



IT HAPPENED ONCE

As Rachel lay on the coarse pallet of straw which now served as her bed she thought back to her life before Akiva. She had been a princess or almost so, the beloved daughter of the wealthy Ben Kalba Savua, and there was nothing she lacked, not the most beautiful dresses, nor the finest delicacies. But, she would not exchange her life with Akiva for even the most precious gem in the world. For her aspirations lay elsewhere--her husband would one day be a great Torah scholar. It didn't matter that her father cast her out of their home, or that people laughed at her and scorned her--she had no doubt that one day Akiva would be a leader in Israel.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Akiva rose to answer and saw on the threshold a man dressed in tatters. "Please, have pity on us. My wife has just given birth and I have no bed for her and the baby." Rachel leapt to her feet, looking helplessly around for something to give him. Sensing her confusion, he said, "Just a bit of straw would help a lot." She gathered a large pile of soft straw and handed it to the grateful man.

"You see, Rachel," whispered her husband, "they are even poorer than we are, but some day I will buy you a golden tiara engraved with scenes of Jerusalem, just like your friends wear." She smiled at him, happy with his loving thoughts.

The days went by and Rachel grew accustomed to her new status. Life was hard, but her thoughts never dwelt on the present; she waited for her dream of the future to be realized.

Akiva knew that his work was cut out for him. Forty years old, he was just now embarking on his education, just now beginning with aleph-beit. Was it possible for him to achieve the heights imagined by his wife? Akiva's thoughts were interrupted by an amazing sight, for there a bit to the side of the road was a huge rock with a large hole bored through the center. He stared at it wondering what kind of tool could have made the hole and for what purpose, when he noticed a small drop of water hitting the hole and then falling again into the depression. He watched as the process repeated itself again and again. Then, he realized that the soft, pure drops had bored the hole in the hard rock. He had stumbled upon the answer to his unspoken question; if water could make a hole in solid rock, then surely the holy words of Torah could work their way into his willing heart, even at the age of forty.

The traits that Rachel had perceived in her shepherd husband matured and his learning advanced, until he reached the stage where he attracted his own students. He was actually acquiring fame as a teacher of Torah and a scholar in his own right. Rachel had encouraged him to go away and immerse himself in further learning; it was hard to believe that twenty-four long years had passed. Akiva the shepherd had become Rabbi Akiva, the teacher of twenty-four thousand students, the greatest of his generation. And the time had finally come for his triumphant return to home and his wife.

The huge crowd thronged around Rabbi Akiva and his disciples. Suddenly a woman emerged from the crowd and reached for the hem of his coat which she kissed. The students surrounded her and attempted to chase her away, but their teacher reprimanded them: "She is my wife! Know that what is mine and what is yours is all hers!"

Also amongst those gathered to welcome the tzadik was Ben Kalba Savua, the father of Rachel. He had suffered the pangs of regret during the many years since he had driven his daughter from his home. Now, the arrival of the tzadik of the generation would give him an opportunity to learn how to right the terrible wrong he had done her. Rabbi Akiva graciously admitted the old man into his presence and listened while he related the story, not knowing that this was his own father-in-law.

As the man's story unfolded, Akiva realized who he was.

"If you had known that the poor, ignorant shepherd would one day become a great scholar, would you have acted differently?" inquired Rabbi Akiva.

"I promise you, if I had thought that he would know even one Torah law, I would have permitted the marriage!"

"Then know, that I am that shepherd, and it is only through the merit of your daughter that I have achieved this position!"

Rabbi Akiva was able to nullify the vow Ben Kalba Savua rashly made so many years before. The old man, in his happiness, gave the couple half of his great wealth.

Their dream realized, Rachel and Akiva felt the old pain of separation diminish, overwhelmed by the new joy of their reunion. Rabbi Akiva hadn't forgotten the promise he made many years before--he had achieved greatness; and in addition to the crown of Torah, Rachel wore a golden crown of Jerusalem.

THOUGHTS THAT COUNT

On the weekly Torah Portion

And if your brother becomes poor...do not take from him any usury or increase (Lev. 25:35, 36)

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said: "The Psalms say about one who lends money without interest, 'His money was not given to extract usury, and a bribe was never taken against the innocent.' He who does these will never stumble." Conversely, one who lends money with interest is forewarned that his wealth will eventually dissipate.

(Talmud, Baba Metzia)

And you shall not deceive one another (Lev. 25:17)

Can a person really deceive another, especially in spiritual matters? Even if he succeeds in his deception, the victory is only temporary and the deceit is always eventually revealed. The only person, therefore, who has been effectively deceived is the deceiver himself. And is it so difficult to fool a fool? (Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch)

And you shall return, every man, unto his family (Lev. 25:10)

In the fiftieth, or Jubilee year, the former slave returns to his family, but not, as brought down in the name of Rabbi Yehuda, to his former stature.

Everything can be restored to a slave--his freedom, his inheritance, and his family--but the status and honor afforded him before he sold himself into slavery can never be returned. This was forfeited the moment he indentured himself. (Chavat-Yair)

For strangers and sojourners are you with Me (Lev. 25:23)

The more a person considers himself only a sojourner and a temporary resident of this world, the closer he is to G-d. And, unfortunately, the opposite is also true... (Rabbi Boruch of Mezhibozh)



7:57 Candle Lighting Time

NY Metro Area
16 Iyar / May 24
Torah Portion Behar
Ethics Ch 4
Shabbat ends 9:04 PM

בס"ד
1824
16 Iyar, 5784
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נוסד תוך ימי השלושים

Dedicated to the memory of Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka Schneerson
"May there be peace in your wall, tranquility in your palaces" (Psalm 122:6)

L'Chaim



LIVING WITH THE REBBE

from the teachings of the Rebbe on the Torah portion

The Torah portion of Behar contains the Biblical prohibition against usury: "Do not take from him any usury or increase, and you shall fear your G-d, that your brother may live with you." Immediately following this verse we are told: "I am the L-rd your G-d who brought you out of the land of Egypt... to be your G-d." Our Sages learned from the juxtaposition of these two verses that when a person accepts the prohibition against lending money with interest, it is as if he accepts the yoke of Heaven. Conversely one who throws off the restriction against usury, simultaneously throws off the yoke of Heaven as well.

What is so significant about usury that the Rabbis used it to illustrate the concept of subservience to G-d? How does charging interest, or refraining from doing so, express the relationship between man and G-d?

Collecting interest on money means making a profit without exerting oneself, at the expense of another person's labor. Once a person lends money to another, that money becomes the property of the borrower, even though he owes the amount to the one who lent it. A person who charges interest is therefore profiting from money which is not his, and is taking advantage of the fact that it once belonged to him.

By understanding this concept, we understand why avoiding usury is so crucial: G-d's goodness and blessings are only bestowed as a direct result of our labor. Both physical and spiritual rewards are only attainable after much toil and effort. The 613 commandments of the Torah are practical expressions of this principle, each one a specific deed to be performed in order to help us reach a higher spiritual level.

But why is all this work necessary? Couldn't G-d, the source of all good, have bestowed that goodness upon us without the labor? The answer is that it is precisely because of G-d's goodness that He chose this system, for we can only truly appreciate that for which we have worked.

An undeserved gift is called "bread of shame," and provides neither joy nor satisfaction. But when a person works toward a goal and then receives his reward, the value of that gift is appreciated and his happiness is that much greater. That is why we are obligated to expend so much effort in our worship of G-d. Spirituality must be attained through hard work and not conferred as a gift.

The mitzva which best illustrates this principle is the prohibition against usury. When a person refrains from it, according to G-d's will, he confirms G-d's plan for the world, that profit may only be accrued as the result of man's work. A person who charges interest defies, with his behavior, this basic principle which is a foundation of the entire Torah.

Adapted from the works of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

Lag BaOmer and the Bow & Arrow

Every evening from the second night of Passover to the day before Shavuot, we count another day, marking the 49 days (seven weeks) between these two holidays. This Mitzva is known as Sefirat HaOmer – the Counting of the Omer.

Lag BaOmer, the thirty-third day of the counting of the Omer, is the anniversary of the passing of the great Talmudical sage, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (circa 165 ce).

Rabbi Shimon was the first to expound upon the mystical secrets of the Divine wisdom. The Chassidic masters have explained that the growing popularity of the inner dimensions of Torah reflect history's progression toward the day when, "The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of G-d, as the waters cover the sea."

Before his passing, Rabbi Shimon instructed his disciples to observe his yearzeit, the anniversary of his passing, as a day of festivity, as it marks the culmination of all he achieved in his life.

On Lag BaOmer it is customary to take children outside to play with bows and arrows to commemorate that in the course of Rabbi Shimon's lifetime, no rainbow appeared in the sky. The rainbow is a sign of human failing: G-d promised that whenever mankind shall be as undeserving as in the generation of the Flood, the rainbow will remind Him of His vow to never again destroy His world.

But as long as Rabbi Shimon was alive, his merit alone was enough to ensure that G-d would not regret

His creation. Hence the connection of the bow (keshet in Hebrew, which also translates as 'rainbow') to Lag BaOmer.

Based on the above explanation, the bow independently, representing the rainbow, has a negative connotation. There is, however, a positive aspect to the bow.

The inventor of the bow and arrow conceived how the tension in an arched bough of wood could propel a missile over great distances. To do so, he first had to grasp the paradox that the more the deadly arrow is drawn toward oneself, the more distant a foe it can reach.

Therein lies the deeper significance of the connection of the bow to Lag BaOmer.

The "revealed" part of Torah is like a close-range weapon in that it aids us in meeting the obvious challenges of life. It teaches us to distinguish between the holy and the profane. Do not kill or steal, it tells us; feed the hungry, remember the Shabbat day, eat only kosher foods.

But what about the subtleties of comprehending the Divine essence of reality? This is where the mystical dimension of Torah comes in. Delve into yourself, retreat to your own essence, to the very core of your soul. There you will uncover the "spark of G-dliness" within you that is one with its Creator and His creation. There you will gain the insight and foresight to deal with the most distant and obscure adversary.

Adapted from the teachings of the Rebbe by Yanki Tauber.

