

SIMHA BUNAM OF PZHYSHA

Verses for Chess

When Rabbi Bunam was young and a trader in lumber, he liked to play chess with persons of rather dubious reputation. Whenever he made a move he did it with inner fervor as serene as if he were intent on some holy rite, and from time to time he accompanied his actions by a jesting verse which he half spoke, half sang. For instance: "Be careful when you move at chess, or you'll end up with one pawn less." The verses always suited the stage of the game, but the tone in which they were said was such that his audience felt impelled to listen. They realized more and more that the verses had to do with their very lives. They did not want to admit it, they resisted, they yielded. Their hearts were possessed with the great turning.

The Wrong Move

Once Rabbi Bunam was playing chess with a man he was particularly anxious to turn from his evil way. He made a wrong move, and now it was the move of his opponent, who put him in a difficult position. Rabbi Bunam begged to be allowed to take back his move and the man consented. But when the same thing happened again, the other refused to give in to him a second time. "I let it pass once," he said, "but this time it must count." "Woe to the man," the zaddik cried, "who has crept so deep into evil that prayer can no longer help him turn!" His fellow player stared at him silent and motionless, his soul on fire.

The Walls

On a business trip to Leipzig, Rabbi Bunam, together with a number of merchants who had accompanied him, stopped at the house of a Jew in order to say the Afternoon Prayer. But the moment he entered he realized that he had come to an ill-smelling house; never had he prayed in such a room. He gave the others a sign and they left. The rabbi turned to go to the next house. But after a few steps he stopped. "We must go back!" he cried. "The walls are summoning me to judgment because I scorned and put them to shame."

Do They Deny God?

When Rabbi Bunam was in Danzig he sat down at table every Saturday with the “Germans”—that was how those Jews who had given up the Torah and Jewish ways were called—and spoke about the Torah. But the “Germans” only made fun of his strange talk. Indignantly his son Rabbi Abraham Moshe begged him to stop talking about the Torah to unbelievers who only mocked it.

“What can I do?” said Rabbi Bunam. “When the time comes and the word wakens within me—how can I restrain it? All the same though—next sabbath when I am getting ready to talk, step on my foot under the table to remind me to keep quiet.” And so his son did on the following sabbath when they were again seated at table.

But Rabbi Bunam reproved him: “No! These people here are not unbelievers! I just heard one of them who has a bad headache cry out: ‘Hear, O Israel!’ Now Pharaoh really was an unbeliever, for when he was suffering under the blows of God he declared that he did not know Him.”

The Three Prisoners

After the death of Rabbi Uri of Strelisk, who was called the Seraph, one of his hasidim came to Rabbi Bunam and wanted to become his disciple. Rabbi Bunam asked: “What was your teacher’s way of instructing you to serve?”

“His way,” said the hasid, “was to plant humility in our hearts. That was why everyone who came to him, whether he was a nobleman or a scholar, had first to fill two large buckets at the well in the market place, or to do some other hard and menial labor in the street.”

Rabbi Bunam said: “I shall tell you a story. Three men, two of them wise and one foolish, were once put in a dungeon black as night, and every day food and eating utensils were lowered down to them. The darkness and the misery of imprisonment had deprived the fool of his last bit of sense, so that he no longer knew how to use the utensils he could not see. One of his companions showed him, but the next day he had forgotten again, and so his wise companion had to teach him continually.

“But the third prisoner sat in silence and did not bother about the fool. Once the second prisoner asked him why he never offered his help.

“ ‘Look!’ said the other. ‘You take infinite trouble and yet you never reach the goal, because every day destroys your work. But I sit here and try to think out how I can manage to bore a hole in the wall so that light and sun can enter, and all three of us can see everything.’ ”

Saved

Rabbi Bunam told this story: “Rabbi Eleazar of Amsterdam was at sea on a journey to the Holy Land, when, on the eve of New Year’s Day, a storm almost sank the ship. Before dawn Rabbi Eleazar told all his people to go on deck and blow the ram’s horn at the first ray of light. When they had done this, the storm died down.”

“But do not think,” Rabbi Bunam added, “that Rabbi Eleazar intended to save the ship. On the contrary, he was quite certain it would go down, but before dying with his people he wanted to fulfil a holy commandment, that of blowing the ram’s horn. Had he been out to save the ship through a miracle, he would not have succeeded.”

A Bit of Sand

Rabbi Bunam was once walking outside the city with some of his disciples. He bent, picked up a speck of sand, looked at it, and put it back exactly where he had found it. “He who does not believe,” he said, “that God wants this bit of sand to lie in this particular place, does not believe at all.”

Two Pockets

Rabbi Bunam said to his disciples: “Everyone must have two pockets, so that he can reach into the one or the other, according to his needs. In his right pocket are to be the words: ‘For my sake was the world created,’ and in his left: ‘I am earth and ashes.’ ”

Two Doors

Rabbi Bunam said: “Man is always passing through two doors: out of this world and into the next, and out and in again.”

The Wedding Ring

Rabbi Bunam taught: “Like one who has made all the preparations for the wedding and forgotten to buy the wedding ring, so is he who has toiled a whole life long and forgotten to hallow himself—in the end he wrings his hands and devours himself in remorse.”

The Scarf

Rabbi Bunam’s favorite disciple had lost his scarf and looked all over for it with great zeal. His companions laughed at him. “He is right,” said the zaddik, “to treasure a thing which has served him. Just so after death the soul visits the body that has sunk and leans above it.”

Blow!

Once when Rabbi Bunam honored a man in his House of Prayer by asking him to blow the ram’s horn, and the fellow began to make lengthy preparations to concentrate on the meaning of the sounds, the zaddik cried out: “Fool, go ahead and blow!”

To Clutch at Life

Rabbi Bunam said: “On New Year’s the world begins anew, and before it begins anew, it comes to a close. Just as before dying, all the powers of the body clutch hard at life, so man at the turn of the year ought to clutch at life with all his might and main.”

In Exile

On New Year’s Day, when he had returned from the service, Rabbi Bunam told this story to the hasidim who had gathered in his house:

A king’s son rebelled against his father and was banished from the sight of his face. After a time, the king was moved to pity his son’s fate and bade him be sought out. It was long before one of the messengers found him, far from home. He was at a village inn, dancing barefoot and in a torn shirt in the midst of drunken peasants.

The courtier bowed and said: “Your father has sent me to ask you what you desire. Whatever it may be, he is prepared to grant your wish.”

The prince began to weep. “Oh,” said he, “if only I had some warm clothing and a pair of stout shoes!”

“See,” added Rabbi Bunam, “that is how we whine for the small needs of the hour and forget that the Divine Presence is in exile!”

I See

One day, after he had gone blind, Rabbi Bunam visited Rabbi Fishel, the fame of whose miracle-cures had spread through the land. “Entrust yourself to my care,” said his host. “I shall restore your light.”

“That is not necessary,” answered Bunam. “I see what I need to see.”

Do Not Change Places

Rabbi Bunam once said: “I should not like to change places with our father Abraham! What good would it do God if Abraham became like blind Bunam, and blind Bunam became like Abraham? Rather than have this happen, I think I shall try to grow a little over and beyond myself.”

The Fool and the Sage

Rabbi Bunam once said: “If I were to set out to give learned and subtle interpretations of the Scriptures, I could say a great many things. But a fool says what he knows, while a sage knows what he says.”

The Great Crime

Rabbi Bunam said to his hasidim: “The sins which man commits—those are not his great crime. Temptation is powerful and his strength is slight! The great crime of man is that he can turn at every moment, and does not do so.”

Eternal Creation

Rabbi Bunam taught: “This is how we must interpret the first words in the Scriptures: ‘In the beginning of God’s creation of the heaven and the earth.’ For even now, the world is still in a state of creation. When a craftsman makes a tool and it is finished, it does not require him any longer. Not so with the world! Day after day, instant after instant, the world requires the renewal of the powers of the primordial word through which it was created, and if the power of these powers were withdrawn from it for a single moment, it would lapse into *tohu va-vohu* – formlessness and void.”

It Is I

Rabbi Bunam was asked: “It is written: ‘I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt.’ Why does it not read: ‘I am the Lord thy God, who created heaven and earth’?”

Rabbi Bunam expounded: “ ‘Heaven and earth!’ Then man might have said: ‘Heaven—that is too much for me.’ So God said to man: ‘I am the one who fished you out of the mud. Now you come here and listen to me!’ ”

The Meaning

When Rabbi Bunam lay dying his wife burst into tears.

He said: “What are you crying for? My whole life was only that I might learn how to die.”

From Now On

After Rabbi Bunam’s death, his disciple Yitzhak of Vorki came to his master’s son, Abraham Moshe, to speak words of comfort to him. The son lamented: “And who will teach me now?”

“Take courage,” said the disciple. “Up to now he has taught you in his coat; from now on, he will teach you without his coat on.”