

## *The End of the Book During a New Chapter in our Lives*

Sadly, we have to complete Vayikra at home this year. Tomorrow, as we close the third book of the Torah, we note that this entire book was studied outside of our shul. Yet there is so much in this book that can inspire us, especially when we are in our homes. This *sefer* includes themes about sacrifice, respect for others, cherishing family relationships and fidelity in the Jewish home. We are reminded to care for others, especially those less fortunate than us. Thinking about these ideas can enable us to offer the *Chazak Chazak Vanitchazek*, which we usually intone together, in a virtual way. Simultaneously, we can aspire to celebrate the culmination of the next *sefer*, Bamidbar, together at Keter Torah.

Parshat Behar, the first of the two Parshiyot that we will “read” this Shabbat, contains one of these empowering themes. Rav Moshe Feinstein (Derash Moshe) opined that the entire Parsha is centered on the theme of Emunah. At the outset of this Parsha, we read about the Shemita year. Only someone who believes that Hashem is the true owner and sustainer of the world can have sufficient faith to allow their land to lie fallow for an entire year. This Emunah can also explain why this Parsha includes the mitzva of tzedakka. Especially during economically challenging times, we are asked to have faith in the integrity and sincerity of people who ask us to help sustain them through their even more difficult financial challenges. With belief in them and devotion to the will of Hashem, we allow others to benefit from what we have worked so hard for. This is true at schools, at shuls, and within our families. Judaism has never accepted that individuals work hard only to provide for their own. We share the burden. It is thus not surprising that this same Parsha contains a prohibition on price gauging. Retailers must consider not only their bottom line but how their prices affect others. Again, they display and live with Emunah that Hashem will provide for them. Concurrently, they must be concerned about the dignity of others, who are also created in the image of Hashem.

One Mitzva in this Parsha, the prohibition of afflicting others with words (Rashi 25:17), apparently goes beyond its economic themes and may therefore seem to be extraneous and misplaced. While we all acknowledge the unruliness of verbal maltreatment and abuse, why is it embedded in this particular Torah portion? It seems to me that, during challenging economic times, whether on a personal or a national level, good people may “act out” with their mouths, pens and keyboards in ways that they would not during more stable times. This is also applicable at these times. Clearly, people are frustrated, angry, scared and uncertain of when stability will return. However, none of this justifies speaking and communicating with family members, friends, or educators in a degrading or deleterious manner. The Torah demands more from us. In fact, Hashem in this situation has faith that we can do better. It is therefore specifically in this Parsha that the Torah demands that we have faith in our own capacity to discipline our speech despite our own hardships. Reb Tzadok Hakohen (Tzikot Hatzadik 154) suggested that it is easier to have faith in Hashem than in ourselves. We should strive to believe in our innate goodness and to allow that best version of ourselves to be on display outside, and especially inside, our homes. Perhaps, as we turn to Hashem in a few quiet moments of prayer, we can ask Him and ourselves to act maturely in all areas of faith, to believe in Hashem, in others and in our own ability to be even greater than we previously imagined.

Shabbat Shalom & Chazak!