

"THE STONE ON THE WELL - BOULDER OR PEBBLE?"

In reading today's Sidra we are puzzled by some extraordinary incidents therein recorded. Jacob, we read, had chanced upon a group of shepherds waiting to water their sheep from a nearby well. And on it there rested a stone, a stone big enough to cover the mouth or opening of the well: "ve'ha'even ha'gedolah al pi ha'be'er". When Jacob notices the shepherds lingering, he ~~begins~~ tells them, "hashku ha'tsoan u'lechu re'u" - why don't you go ahead, remove the stone from the mouth of the well and water your sheep? It all seemed so terribly simple to the naive Jacob. But they answered: "va'yomru lo muchal ad asher ye'asfu ha'adarim" - they said: we cannot, it is impossible, until all the herds gather and the other shepherds help us. Jacob was puzzled by their attitude, and he thought he might be able to do it - and, in the Bible's eloquent simplicity: "vayigash yaakov va'yegal ess ha'even me'al pi ha'be'er" - He went over and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well.~~xxx~~ Just like that!

We can well imagine the attitude of the shepherds when Jacob walked over to the well. "Look," they probably sneered, "look who's going to play big hero - Jacob, the Batlan, the Luftmentsch!" And we can also imagine their amazement - and their embarrassment - when this same Jacob walks up to the stone and effortlessly rolls it off. The stone appeared to Jacob, say the Rabbis, "ki'mlo pi kvarah ktanah", as big as a hole of a strainer. What to these mighty muscle men appeared to be a boulder, appeared to Jacob to be a mere pebble.~~xxx~~

This narrative certainly is remarkable. The feat of strength of Jacob and the apparent weakness of the shepherds requires some explanation. Why could Jacob do it? - and even more important - why couldn't the shepherds? What does all this mean, and what is it that the Bible is trying to teach us?

The "be'er", the well, was interpreted in many different ways by our Rabbis. Some said that it refers to Zion - the love for the Jewish home. Others would have it mean the feeling for Jewish ethics, when they say: "be'er - zeh Sinai". Still others say: "be'er zeh ha'mehaleches im ha'avos", that it refers to the tradition of the Jew and his sense of continuity. In essence, what our Rabbis are trying to tell us is that the "Be'er" is the well of the Jewish personality, it is the source of the forces of opportunity and accomplishment which well up in the Jewish soul and beg to be released. It is a man's talents and his innate abilities which seek expression. But we see so many people, you might say, who never amount to much despite the fact that they have a wealth of talent and ability. True - their talents are never released because there is a stone on the mouth of their well, there are difficulties - hard, cold and rocky - which must be rolled away first. The stone represents the difficulties in the way of each and every man in his desire to set free the forces which lie in the great well of his personality and being. And it is his attitude to this stone, his approach to these difficulties, which determines whether he will be able to roll it away, like Jacob, or be forced to keep the well covered - like the shepherds.

Yes, it is the attitude which counts most. It is the idea which gives birth to the fact. The reason the shepherds could not roll the stone away was that they were convinced that they could not do it. Listen once again to the Bible's words: "va'yomru lo muchal", they said "we cannot - it's impossible". When a man thinks that a particular task is impossible, then for him it is impossible. becomes impossible.

Jacob, however, had no such difficulty. He did not think that it was impossible. He thought that it certainly was possible for a man to remove the stone from his well. He therefore went over and, without further ado, simply moved it out of the way. He thought it was possible, and so for him it became possible.

That same rule holds true for all of us. If we face the stone on our individual wells, the difficulties which keep us back from doing those constructive things which we want to do, and we imagine that stone to be a boulder - then that is what it is, and try as we can shall it cannot be budged. Our "lo nuchal" attitude makes of it an "even gdolah". Approach it, however, with the attitude that it is only "ki'mlo pi kvarah ktanah", that the stone is only a pebble, then it can be rolled away as easily as a pebble. What you think is impossible becomes impossible. Think of it as possible, and the odds are that you can do it.

Here is a man who would like to get himself an education. He must continue at night-college for two more years in order to get his degree. It ~~his~~ his opportunity to open up the well of his hidden abilities. But there is a stone which lies on that well and threatens to choke it. He must have time for his club, he must finish his office work, he must keep up his social contacts, he must have some rest. "Lo nuchal", sorry, I can't do it - it's impossible. And so the stone becomes a boulder, and for him it is now a virtual impossibility to get a degree. The "lo nuchal" made a boulder of the stone, and he cannot surmount it.

On the other hand, take a man like the late Pres. Roosevelt. In the prime of his life he was cut down by crippling infantile paralysis. What a stone! What a rock! And yet we know, from the many biographies written of him, that his attitude was anything but that of resignation, anything but "lo nuchal" - he was going to beat it. It was for him only "ki'mlo pi kvarah ktanah" - and so the stone became not a boulder but a pebble, and he removed, allowing all the world to benefit from the treasures stored up in the well of his personality.

The story is told of Marshal Foch, the famous World War I commander, who reported to his headquarters the following message: "My right flank is in retreat. My left flank is encircled. My center is caving. I am ready to attack." Here was a man who could not so say "lo nuchal", and so the stones became as pebbles, and he won.

And what is true for individuals is true for communities and for this community in particular. Of course there are stones on our well. This is not primarily a residential area, the interest in religion in general is waning, and so on and so forth. Look at it that way, and the stone is as formidable as a boulder, and we might as well give up before we start. Think of it, however, as a pebble of minor significance, remember that within walking distance of this synagogue there live a minimum of over four thousand adult Jews, and your stone becomes not a boulder but a pebble. As long as we don't say "LO nuchal", we can't, it can't be done, impossible, the well can be tapped to good use.

And so, getting back to Jacob, his show of strength was of the mind and not of the muscles; it was a matter of attitude, not sheer brawn. And it was this very same attitude, this "never say 'die'" attitude, which made him perform such miracles all his life. Thus the ivory-tower scholar, the "yoshev ohalim", was able to turn shepherd for 14 long years to work for Rachel whom he loved. Thus the "ish tam", the naive student, was able to outsmart Laban in his own game of trickery and deceit. Thus was he able to envision a ladder rising into heaven. All this - because he never said "lo nuchal" - impossible.

The Vilna Gaon, according to a folk's legend, was once asked how one becomes a Vilna Gaon. And he answered, "vil nur, vest du zein a gaon". Just don't say "lo nuchal".

And Jacob's reward was ample. When he crossed "maavar yabok" with his family and then went off by himself, an angel appeared out of heaven and began to grapple with him. The angel who represented, according to Tradition, "saro shel Esav", the patron angel of Esau, wrestled with him on those bleak plains of Mesopotamia until morning. It was the battle for spiritual supremacy - who will ultimately control the destiny of the human race:

Jacob, with his religion and faith and decency, or Esau, with his treachery and faithlessness and sinister intrigues? Jacob, fleeing from Laban after having been tricked into 14 years of hard labor, and fearful of an uncertain future, could easily have been the pessimist and conceded to the "sar shel esav". But that was not for the Jacob who rolled the stone from the well and never said "lo nuchal". And so, it is the angel who concedes to Jacob, and - and this is remarkable - in the very same expression of "yachol", the Bible relates: "vayar ki lo yachol lo", the angel saw that he could not gain the best of him, Jacob would not surrender, Jacob had never learnt the words "lo nuchal". How significant and how complimentary, therefore, the encomium which G-d bestows upon Jacob when, changing his name, He says to him: "ki sarisa im elokim ve'im anashim vatuchal" - you fought with angels and with men, and you won - "vatuchal", and you were able. There was no "lo nuchal" on your tongue, you did not regard any great and noble task as "impossible" - vatuchal!.

The limits of a man's ability are much greater than most men think they are. Tremendous forces churn incessantly in the well of human nature and particularly in the Jewish soul. The stone upon that well can either block it, or the stone can be cast away. What a man does with that stone depends on what he thinks of it. He can be a peasant and, in primitive fear, imagine it a boulder and choke off his life's mission. Or he can be a Jacob and understand that the stone is only a pebble, cast it off, and eventually grapple even with angels - "vatuchal", and win.

## Benediction

O T-d,

When we attempt to do Thy will even when it seems impossible,  
do Thou laugh with us as others laugh at us.

For we know that only by attempting the absurd

can man achieve the impossible; ~~and~~ that if man will not  
attempt to be more than human, he must remain less than human.

Amen.

and that

