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The Audience Was Dozing Off while Rabbi Akiva Was Teaching

Rabbi Akiva Aroused the Audience to Emulate Sarah and Esther

This week's parsha is parshas Chayei Sarah. We will focus on a fascinating passage in the Midrash (B.R. 58, 3): **Rabbi Akiva was once sitting and lecturing and the audience** (his students) **began to doze off. He sought to rouse them. He said: "Why was Esther seen fit to reign over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces? The explanation is: Let Esther, who was a descendant of Sarah, who lived one hundred and twenty-seven years, come and reign over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces."** The commentaries, each in his own way, attempt to explain Rabbi Akiva's profound intent. What is the connection between Esther HaMalkah reigning over 127 provinces and Sarah Imeinu living 127 years? And how did this arouse Rabbi Akiva's students?

I would like to present to our royal audience, with the utmost awe and reverence, an explanation that came to me by the goodwill of Hashem. We will begin by introducing a precious teaching found in the wonderful sefer Amudehah Shivah (Amud 1, 9), authored by the great "darshan" Rabbi Betzalel of Slutzk, ztz"l. (He is often cited by the Gaon Chida.) The Zohar hakadosh (Ki Seitzei, Raiya Mehemna, 286a) teaches that Esther was never intimate, chas v'shalom, with Achashveirosh the goy. The holy Shechinah hid her from him and sent him a female demon in her place. This is alluded to by her name "**אסתר**", which is derived from the Hebrew word for hiding-place or secrecy.

Mordechai and Esther Used the Holy Name to Separate the Demon from Esther

The Amudehah Shivah elaborates by citing the cryptic interpretation of the Arizal (Eitz Chaim 49, 6) on this teaching in the Zohar hakadosh: **The Arizal questions the plausibility of the assertion that Achashveirosh never touched Esther, seeing as Daryavesh HaMelech** (Darius the Great)**, the son of Achashveirosh, is referred to as the son of Esther** (V.R. 13, 5)**. He posits that every single human being is composed of a good side and a bad side. They resemble each other and are combined as one. The good part is referred to as a "levush," whereas the bad part is referred to as a "beged." The bad part is also referred to as the devil** (demon) **that causes a person to sin; it is the yetzer hara within him. The good part is the yetzer hatov that habituates a person to occupy himself with Torah, mitzvos, and good deeds.**

On account of that evil component, the death penalty was imposed on creation. For, had Adam HaRishon not sinned, he would have remained entirely good. After sinning, however, the good and bad became intermingled, and a person has to be buried in the ground, so that the bad component will decay, leaving the good in its place.

Mordechai and Esther knew how to use the Ineffable Name to separate the bad from the good; they used it to separate the evil part, the "beged" and "demon," from Esther. It truly resembled Esther in all ways. Achashveirosh had intimate relations with that evil part. Therefore, Daryavesh is called the son of Esther, even though he was born from the demon, because that demon was originally part of Esther.

Based on this, the Amudehah Shivah interprets the following psalm (Tehillim 22): **"למנצח על אילת השחר"—to Him Who grants victory on the "ayeles hashachar"** (literally the dawning of the day or the morning star)—which was uttered by Esther according to the Gemara (Yoma 29a) and the Midrash Shochar Tov. Among her supplications, she says

(ibid. 17-20): **"כי סבבוני כלבים עדת מרעים הקיפוני כארי ידי ורגלי"—for dogs have surrounded me; a pack of evildoers has enclosed me, like a lion at my hands and feet.** Esther was referring to the forces of tumah of the "samech-mem" that surrounded her trying to control the good component within her emanating from the realm of kedushah. She continues: **"אספר כל עצמותי"—I can count all my bones** that remain within me from the good component that I separated from the bad. As a result: **"המה יביטו יראו בי"—they** (the forces of tumah depicted as dogs) **look on and gloat over me.** They are angry because they have no control over the good within me. Even though: **"יחלקו בגדי להם"—they divide my garments ("בגדי") among themselves**—they have taken control of the evil component within me, which is referred to as a **"beged,"** alluding to an act of betrayal ("begidah"); that demon (she-devil) has gone to Achashveirosh in my place. Yet: **"ועל לבושי ימילו גורל"—and cast lots for my clothing ("levush")**—they also want to control my good component, the **"levush."** Hence, she prayed: **"ואתה ה' אל תרחק אילותי לעזרתי חושה"—but You, Hashem, be not far; O, my strength, hasten to my assistance!** In other words, she was praying for Hashem to protect her good component from being influenced by the forces of evil.

Hagar Was the Evil Component of Sarah Imeinu which She Sent to Avram to Cleanse the Evil Component within Him

We will now continue on this sacred journey and find the golden thread connecting Esther HaMalkah and Sarah Imeinu. In addition to the teaching above of the Arizal cited by the Amudehah Shivah, he cites another fascinating, related teaching of the Arizal's. Sarah Imeinu had also separated the evil component within her from the good component; that evil component was none other than her maidservant, Hagar.

In fact, this is why she gave her maidservant to Avram. For, prior to his "milah," his foreskin constituted an evil component. Therefore, Sarah wanted Hagar to draw the evil component out of him in the form of the birth of Yishmael. Afterwards, Avraham would remain entirely good devoid of any evil. Then, he would be able to beget Yitzchak from Sarah with both parents completely free of all evil.

With immense pleasure, we can now add a marvelous "remez" from the Agra D'Kallah (Lech Lecha). He comments on the passuk (Bereishis 16, 15): **"ותלד הגר לאברם בן ויקרא אברם שם בנו אשר ילדה הגר ישמעאל"—Hagar bore Avram a son, and Avram named his son that Hagar bore Yishmael.** He writes that the reason he named this son Yishmael was to indicate that he was born from the evil component of Sarah—i.e., **Hagar**—and also from the evil component in him prior to his "milah," when he was still called **Avram.** This is corroborated by the fact that the gematria of **ישמעא"ל** (451) equals (243) **אבר"ם** plus (208) **הג"ר**.

Avraham Avinu Was Inferior to Sarah Imeinu in Prophecy

The Midrash Talpiyos (**ענף הגר**) brings down these remarks of the Amudehah Shivah citing the Arizal. He applies them to interpret the statement of HKB"H to Avraham Avinu (ibid. 21, 12): **"כל אשר תאמר אליך שרה שמע בקולה"—whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice.** Rashi comments: **(to the "ruach hakodesh" in her;** see Rashi on Bereishis 16, 2**) We learn from here that Avraham was inferior to Sarah in matters of prophecy.** He asserts that this is because Sarah separated her evil component before Avraham did. Furthermore, the separation of Avraham's evil component was accomplished by Sarah giving him Hagar her maidservant. For these reasons, Avraham's power of nevuah was inferior to Sarah's.

Let us elaborate on this subject by adding an additional point. When HKB"H instructs Avraham: **"Whatever Sarah tells you, heed her voice"**—it was in relation to Sarah telling Avraham (ibid. 21, 10): **"גרש האמה הזאת ואת בנה כי לא יירש בן האמה הזאת עם בני עם יצחק"—drive out this slave-woman and her son; for the son of this slave-woman will not inherit with my son, with Yitzchak!** The Chasam Sofer (Vayeira) explains that when Sarah Imeinu saw Yishmael engaging in avodah-zarah, sexual immorality, and murder, she feared that he would corrupt Yitzchak with his evil behavior.

Seen in this light, it is understandable why HKB"H instructed Avraham **to heed Sarah**—to be guided by **her "ruach hakodesh."** Accordingly, he sent Hagar and Yishmael away with the prophetic understanding that she had been the evil component within Sarah and she would be the instrument

to expel his evil component now in the form of Yishmael. As a result, Yitzchak, who was conceived by Avraham and Sarah, would remain totally pure and good. Heeding the voice of Sarah's "ruach hakodesh," Yitzchak would not be corrupted by Yishmael's negative influence. Having accomplished this task, Hagar's presence was no longer necessary; so she could be driven out of Avraham's home.

This illuminates for us the exposition of Rabbi Akiva: **"Why was Esther seen fit to reign over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces? The explanation is: Let Esther, who was a descendant of Sarah, who lived one hundred and twenty-seven years, come and reign over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces."** He wanted to reconcile the following enigma: On the one hand, we know that Esther HaMalkah was very righteous. This is attested to by the following passuk. When Esther entered the quarters of King Achashveirosh, it says (Esther 5, 1): **"ויהי ביום השלישי ותלבש אסתר מלכות"—it came to pass on the third day, Esther donned royalty.** Based on the Gemara (Megillah 14b), Rashi comments that this refers to spiritual royalty—**she was adorned by "ruach hakodesh."** So, it is inconceivable that such a righteous woman would agree to Mordechai's plan to become the queen and cohabit with this evil goy. More likely, she would opt to sacrifice her life as an act of "kiddush Hashem."

To reconcile this enigma Rabb Akiva made the profound statement: **"Let Esther, who was a descendant of Sarah, who lived one hundred and twenty-seven years, come and reign over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces."** He was teaching us that when Esther realized that HKB"H orchestrated matters so that she specifically would be chosen from among the thousands of young women presented to King Achashveirosh to be his queen and to reign over 127 provinces; she knew via her "ruach hakodesh" what she had to do. As the descendant of Sarah, who lived to be 127 years old, it was incumbent upon her to emulate Sarah. She needed to separate to separate the good within her from the bad; hence, she sent the evil component within her—the female demon—to Achashveirosh. Thus, she saved all of Yisrael from extermination.

Rabbi Akiva Aroused His Drowsy Students by Teaching Them the Value of Nighttime Torah Study

Continuing on this path, we will now complete our explanation. How does this connection between Sarah Imeinu and Esther HaMalkah tie in with the beginning of the Midrash: **Rabbi Akiva was once sitting and lecturing and the audience** (his students) **began to doze off. He sought to rouse them.** We will endeavor to explain how he did that. **He said: "Why was Esther seen fit to reign over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces? The explanation is: Let Esther, who was a descendant of Sarah, who lived one hundred and twenty-seven years, come and reign over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces."**

To explain the matter, we will refer to a teaching in the Gemara (Berachos 63b): **"אמר ריש לקיש, מנין שאין דברי תורה מתקיימין אלא במי שממית עצמו עליה, שנאמר זאת התורה אדם כי ימות באהל". Reish Lakish said: From where do we learn that words of Torah are not retained except by one who sacrifices himself for her sake? For it is stated** (Bamidbar 19, 14)**: "This is the Torah of a man who dies in a tent."** According to the Rambam (Hilchos Talmud Torah 3, 12) this means self-sacrifice and devotion to the study of Torah by minimizing one's sleep. Here is a translation of the passage:

The words of Torah will not be retained by a person who applies himself feebly to obtain them, and not by those who study amid pleasure and an abundance of food and drink. Rather, one must give up his life for them, constantly straining his body to the point of discomfort, without granting sleep to his eyes or slumber to his eyelids. The Sages alluded to this concept (Bamidbar 19, 14)**: "This is the Torah, a man should he die in a tent..." The Torah can only be retained by a person who gives up his life in the tents of wisdom.**

Immediately, in the following halachah, the Rambam emphasizes the importance of studying Torah at night, which is an integral part of the directive **"a man who dies in a tent"**—self sacrifice for the sake of the Torah. Here are his fiery, sacred, inspirational words:

Even though it is a mitzvah to study during the day and at night, it is only at night that a person acquires

most of his wisdom. Therefore, a person who desires to merit the crown of Torah should make the most of all his nights, not wasting even one with sleep, eating, drinking, idle chatter, or the like. Rather, (they should be devoted to) **the study of Torah and words of wisdom. Our Sages declared: "The song of Torah can** (be heard) **only at night, as it states** (Eichah 2:19)**: 'Arise, sing out at night . . .'" Whoever occupies himself with Torah study at night will have a strand of divine favor extended over him during the day . . .**

This, in fact, is consistent with the halachic ruling in the Shulchan Aruch (Y.D. 246, 24): **Whoever wants to attain** (merit) **the crown of Torah**, **should take care to make the most of all his nights and not waste even one of them sleeping, eating, drinking, conversing or the like. Rather, they should be filled with words of wisdom and the study of Torah.** In a gloss, the Rama adds: **Because a man acquires most of his wisdom exclusively at night.**

What Should a Man Do to Live

In keeping with our current discussion, let us interpret the teaching of Reish Lakish that words of Torah are only retained by: **"במי שממית עצמו עליה"**—literally, this means to kill oneself for them. We can interpret this as killing the evil component within oneself. In truth, we are not capable of doing precisely what Sarah and Esther did; they used sacred names and incantations to separate the bad from the good into two distinct, separate bodies. Nevertheless, we possess the capacity to subdue and extinguish the evil component within us by means of Torah-study and the performance of mitzvos.

Now, we find that David HaMelech says about himself (Tehillim 109, 22): **"ולבי חלל בקרבי"—and my heart has died within me.** The sages expounded in the Gemara (ibid. 61b): **"צדיקים יצר טוב שופטן שנאמר ולבי חלל בקרבי"—tzaddikim are governed by their yetzer tov, as it states: "And my heart has died within me."** Rashi interprets this to mean that David had mastered his yetzer hara to the degree that it was dead within him. Expounding on the same proclamation of David HaMelech, we are taught in the Yerushalmi (Berachos 9, 5): **"דוד לא היה יכול לעמוד בו והרגו בלבבו, מאי טעמא ולבי חלל בקרבי"**—since David could not withstand the yetzer hara in his heart, he killed it.

We can suggest that he killed it by studying Torah all night long, as we have learned (ibid. 3b): **"אמר רבי שמעון חסידא כנור היה תלוי למעלה ממטתו של דוד, וכיון שהגיע חצות לילה בא רוח צפונית ונושבת בו ומנגן מאליו, מיד היה עומד ועוסק בתורה עד שעלה עמוד השחר". Rabbi Shimon Chasida said: A harp hung above David's bed. At midnight, the northern wind came and blew on it, and it would play by itself. Immediately, he would rise and engage in Torah-study until the break of day.**

In Sefer HaBahir (196), attributed to Rabbi Nechuniah ben HaKanah, he states explicitly that David was compelled to kill the yetzer hara in his heart, **since he could not withstand it,** and it says (Tehillim 5, 5): **"No evil sojourns with You." How did he kill it? By studying Torah night and day. By studying Torah l'shma, he connected with HKB"H through the Torah of above.**

Based on what we have learned, let us focus on a passage in the Gemara (Tamid 32a). Among ten questions Alexander of Macedon asked the elders of the South is the following:"**מה יעביד איניש ויחיה, אמרו ליה ימית עצמו. מה יעביד איניש וימות, יחיה את עצמו**." **"What should a person do to live?" They said to him, "He should kill himself."** Then he asked them, **"What should a person do to die?"** They answered him, **"He should enliven himself."** In other words, if one desires to live a spiritual life based on Torah and service of Hashem, it is necessary to eliminate the physical, material character of the body; whereas, if he wishes to die a spiritual death, he should enhance the physical, material character of the body.

Let us elaborate. The independence associated with a person's animalistic being is the negative, bad portion within him. Hence, the elders of the South wisely advised him: "**ימית עצמו**", to exterminate the evil portion within him by means of Torah-study. Conversely, chas v'shalom, if a person wishes to eliminate the good portion within him, they advised him: "**יחיה את עצמו**"—to let his independent nature run wild; pursue the senseless, meaningless offerings of Olam HaZeh to your heart's content. Then, his evil component will control him exclusively governed by the yetzer hara.

By Illuminating the Night with Torah the Dark Forces of the Yetzer HaRa Are Eliminated

Let us embellish this concept. Why is nighttime Torah-study particularly effective at eradicating the evil portion within a person—i.e., his yetzer hara? Now, we know that Torah-study and the performance of mitzvos are analogous to the light of day. In contrast, the darkness of night is associated with the yetzer hara and its forces that fill the world with darkness. As they expounded in the Midrash (B.R. 2, 5) on the passuk (Bereishis 1, 2): "והארץ היתה תהו ובהו"—**and the earth was desolation and emptiness. These are the deeds of reshaim.** "ויאמר אלקים יהי אור"—**G-d said, "Let there be light." These are the deeds of tzaddikim.**

Thus, by occupying oneself with the light of Torah during the night, one is able to dispel the darkness within, in keeping with David's pronouncement: **"ולבי חלל בקרבי".** Accordingly, we can also explain very nicely the Rambam's interpretation of Reish Lakish's precept that words of Torah are only retained by someone **"שממית עצמו עליה"**—someone who kills the evil component within himself by studying Torah in the dark of night. This will effectively kill the yetzer hara inside him.

We can also understand why it was specifically Reish Lakish who teaches us this precept. For, he qualifies as (Chagigah 14b): "נאה דורש ונאה מקיים"—**one who both expounds well and practices well.** We know (B.M. 84a) that Reish Lakish was originally the leader of a group of bandits until Rabbi Yochanan took him under his wings and taught him Torah. Under the tutelage of Rabbi Yochanan, he sacrificed himself in the tent of Torah. He ultimately became one of the greatest sages of Torah she'b'al peh providing us with sacred teachings and insights throughout both Talmud Bavli and Talmud Yerushalmi.

We can now begin to appreciate the profound strategy of Rabbi Akiva whose students were dozing off while he was teaching. Evidently, he continued relating his words of Torah into the night, in keeping with the Rambam's statement above: **It is only at night that a person acquires most of his wisdom.** Hence, the audience started dozing off due to their fatigue. In order to arouse them and emphasize to them the importance of studying Torah at night, he said to them: **"Why was Esther seen fit to reign over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces? The explanation is: Let Esther, who was a descendant of Sarah, who lived one hundred and twenty-seven years, come and reign over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces."**

From the fact that HKB"H arranged for her to reign over precisely the exact number of provinces as the years of Sarah's life, she understood what she was supposed to do. It was imperative that she separate the bad component within her from the good component and send that female demon to Achashveirosh, the goy, in her place. The lesson to be learned from her is clear. We all possess the power to exterminate the evil component within us through diligent Torah-study even in the darkness of night. With these words, Rabbi Akiva succeeded in arousing his pupils and inspiring them to remain awake and study Torah even at night.

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