



GLOBAL WOMEN'S CAMPAIGN TO LEARN PIRKEI AVOS

לע"נ הרב מנחם מענדל ע"ה בן יבלח"ט הרב ישראל שיחי'

Chodesh Av

Why do you Laugh?

The Romans ruled Eretz Yisroel and would make many harsh decrees against the Yidden. One time when this happened, the great leaders of the time, Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Akiva decided to travel together to Rome to see what they could do about canceling the terrible decree. As they approached Rome the noise and majesty of the big city became apparent to them. The other Tanaim began to cry but Rabbi Akiva laughed.

Rabbi Akiva asked, "Why do you cry?"

The Tanaim explained, "These goyim who serve avodah zora and who destroyed our precious Beis Hamikdash are living in peace and wealth. It's a desecration of Hashem's name! Why do you laugh?"

Rabbi Akiva explained, "If wicked goyim get to enjoy such benefits, all the more so will those who listen to Hashem receive even greater reward."

On another occasion, the same group of Tanaim were traveling to Yerushalayim. When they approached the place where the Beis Hamikdash was and saw the rubble, they tore their clothes in mourning. They then got closer and saw a fox walking out of the place of the Kodosh Hakodashim. They began to cry, but again, Rabbi Akiva laughed.

Rabbi Akiva asked, "Why do you cry?"

The Tanaim explained, "Such a holy place being defiled by animals, how could we not cry? Why do you laugh?"

Rabbi Akiva explained, "Uriah said in a nevuah that our holiest places will be turned to rubble and defiled. Zechariya said that one day the streets will once again be rebuilt and full of people. Now that I see Uriah's nevuah has come true, I am reassured that also Zechariya's nevuah will also come true."

The Tanaim said, "Akiva, you have comforted us. Akiva, you have comforted us."

The Rebbe Analyzes

In both stories, the question of the Tanaim is readily understood. Laughing and being happy when seeing our enemies thriving and when seeing our holiest place in ruins is very puzzling.

However, Rabbi Akiva's question is not so easily understood.

- Wasn't it obvious to him why they were crying? In fact even Rabbi Akiva tore his clothes when approaching the Har Habayis, so he obviously did feel pain when seeing the awful sight.
- Another question is why were they only comforted after the second story and not the first?
- Also, why did they use the double expression of "you have comforted us, you have comforted us." (The reason isn't because they are talking about the two incidents because these two stories happened years apart in two totally different countries.)
- Another question we can ask; why was it specifically Rabbi Akiva who was able to see the deeper meaning in both sights and was able to be joyful even when facing such pain?

The Rebbe explains:

Rabbi Akiva meant to ask them, not why are you crying, but rather why specifically NOW? They knew and experienced the might of the Roman Empire firsthand. After all, that was the reason they were traveling there, and they definitely knew that the Beis Hamikdash had been destroyed. On their way up to Har Habayis they had even torn their clothes, so why were they starting to cry suddenly now?



The Tanaim answered him, that of course they knew it well, but seeing it with their own eyes was something else entirely. They were indignant over the fact that Romans were living it up in wealth and power after destroying the Beis Hamikdash and felt it was a Chilul Hashem. Not only were they victorious but they were shocked that they STILL were so powerful all these years later.

In the second incident, they hadn't imagined the extent of the absolute devastation and defilement caused by the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash. They knew it was destroyed but seeing the fox walk out of the place where in the past a stranger couldn't even approach to enter, was too much for them.

Akiva said, yes that's true. Neither had I imagined how bad it truly was, but now I can be reassured that rewards for those who fear Hashem will be much greater and long lasting than we ever imagined and the fulfillment of the promise to rebuild the Beis Hamikdash will be to a greater extent than we may have thought. And that is why I laugh.



Long Range Vision

This follows the pattern of disagreement in Halacha commonly found by these Tanaim. The other Tanaim would say that Halacha is decided based on what the immediate situation is, while Rabbi Akiva would say that one has to look at the long term gain.

An example of this is the famous question: if an unwell person will fast on Tzom Gedalya then he may be too weak to fast on Yom Kippur. Rabbi Akiva would say that desecrating Yom Kippur is worse than desecrating Tzom Gedalya so maybe he should not fast on Tzom Gedalya. The others would say you cannot desecrate a fast if you are able to fast, so even for such a person he should fast on Tzom Gedalya.

The other Tanaim react to the facts on the ground as they are in front of them. Rabbi Akiva looks at how things will be.

It's Also Good Now

Not only does Rabbi Akiva have a long range vision, but even in the present, the bad that he sees in front of him is celebrated because he sees the good that will come from it. As Rabbi Akiva is known to say, everything Hashem does is good. He didn't say it will be good, but it is actually good now, even if it seems negative.

The first story brings out the idea that the negative we see is not good but it hints to a future time that it will be good. The fact that the Romans are so bad yet they enjoy so much good, tells us that those who do fear Hashem have a lot to look forward to— much more than what was seen in Rome.

The second story brings out the idea that the bad itself is the beginning and a part of the future good. What's happening now, itself, is actually good.

This is why the Tanaim told Rabbi Akiva that after this story they were comforted. Because this is true comfort; to see that all is for our good even as it is happening, even though it may feel and look bad to us.

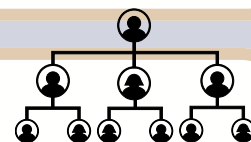


This is also the reason why they said it twice, as a double comfort. The future will be good and also the present is good, although we may not see it.

The fact that the foxes were walking around, and the Kodesh Hakodashim was so defiled is the beginning of the Geula. In order for the second Nevua to happen the first one HAD to happen.

It's like when a seed must break apart and disintegrate in order for it to start taking root. During the time of Golus we are plowing the ground for the planting and growth of the Geula. The breaking up and destruction isn't just a prerequisite to the Geula but is an actual part of the process of making the Geula happen.

DIFFERENT YICHUS



Rabbi Akiva specifically was able to see this because his upbringing was very different from the other three Tanaim.

Rabban Gamliel came from a well known family of leaders and princes of the Sanhedrin. Rabbi Elazar ben Azzaria was a Kohen and came from a wealthy and very respected family. Rabbi Yehoshua was a Levi and had the zechus to sing in the Beis Hamikdash.

Rabbi Akiva was an ignorant shepherd until the age of 40 and came from a family of converts. His ancestors had been part of those who had caused a lot of harm to the Yidden. Yet he became the leading Tana of his generation. People came from near and far to learn from him and he had over 24,000 students.

He knew, from personal experience, that not only can a difficult beginning end well (like the first story) but also that the difficulties are the building blocks that are sometimes a prerequisite for greatness (like the second story).

UNIQUENESS OF A GER

Being descendants of Gerim can give one an advantage over people born into the Jewish nation for many generations. Yidden take pride in their yichus, who their ancestors are. Gerim take pride in the only yichus they have; that they have connected themselves to Hashem. Being that Hashem is not limited by time, Rabbi Akiva was able to easily tap into the ability to see things the way Hashem sees them, how they will be. He could see that even in the present, bad is for the good and to rejoice.

THINK AND DISCUSS

As we think about hardships in our own lives, we may become despondent. Don't let today's difficulties define your future. Not only should we not let them destroy us, we must use these difficulties as pathways to growth.

- How has a previous very difficult situation changed you or your life for the better?
- Think about a difficulty you are currently experiencing. How may you use this opportunity for growth?

May we only experience open and revealed good that is apparent to all!



A Story

When Shirley Chisholm was elected in 1968 to represent New York's 12th District, which included her own neighborhood of Crown Heights in Brooklyn, she made headlines as the first African-American woman elected to Congress. However, she soon found her congressional career stunted at its start by race-related politics. Bowing to political pressures from Southern politicians, the House's leadership assigned Chisholm to the Agriculture Committee, a place where it was assumed that she could have little influence.

At the time, some in the New York media questioned the appointment and expressed doubt as to Chisholm's ability to affect the legislative agenda.

The less than open-arms welcome caused Chisholm, who died in 2005, an understandable amount of frustration, according to Anna V. Jefferson, a former state senator from New York's 22nd District.

"She was trying to help poor people," explained Jefferson. "She was interested in taking care of the issues in the inner city. That committee had no power" to do that.

But a phone call from the Rebbe's secretariat—a simple "the Lubavitcher Rebbe wants to see you"—changed her attitude, says David Luchins, who was a senior advisor to the late U.S. Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) and chairs the political-science department at Touro College.

According to Luchins, a 20-year veteran of Moynihan's staff who in 1983 heard the story firsthand from Chisholm at a party celebrating her retirement from Congress, the Rebbe—Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory—told the congresswoman, "I know you're very upset."

Chisholm, who lived a block away from the Rebbe and had met him once before when she was running for Congress and searching for endorsements, told the Rebbe, "I am upset. I'm insulted. What should I do?"

The Rebbe, who had declined to endorse Chisholm's candidacy and that of her predecessors because of his policy of non-involvement in political campaigns, turned the situation around.

"What a blessing G-d has given you!" the Rebbe told Chisholm, urging her to take advantage of the Divine Providence that put her in a position to do something about food supplies. "This country has so much surplus food, and there are so many hungry people. You can use this gift that G-d gave you to feed hungry people. Find a creative way to do it."

Tasked with this charge, Chisholm happened to meet U.S. Sen. Bob Dole (R-Kan.) on her first day in Washington. The farm-state politician—and later, Senate Majority Leader and presidential candidate—was looking for help in shoring up the economic plight of Midwestern farmers who were losing money on their crops.

"Americans started purchasing [produce] from Cuba," explained Jefferson, who was a close associate of Chisholm's. "So as a result of the imports, the farmers were poor."

According to Luchins, Dole told Chisholm: "Our farmers have all this extra food, we don't know what to do with it." Chisholm thought, "One second. The rabbi!"

During the next few years, and for the duration of the 1970s, Chisholm worked to expand the national Food Stamp Program, which allowed poor Americans to buy subsidized food. Finally, in 1973, the Agriculture and Consumer Protection Act mandated that Food Stamps be made available in every jurisdiction in the United States.

It was in the creation of the WIC program, however, that Chisholm really made her mark. The 1969 White House Conference on Food Nutrition and Health recommended targeted food supplements for high-risk pregnant women and their infants. Chisholm, in the House, and Dole, in the Senate, championed the idea and got Congress to approve a two-year pilot project that would be administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The USDA, however, fought the measure. It finally took a federal lawsuit to get the USDA to relent, and today more than 8 million people receive WIC benefits each month, according to U.S. government figures.

Chisholm "was responsible for the food program," said Vernell Alburary, former president of the Shirley Chisholm Institute for Children. "She was a strong, determined individual."

But Chisholm herself gave ultimate credit to the Rebbe, said Luchins.

She "said at her retirement party, 'I owe this because a rabbi who is an optimist taught me that what you may think is a challenge is a gift from G-d,'" said Luchins in an interview he gave to Jewish Educational Media. "'And if poor babies,' I heard her say this, 'If poor babies have milk, and poor children have food, it's because this Rabbi in Crown Heights had vision.'"

-From Chabad.org, by Dovid Zaklikowski