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JEPQueens@gmail.com

by Rabbi Yaakov Finestone

MAY I HAVE SOME OF THOSE GOLD COINS THAT ARE IN THE VALLEY?!

SHAVOUT

The Yom Tov of Shavuot is approaching. Hashem gave us the greatest gift, the Torah. I recall hearing that when we daven, we are talking to Hashem. However, when we learn Torah, it's as if Hashem is talking to us! We are so lucky to have this precious gift! Learning Torah strengthens our connection to Hashem. It also helps refine our middos. We should take advantage of every opportunity, every extra moment that we have, to learn Torah. On the first night of Shavuot many remain awake the entire night to learn Torah. Hashem invested the yom tov of Shavuot with the extra potential for us to increase our understanding of the Torah. We can tap into that potential with any Torah learning that we do on Shavuot. We can tap into that potential even more if we learn Torah that entire night.

*The **Midrash** (Midrash Rabba Shmos 52:3) quotes a story. One of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai's students left Eretz Yisroel and settled elsewhere. He was successful and became very wealthy. When he returned to Eretz Yisroel, his friends were jealous of his great wealth. They, too, wanted to leave Eretz Yisroel to become wealthy. When Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai became aware of his students' desires, he told them to come with him to the valley of Pnei Marom. When they were all assembled, overlooking the valley, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai davened that the valley should become full of gold coins. His tefillos were answered and the valley filled with gold. Then Rabbi Shimon told his students if they wanted gold, it was "there for the taking". He continued, however, by saying that whoever would take gold now, would be taking away from his reward in Olam Haba. where Hashem rewards us for the Torah that we will have learned.*

Pirkei Avos (6:9) quotes the following story. Rabbi Yossi ben Kisma once met a man who wanted him to relocate and become the rabbi of his town. He offered Rabbi Yossi an exorbitant amount of money. However, since his man's town was devoid of Torah

*"I prefer the Torah of
Your mouth more
than thousands in
gold and silver."
(Psalms 119:72)*

learning, Rabbi Yossi refused. Rabbi Yossi told him, "Even if you were to give me all the silver and gold and precious stones and pearls in the world I would only live in a place of Torah. And thus is it written in the book of Psalms of

David, King of Israel (Psalms 119:72), 'I prefer the Torah of Your mouth more than thousands in gold and silver.'"

Rabbi Yossi's response seems very similar to Bilam's response. Balak wanted Bilam to curse the Jews. Bilam told Balak's messengers, "Even if Balak would give me enough silver and gold to fill his house, I cannot transgress the word of Hashem..." (Bamidbar 22:18) The commentaries say that Bilam's response indicated his enormous greed. Yet Rabbi Yossi's similar response was considered praiseworthy. What was the difference? The **Chida** answered this question while he was still a youngster. He said that Bilam's words "I cannot transgress the word of Hashem" implied that if he were permitted to do so, he would have done so. Rabbi Yossi, on the other hand, was very clear and decisive when he said, "I would only live in a place of Torah". **Rabbi Yossi only wanted to live in a**

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Torah environment (Maggidei HaEmes as quoted in Pirkei Avos with Ideas and Insights of the Sfas Emes and other Chassidic masters by Rabbi Yosef Stern).

In responding to the man who wanted Rabbi Yossi to come to his town, why did Rabbi Yossi also quote to him the pasuk in Tehillim from King David? The sefer **Ruach Chaim** & the **Ksav Sofer** explain as follows. Rabbi Yossi said that he only wanted to live in a Torah environment because spiritual wealth was more important to him than physical wealth. Had that idea only been expressed by him, it would not have had such an impact. After all, it was said by a Torah scholar who was poor and had not tasted luxury. Therefore, Rabbi Yossi added that this idea was expressed by a wealthy king. Despite his great wealth, King David was the one who said that **spiritual wealth was much more valuable than physical riches** (The Pirkei Avos Treasury by Rabbi Moshe Lieber)

The **Midrash** (Vayikra 27:1) gives us a history lesson about Alexander the Great. While conquering the world, Alexander came to a country inhabited by women. They sent a delegation to speak to

Alexander. They told him that it was pointless and even disadvantageous to Alexander to fight against them. They said that if he would be victorious over them, it wouldn't bring him glory since they were only women. However, if they would defeat him, it would be a big embarrassment to him. Alexander heard the logic of their argument and did not attack them. Upon leaving, Alexander left an inscription stating, "I, Alexander, was a *shoteh*, a dumb person, until I came to this country". **Rabbi Henach Leibowitz** zt"l questioned this Midrash. Alexander had one of the greatest minds of his day. He was a brilliant general, in the process of conquering the world. How can he say that until this he was a dumb person? **Rabbi Henach Leibowitz** zt"l explains that Alexander realized the significance of every added piece of knowledge. It is more than becoming a little smarter. Every extra bit of knowledge changes you into a new person! It's as if you were not smart and the new knowledge turned you into a smart person.

Extra knowledge transforms you into a wise person. Imagine the great transformation you will have with each additional understanding of Torah learning. Every "minor" increase in understanding, transforms you into a wiser and wiser person!

Thank You, Hashem, for Your precious gift of the Torah. Torah brings us close to You and transforms our lives.

Torah brings us happiness and satisfaction.

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Rabbi Yaakov Finestone is the director of JEP Queens. For almost 50 years JEP Queens has been in the forefront of kiruv. JEP has changed the lives of thousands of Jewish children enrolled in public schools and kiruv schools. Many are shomrei Torah and mitzvos today because of JEP.

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