



GROWTH

At The

SHABBAT TABLE

PARSHAT BEHA'ALOTECHA

Next-Level Love

Towards the end of this week's Parsha, the Torah recounts an incident that is difficult to even read. The Jews made a tragic mistake and sinned by unreasonably complaining against Hashem out of their craving for meat, a brazen display of disrespect and lack of gratitude which ended up bringing a disastrous plague upon the nation. They disparaged the exodus from Egypt along with the open miracles that allowed them to survive in the desert, such as the miracle-food that fell from Heaven to their doorsteps, and chose to rather express irritability for their lack of fish and vegetables in the wilderness. Their insolence was so grave that even Moshe Rabbenu, the biggest lover and advocate on behalf of *Am Yisrael*, grew furious with the people and even uttered a shocking remark to G-d (Bamidbar 11:14-15): "I alone cannot carry this entire nation, for it is too heavy for me! And if this is how You deal with me, then kill me now, if I have found favor in Your eyes, and let me not see my evil!" As pointed out by the *Mizrachi* and *Siftei Chachamim*, Moshe would not have said "then kill me now" merely because of the burden of a troublesome people, and so *Rashi* contextualizes Moshe's enigmatic statement: *when G-d showed him the punishments that He is destined to bring upon them over this, Moshe said before Him, "If so [that You will punish them in this manner], kill me first."*

Here, Moshe Rabbenu, the greatest leader and prophet in history, teaches us and demonstrates greatness in its purest form. Unlike many others who are driven by personal agendas and ego, Moshe's humility and *ahavat Yisrael* drove him not only to commiserate with the people but to even put other Jews before his own life. Just try wrapping your head around this for a moment: Moshe beseeched Heaven to *take his life* just so he wouldn't have to bear witness to the self-inflicted misery of the nation! This wasn't just sympathy or empathy; Moshe would rather have *died* than have seen other Jews suffer.

We find many other great Jewish personalities that, too, were *moser nefesh* (willing to sacrifice of themselves) for their fellow *yehudim* out of sheer love for them. The years 3327-3338 [since the world's creation] were very turbulent ones. In those eleven years, Israel had become a tributary of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and the elite of Jerusalem's people from the Kingdom of Yehuda were exiled to Babylon (the other tribes from the Kingdom of Yisrael had been exiled much earlier). There was only a pitiful remnant left in Jerusalem, upon whom G-d had appointed Yirmiyahu as a prophet to remain with and exhort until the very end to turn once more to Hashem. Sadly, his message was ignored. As it would turn out, Israel's future did not rest with the small, struggling group remaining in Jerusalem, but with the dynamic exile community soon to be formed in Babylon (for which Yechezkel would serve as a prophet and mentor). When the Babylonians burned the first Bet HaMikdash (after those 11 years), they also conquered the whole land and devastated its villages. Jews who had survived the calamity were banished, as the captors led tortured and humiliated Jews in iron chains into Babylonian exile. Yirmiyahu witnessed the horrific tragedies unfold,

and although the Babylonians did not want to exile him together with the rest of the people, he refused to remain a free man while his brothers were led away in chains as slaves. He searched for them on all the roads that led to Babylonia until finally coming across a particular road stained with traces of blood. He even noticed marks on the ground left by the feet of small children, and stooped low and kissed them. When he reached the captives, he embraced them and wept with them. His love for his brothers ran so deep that he even took one of their iron chains and put it around his neck, hoping to show how he identified with them in their suffering, before being commanded by G-d later on to return to Judea, as He assured Yirmiyahu that He Himself would accompany the exiles and be a "Small Sanctuary" for them.

Generations later, there were still famous instances of such *ahavat Yisrael* coming to light. The Jewish People were thriving like never before in exile in both financial riches as well as political power before the Spanish Inquisition in 1492 C.E., in which Jews were once again persecuted. One of the leading sages of the time, R' Don Abarbanel, happened to also hold a high government position as the king's top advisor. Though the evil monarchy had a despicable hatred of Jews, the king loved the exceptionally wise "Abarbanel" and his insightful counsel and wanted him to stay behind with him, where he could continue living his personal life in wealth and tranquility. As enticing as the offer may have sounded, it wasn't even an option for R' Abarbanel, as he refused instantly and informed the king that he would remain with his people, wherever they were and no matter what they were going through.

And even nowadays, so many Jews are stepping up to the plate. After the October 7th massacre, as countless Jews took extra mitzvot upon themselves as a merit for the struggling and bereaving families in the Holy Land, a number of them didn't stop there. R' Yaakov Bender related that a student of his, since the war, doesn't take hot showers anymore except on Fridays (out of the honor of Shabbat); during the rest of the week he only takes cold showers. Another student stopped bringing snacks to yeshiva since Simchat Torah. "There are boys in yeshiva who haven't eaten cake since the war began," R' Bender recounted. Other boys have stopped sleeping with pillows ever since the hostages have abducted. Even today, despite all we've been through, we have that unique element of love for one another, to the extent that we learn from our great leaders of old to step out of our comfort zone to feel for the pain of another Jew.

Our Sages teach us that loving another Jew and the collective Jewish People is actually expressing love for Hashem Himself, since every Jew is made up of a G-dly soul with divine origin. As summed up in a beautiful quote I saw recently: "Most Americans will just never understand: when one Jew is cut, we all bleed, and when one Jew is saved, we all dance."