation. We can easily see that there is an unending kindness in the physical beauty of the world we were given.

One example is what King David writes in Psalm 144: "You open Your hand and satisfy the desires of all the living." The Talmud (Sanhedrin 38a) teaches that the reason Adam was created on the sixth day of creation and not the first day was because God wanted to prepare the entire world for him before he was created, just as one who invites guests wants to have everything ready for them.

I am reminded of an anecdote where a simple man orders a coffee at an upscale hotel. Thinking that a coffee should cost a few dollars, he is shocked when he receives a bill for \$20.

The waiter explains, "True, the coffee itself costs a few cents, but you are paying for much more than that. The marble floors, musicians and expensive chinaware are all there just to create for you a perfect cup of coffee."

This is how we can view our world. Try to appreciate the amazing ambiance this world contains. Food could be tasteless and colorless and we would still eat for nourishment. The Creator was not satisfied with that. God made the most amazing varieties of colors, aromas and tastes just to create the perfect eating experience for you.

Another possibility is to focus on what God promises toward the end of the Torah portion. "But despite all this ... I will not have been revolted by them nor will I have rejected them to obliterate them, to annul My covenant with them" (Leviticus 26:44). Indeed, this is the secret to the Jew's immortality. We have a guarantee that no matter what happens, the Jewish people will survive. This is the ultimate kindness.

Imagine flying in an airplane through terrible turbulence. The knowledge that there is a professionally trained pilot is the greatest comfort. Life is filled with turbulence, and the only thing that gives us strength is the knowledge that there is a competent driver - a God who truly cares about us and is there, guiding us through the challenges we face daily.

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