



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

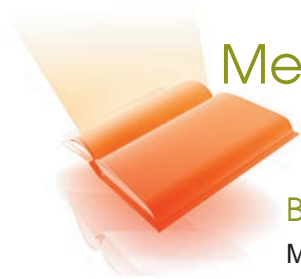
BAMIDBAR > Bamidbar

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May 26, 2012

Bamidbar

The Cedar and the Date Palm



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

How would you describe this type of person? If you heard this profile what would you think?

Strong, tall, handsome and beautiful. Righteous and devout. In a continuous state of attachment (*dveikus*) to God. Does everything a good Jew should do.

Isn't this the profile of a tzaddik? Is there anything missing?

Based on the Midrash on this week's Torah portion, "bring forth the Tribe of Levi" - which cites the Psalm "A *tzaddik* will flourish like a date palm; he will grow tall like a cedar in Lebanon" - this sermon examines two types of Jews - both of them perfectly righteous and holy. One is like the cedar - with a personality that is strong, tall, and beautiful. However, like the cedar, this type of Jew is missing something vital. The other is like the date palm, which is not as elegant as the cedar, but it possesses another quality, which is even greater and more important.

Enlivened by some humor from Chelm and the parable of the "*tzaddik* in peltz" (in a fur coat), we discover that every one of us, like the Levites, has two options in our service: we can focus only on our personal growth and "grow tall like a cedar," or we can "flourish" like a date palm.

What type are you?

THE CEDAR AND THE DATE PALM

Two Types of People

1. The Lost Sermon (Humor)

A rabbi in Eastern Europe was returning home from a neighboring village where he had just preached a sermon. On the way, he was overtaken by a farmer whose wagon was piled high with hay.

“May I offer you a ride?” asked the peasant courteously.

“Why surely,” answered the rabbi climbing on board and settling in the hay.

During the long trip, the rabbi fell asleep, not waking until he arrived home. But when he got there, he discovered that he could not find his notebook in which he kept the notes for his sermons.

“I must have lost it in the hay!” he exclaimed. “Now some dumb ox will eat it!”

The next evening in the synagogue, he strode to the bimah and announced to the congregation:

“I have lost my notebook in a load of hay. I want you to know that if some dumb ox ever comes to this town to preach, his sermon will be mine, not his!”¹

You laugh, but I would like to add that this is not meant to reflect on the sermon that follows.

Okay, now to get serious for a bit...

¹ Adapted from the *Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor* by Henry D. Spalding, p.112.

2. The Tribe of Levi

This week's Torah reading tells us about the service in the Temple, describing as follows the role of the Tribe of Levi:

Bring forth the Tribe of Levi, and present it to Aaron, the priest, so that [its members] shall serve him. They shall safeguard his trust and the trust of the entire community in the Tent of the Meeting, and they shall perform any necessary service in the Sanctuary.²

Thus we see that the Levites were appointed as representatives of the entire Jewish people to serve in the Sanctuary. Through their service they drew down God's blessings to His people – a truly holy task.

The Midrash³ describes them by quoting the words of Psalm 92: “A *tzaddik* (holy righteous man) will flourish like a date palm; he will grow tall like a cedar in Lebanon.”⁴

How were the Levites like trees ... like the date palm and the cedar?

The Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, explains.⁵

3. Two Types of Tzaddikim

There are two types of *tzaddikim*, both perfectly righteous and holy. One is likened to a date palm and the other to a cedar. A cedar possesses many qualities; it is strong, tall, and beautiful.⁶ However, it produces no fruit.⁷ The date palm, on the other hand, is none of those things. It possesses, however, another quality, and an important one at that – it “flourishes” and as it flourishes, it produces beautiful and sweet fruit that energizes all who eat it.⁸

²Numbers 3:6-7.

³*Bamidbar Rabba* 3:1.

⁴*Tehillim* 92:13.

⁵Tzava'at Ha'Rivash section 125. See Likkutei Sichot vol. 2 p. 557-558.

⁶Ezekiel 31:3.

⁷*Bamidbar Rabba* 3:1. See also *Ta'anit* 25b.

⁸*Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim ibid., Kesuvos* 10b.

The first type of *tzaddik*, who is like a cedar, is strong tall, and beautiful in his service to God, but he produces no fruit – that is he does not affect others with his holiness or righteousness. Yes, he learns Torah, fulfills all the commandments and, in general, lives a thoroughly righteous life. However, he lives only for himself, concerned only about his own spiritual growth and his reward. He does not wield any influence over his brethren, and he is not concerned with bringing others back to God, so that their goodness may multiply and be fruitful in the world.

There is no question that the *tzaddik* who is like a cedar is a holy man. But, ultimately, he does not engage in the kind of divine service that God desires from us.

In Chassidic parables, he is called a *tzaddik in peltz*, “a holy man in a fur coat,” which is another way of saying “a selfish man.” Because there are two ways to get warm in a cold room: 1) by putting on a fur coat and warming yourself, or 2) by lighting a fire so that everyone is warmed.

Now, the second type of *tzaddik* is compared to a date palm, which produces fruits. The Psalm says “he will flourish like a date palm” – that is, he will bring out “the noble out of the worthless,”⁹ as the Prophet Jeremiah put it, for he will cause goodness to flourish and multiply in the world.

This also relates to the statement of the Talmudic sages that “perfect *tzaddikim* cannot stand in the place where *ba’alei teshuvah* (masters of repentance) stand.”¹⁰

When they made this comparison, the sages were clearly referring to the *tzaddikim* who are like the cedar, and who cannot stand in the place of the *tzaddikim* who are like the date palm. For the *tzadikkim* who are like date palm are masters of repentance (*baalei teshuvah*) since they restore others to goodness, turning “many away from iniquity,”¹¹ as the Prophet Malachi put it.

Now, what is the message in this for us – who are not *tzaddikim*?

⁹ Jeremiah 15:19.

¹⁰ *Berachot* 34b.

¹¹ Malachi 2:6.

4. The *Tzaddik* from Chelm (Humor)

Before I answer that question, let me tell you a story about the *tzaddik* from Chelm.

In that fabled city, there once dwelt a *tzaddik* whose fame for wisdom and ability to inspire others had spread throughout all of Poland. Therefore, he was invited to preach and teach in many places, where he was always welcomed with great fanfare. And thus, he was constantly on the road.

Now, this great *tzaddik* had a driver who, although he loved his master very much, also envied him his great popularity. One day, as he was at the reins, the driver turned to the great *tzaddik* and confided his feelings, and then made the following request:

“Rabbi, please don’t take me to be too impertinent, but I have a favor to ask of you. I realize only too well that I am an uneducated man – a nobody – but I too would like to be welcomed as you always are. Just for once, I would like to know how it feels to have everyone look up to me and marvel at my wisdom.”

The rabbi nodded sympathetically. “I can understand your feelings, my friend. But how could that happen?”

“What if we were to change clothes. Then you would be the driver, and I would be the famous *tzaddik*. Please rabbi, just for one day!”

Now the great rabbi had never lost the common touch. He also had a keen sense of humor, and the idea appealed to him. But he immediately detected one flaw in the driver’s scheme.

“I must point out to you,” he told the driver, “that just as the cover does not make the book, so the rabbi’s clothes do not make the man. You are not learned and you will be questioned by those who know more than you. You might be humiliated by them.”

But the driver would not be deterred. “I’ll think of something. Don’t worry!” he assured his master.

So they exchanged clothes and soon they arrived at their destination.

As usual, huge crowds awaited the famed *tzaddik*. The driver, now posing as the honored guest, was thrilled at the honors bestowed upon him. It was even more than he had hoped for.

Inside the synagogue, the impostor was given the seat of honor, and all the wise men of the city gathered around him. “Learned rabbi,” said one of them, “would you be kind enough to explain this passage in the law? It is very complicated, and we simply cannot understand it.”

The real *tzaddik* tensed. Now here was the trouble he feared. But the driver calmly studied the sacred book before him even though he was completely illiterate.

Then he spoke:

“Is this the question you save for my yearly visit? This?! Why this is so simple even my driver can explain it to you.”¹²

5. The Message for Us

[Now back to our question: What is the message in this for us – who are not *tzaddikim*?]

Well, let me remind you of what the Prophet Isaiah told God: “Your people are all *tzaddikim*.”¹³

This means that every one of us is a *tzaddik*, and every one of us should serve God like the Levites.¹⁴

And just like the Levites, we also have two options in our service: we can focus only on our personal growth and “grow tall like a cedar,” or we can “flourish” and bear fruit like a date palm.

¹² Adapted from the *Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor* by Henry D. Spalding, p.116-117.

¹³ Isaiah 60:21.

¹⁴ Rambam, conclusion of *Hilchos Shemita v' Yoveil*.

God's ultimate desire is that we "flourish like a date palm" ... that we produce good and sweet fruit. Our mission in life is not just to take care of our own needs, but to give of our own time, strength and energy – all of which could have been used for our own benefit – to positively influence others.

6. Bearing Fruit

Like a fruit-producing tree, we each have the power to positively affect all those we encounter, and elicit from them their inner beauty, so that they turn into good and sweet fruit.

Bearing fruit and effecting others in this way comes back to enhance our own beings so that we continue to flourish in our own growth as well. Indeed, only when we bear such fruit, can we be deemed a flourishing date palm, constantly growing and advancing from level to level.

It is quite possible to serve God in a "cedar-like" manner and be considered a *tzaddik*, Such a one possesses abundant qualities and merits of spiritual loftiness, strength and beauty. Still, this is not the ultimate purpose of existence.

Our higher calling beckons us not to be selfish with our time, effort and soul powers, but to devote all our energies to affect the people around us and our entire environment.

This is the clarion call of Sinai, and on this holiday may we all resolve to respond to it. Amen.