FEEDING TROUGH

Before the advent of Stephen Spielberg, my favorite movie genre was westerns. I loved High Noon, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, She Wore a Yellow Ribbon, and so many, many others. The most striking scenes were usually shot in Monument Valley, Arizona. Those majestic buttes and mesas populated my dreams until Close Encounters of the Third Kind, when all I could dream about was Devil's Tower, Wyoming. But the most characteristic scenes in these movies took place on main street in some generic Western town, complete with saloon, church and hitching posts. Next to those hitching posts was a watering trough for horses, into which, inevitably, a cowboy would get dunked or bullets would pierce. I never thought those props would invade a D'VAR TORAH. But lo and behold, a fascinating debate got me thinking about those troughs.

This week's famous Haftara gives our Shabbat its name, Shabbat Chazon, Yeshayahu's vision. This stirring address to the leaders of our nation, begins, 'An ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's feeding trough, but Israel doesn't know, My people don't understand' (Yeshayahu 1:2). The normative approach to this rebuke is that the Jews have less loyalty to God than farm animals to the farmer. Even these domesticated beasts realize on which side their bread is buttered. Our Sages view ingratitude as a horrible character flaw. It's bad policy on both practical and ethical grounds.

The Radak (R' David Kimchi, 1160-1235), rubs salt into the wound by explaining that the central idea isn't gratitude, but intelligence. These animals are displaying superior awareness of their status in the nature of things than their human counterparts, in our relationship with God.

But not everyone agrees with that assessment. Shadal (R' Shmuel David Luzzato, 1800-1865) translates the word AVUS differently. We translated it 'feeding trough', but he avers that this is the threshing floor. In this scenario, the ox's level of understanding far outstrips ours. These massive beasts of burden go straight to work for their owner. They understand that they must do their master's bidding to receive life's requirements. The Talmud further chastens us by demanding that when one is lashed...
according to Jewish law, the strap must contain donkey hide, because 'a sinner who doesn't recognize God's control will be punished by means of a donkey who knows the master's AVUS' (Makot 23a).

This is a powerful censure of the Jewish people. It reflects the sorry state of affairs in ancient Israel, leading up to the destruction of the first Beit HaMikdash. Sadly, this observation remains relevant for many of our modern brethren. Most of world Jewry follows neither the letter nor spirit of God's Torah. En mass, Jews ignore the nuts and bolts of Jewish law, but, perhaps, more importantly don't live up to the high ethical standards demanded by our tradition, our Torah and our God.

However, it's the S'fat Emet who takes Yeshayahu's reprimand and applies it specifically to Tish'a b'Av. The Gerrer Rebbe is addressing a very specific audience, his Chasidim, and declares, CHAS V'SHALOM that the Jews (at least his Chasidim) don't have the same recognition of God comparable to barnyard animals' relationship to their master. After all, they bless and pray to God. So, what can this mean? Rather the Divine will for B'nei Yisrael is that we should clearly recognize and demonstrate (LEVARIR) God's kingship over the world. This was the situation during the glorious time when the Beit HaMikdash stood in Yerushalayim, and our ancestors brought the daily offerings. This daily process of serving God helped to bind (LEHITDABEK) the life force of every living thing to heaven. Even the gentiles recognized this phenomenon. As a result, many gentiles also brought offerings to God's Holy Abode. That's when Yerushalayim was the Faithful City (KIRYA NE'EMANA).

But towards the end of that magical period, Yeshayahu declares that the Jews no longer 'know their Master'. By this, he meant that the Jews had lost their way. They forgot that they had to bring this knowledge of God to all life on earth.

Rav Kook, in the previous century, added to these ideas. He taught that along with controlling our behavior, we're also required to have at least some control over what we think. Rav Kook describes 'ethical enlightenment'. This requires us to not only freely choose to behave morally but also do it because that's what God wants from us.

This is harder for us than it was for the people who were able to see God's glory daily, because now God is
only found in 'the heavenly sanctuary' (Tehilim 11:4).

Now, I think that we can understand what the S'fat Emet was saying about Yeshayahu's complaint. In those days, the choice was pretty straightforward. Either recognize God or idols, but today, idolatry is off the menu. So, one might believe that it's easier to follow God and the Torah. However, that's not true. Because, without the Beit HaMikdash, we must be the vehicle for God's glory in this world. When the Beit HaMikdash sat sublime in Yerushalayim, the moral choices were only about us. Be good or be bad. But in our present status, we must not only be good, but do it in such a way that the glory of God is evident to the whole world.

Yes, the Gerrer Chasidim of the S'fat Emet recognized God in their BRACHOT and TEFILOT, but did they make the Creator manifest in this world? With a Mikdash, following God is comparable to farm animals, either 'yes' or 'no'. Without it, the 'yes' must be accompanied by clearly demonstrating God's HASHGACHA.

On Tish'a b'Av, we, of course, mourn the destructions of the Batei Mikdash. But even more so, we mourn the seeming absence of God in the world. The purpose of the mourning is to motivate us to do something about that dual absence in our world. We not only have to build a building, but also a bridge for God's entry into this realm. 🙏