Jewish Tribune – Shavuos

**Royal Chutzpah**

Rabbi Hartman is fond of sharing his “sholom aleichem” to Hasmonean. It was a Thursday morning, and he offered a doughnut for the right answer to a challenging question. Lo and behold, one young man same up with a good answer and after the shiur approached Rabbi Hartman. As if it was the most normal thing in the world, he asked if Rabbi Hartman could wait until Monday to buy the doughnut because he wanted it to be fresh.

“You see”, explained the young man, “I don’t do Fridays and Sundays and if you buy it later today or tomorrow and I only get it on Monday, it will be stale.”

I am pleased to say that, astonishingly, this was over 17 years ago, and Hasmonean has moved on since, thanks to Rabbi Hartman and many others.

For me, the request of this young man personifies chutzpah. His actions contain a reprehensible brazenness. And yet, עזות – brazenness can be very positive.

Indeed, the mishna in Pirkei Avos confirms this dichotomy. In the mishna (Avos 5,20), Yehuda ben Teima declares הוי עז כנמר – be as bold as a leopard and in the very same mishna adds עז פנים לגיהנם – a brazen faced person is headed for Gehinnom.

Are we meant to be bold or not?

In his sefer on Shavuos, Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein, explains that it depends.

The mishna reflects the positive and negative uses of the trait of boldness. On the one hand, being עז פנים, “bold of face”, suggests someone who makes appoint of showing others how bold he is. For him, the trait of boldness is not a means to an end, but rather a value in itself. This is potentially a very dangerous trait.

On the other hand, one needs to be “bold” and resolute in doing that which is right, even in the face of apathy or derision.

The midrash (Midrash Zuta, Rus 2) notes that all of the eighty-five pesukim in the Book of Rus begin with the letter vov “ו”, with eight exceptions. These eight pesukim, says the midrash, reflect the fact that Rus joined the Jewish People, who enter into a covenant (Bris Milah) with Hashem on the eighth day.

Rabbi Bernsterin quotes Rav Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz, the famous author of “Lecho Dodi”, in his introduction to his commentary to sefer Rus entitled “Shoresh Yishai”.

Rav Alkabetz explains that the letter vov represents the natural flow of events. In addition to being the name of a letter, vov is also the Hebrew word for a hook or link, and it represents the way that one event is naturally linked to and follows on from another. When Rus chose to become part of the Jewish People, she broke away from the natural flow and linkage of events, and that is why her conversion is represented by the pesukim which do not start with the letter vov.

The Maharal explains that the number seven represents the natural order of the world, corresponding to the seven days of the week, while the number eight represents the level beyond nature. This is why the bris of a child takes place on the eighth day, for it involves improving upon the natural state in which the child was born.

Rus’ supernatural strength which allowed her to defy comfort and convention to join the Jewish People is reflected in the eight pesukim which do not begin with the letter vov.

Rabbi Bernstein notes that subtracting the eight unusual pesukim from the total eighty-five leaves seventy-seven, equivalent to the numerical value of the עז, bold.

When Rus ignored her mother in law’s attempts to dissuade her from returning with her, Rus does not meekly obey, but demonstrates boldness, determination and strength of character. It is actually a form of chutzpah but in the purest sense. No brazenness or irreverence but steadfast boldness. No compromising on her modesty or respect.

Amazingly, the roots of this trait are found in Moav, the nation which she comes from and the nation which embodies chutzpah.

The very name of the original individual called Moav was given to him by his mother in an unabashed expression of the fact that he was born to her from her father. Centuries later, when Klal Yisroel are about to enter Eretz Yisroel, it is Moav who shamelessly send their daughters out to entice them.

The progenitor of Moav, Lot, dwelled in S’dom, the city which took chutzpah to a new level. Their constitution made kindness illegal and cruelty mandatory. As Rabbi Bernstein notes, doing the wrong thing is bad enough, but turning it into the right thing is a chutzpah of the highest order.

When Lot escaped, he brough the trait with him, and whilst it found a reprehensible expression in Moav, it’s pure and lofty expression was demonstrated by Rus.

And if the trait of boldness is essential for an individual who wishes to do the right thing, it is critical for a king. True leadership is not a popularity contest and often requires taking a stand.

To quote the English poet John Lydgate: “You can please some of the people all of the time, you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can’t please all of the people all of the time.”

The trait of boldness was personified by Dovid Hamelech. His reign and leadership led Klal Yisroel to war against their enemies with fearlessness and determination. It was an elevated usage of chutzpah, refined and bequeathed to him by his great grandmother Rus.

Perhaps that is why we refer to her as “Imah shel Malchus” – the mother of royalty and perhaps this is what Chazal (Midrash Bereishis Rabbah 41:4) mean when they say מצאתי דוד עבדי, מצאתי בסדום, I found My servant Dovid, I found him in S’dom. Dovid Hamelech implemented a sanctified version of the chutzpah which was embodied by his forebears S’dom and Moav.

May we all merit to be bold and resolute in doing what is right and enjoy a peaceful and uplifting yom tov. Perhaps a fresh cheese doughnut would be appropriate!

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