

TORAT HAR SHMUEL

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BEYOND HUMAN COMPREHENSION

Since the days of creation, mankind has tried to establish itself as being independent and totally self-sufficient. The concept of answering to a higher authority, to Hashem Yisborach, leaves secular man with a burdened feeling of constraint. We should be free to live our own lives, make our own decisions, and maximize our potential and enjoy all the power and luxury that comes with our accomplishments. We think know what's best for us!! If history has proven anything, it's the fact that without the Yad Hashem, society as we know it would have finished centuries ago.

On this we can ask a very logical question. Hashem Yisborach created this world with everything required to sustain the human race. What is the ultimate purpose behind Hashem's desire to run the world? Why not leave it to mankind, letting him determine what direction the world moves in. If we choose right, then the world continues to exist and evolves into that place mankind has earned. If we choose wrong, then we're responsible for our actions and if that means the end of society as we know it, then so be it. When the concept of justice was asked

what should happen to a person who sins, justice answered that the person should die. (What a chesed it is that Hashem allows us to substitute an animal on the mizbayach, for a sin offering – a Korbon Chatos.) As per justice, the global consequences should be no different than those of the individual.

To understand this properly, we have to realize that Hashem had a wonderful purpose behind creating the world. He wanted to share the essence of His Infinity, His Goodness with mankind. To achieve this, Hashem could not just sit back and watch as mankind exclusively determines what direction to go in. For the sake of the world in general and in particular the Jewish people Hashem's historical guidance is required. This has a direct impact on how that knowledge of Hashem Yisborach is going to come to mankind. Is it coming to us as a gift or is said knowledge something we have to earn? All of us know that something we earn is appreciated much more than something that's given to us freely in gift form.

What goes into "earning" that ultimate "Yediah" – Knowledge of Hashem? Hundreds of pages have been devoted to this question. Nonetheless, there is one angle of this philosophical conundrum that I would like to address that relates directly to Parashat Chaye Sarah – and much of Jewish history.

The way that Sarah passed away is something that has wracked my mind for many years. Avrohom completes the greatest test of his life – Akeydas Yitzchak. He passes this monumental challenge in a manner that leaves all of us in awe regarding his un-

wavering faith in Hashem Yisborach. The event is something we recall every day, and comes to define the essence of Jewish character – what we call Mesiras Nefesh, self-sacrifice at every level, including giving our lives to sanctify Hashem’s Holy Name.

Father and son descend the mountain having been spiritually transformed by what they experienced. One can only imagine how Avrohom contemplated sharing this with his beloved wife. He recognized that all of his life accomplishments were a result of how he and Sarah worked hand in hand every step of the way. Avrohom’s ability to achieve new heights as a result of the Akeyda experience was a result of a lifetime of encouragement and wisdom that Sarah shared with him. It was now time to bring her to the top of that spiritual mountain of faith and trust, a place she fully deserved to share with her beloved husband.

Avrohom returns home only to find out that Sarah has passed away. The desire expressed in the previous paragraph would go unfulfilled, leaving an enormous vacuum in his broken heart. We need to consider the rest of the scenario as well. Chazal explain that Og advised Sarah as to what was going on atop Har HaMoriah. He told her that Avrohom was about to slaughter their only son. She screamed three times, had what we understand to be a heart attack and that was the end. Not only did Avrohom have to deal with his loss, but with the reality that it may have been a direct result of the Akeyda. How are we to understand this? It’s interesting to note that neither Rashi nor the Ramban consider this one of the tests of Avrohom.

I think in order to understand this we have to take a look at a concept we’re introduced to at the beginning of Avrohom’s appearance in our Torah Ha’Kedoshah: The concept of “ma’aseh Avos, siman l’bonim”. That which happened to our Patriarchs serves as a foreshadowing of Jewish history. Everything revolving around the death of Sarah may actually fall into this concept. Throughout Jewish history there will be many events that take place that we are incapable of comprehending. How we respond to those events, on a personal and national level, will determine our place in the chain of Jewish history.

How did Avrohom respond to the death of Sarah? The word “leevkosah” is written with a small “chof”. It represents the fact that his crying was diminished for two reasons. There is a question regarding where Avrohom was prior to the passing of Sarah. Traditionally, we’ve been lead to think that he came directly from the Akeyda only to find that Sarah had passed away. The Yefeh To’ar says in the name of Rabbi Levi that Avrohom had come from the burial of his father, Terach. His tears were diminished for two reasons. He had cried his eyes out over the loss of his father – he was emotionally exhausted - or - the elation he felt having completed the Akeyda to Hashem’s Satisfaction lessened the blow of having lost his wife. Rav Shach, ZT’L, merges these two reasons together. How was Avrohom able to remain an “Ivri”, philosophically on one side of life’s river while the idolatrous world represented by his father during his first fifty two years, was on the other? And simultaneously how was he able to find the strength to fulfill Hashem’s request and slaughter his son? Sarah was the inspiration that gave him the strength of character to stand tall no matter what came his way. She was the paradigm Aishes Chayil responsible for making the Shechina feel comfortable in every tent occupied by her family. She left Avrohom with the strength and ability to cry just enough to demonstrate that he was human while demonstrating to everyone around him that his faith in Hashem remained steadfast, as it was when she was alive. What about Og telling her that her son was about to be slaughtered by his hand? Avrohom knew that when she arrived at her place in the Olom Ha’Emes, Hashem would answer all of her questions, making it right in a way that only Hashem can. All was exactly as it was supposed to be, and what made it good is that Avrohom knew that as always, this too was orchestrated by Hashem Himself!!

Throughout Jewish history, hundreds of events have occurred that have left all of us wondering, questioning what’s going on. As a nation, we recognize this twice a year when we recall the death of the ten martyrs. The Gemara (Moed Katan 28a) teaches

that on Yom Kippur the purpose of this as part of the Musaf service is because the death of the righteous appears before Hashem Yisborach as a sacrifice and thereby helps to achieve national atonement. Their martyrdom is also part of the Kinot recited on the ninth of Av, as their death is an extension of the destruction of our Holy Temples.

If the inability to comprehend historical events is difficult for us, consider this. Within the “Azkoroh” of the Yom Kippur Musaf, we recite the following. “The celestial Seraphim (angels!!) cried out bitterly, “Is this the Torah and this its reward – O Hashem who cloaks Himself in light as with a garment? The enemy insults Your great and awesome Name, and reviles and blasphemes against the words of the Torah!” A voice from heaven responded, “If I hear another sound, I will transform the universe to water, I will turn the earth to astonishing emptiness – this is the decree from My Presence; accept it you who delight in the two thousand year old law!” If Hashem is telling His angels to sit quietly, bear the pain and recognize that this is even beyond their comprehension, how much more so are we to follow suit.

Let’s compound the mystery by bringing this down to the human level and focus on the end of Rebbi Akiva’s life. It’s Yom Kippur day and the great sage is 120 years old. He’s in perfect health as was Moshe Rabbeinu. Turnus Rufus has sentenced him to death for teaching Torah. Rebbi Akiva has devoted eighty years of his life to Hashem Yisborach and His Torah in a manner that characterizes him as a paradigm scholar. The best of the best!! Within a thirty two day period he endured the loss of twenty four thousand students and took upon himself the responsibility to support their families. We all know that Rebbi Akiva faced his death with the joy of being able to make the ultimate sacrifice for Hashem Yisborach. It would be a great chutzpa for me to speak for Rebbi Akiva, so let me simply ask the logical questions. At the end of his life, there were only five students* left to transmit the Torah Rebbi Akiva taught them. What would be the future for the Torah he devoted his life to? Would it endure and achieve its deserved place of greatness in our world? Was the

Mesorah strong enough to withstand the widespread Roman desire to wipe out Torah entirely? In the same way that Avrohom Avinu wasn’t given the ultimate answer regarding the passing of his wife, we can only wonder what questions remained with the private confines of Rebbi Akiva’s mind.

How do we at our diminished level relate to this today? At a certain point in everyone’s life, we have to rely on our Emunah in Avinu She’ba’shamayim – our Heavenly Father. If all the learning we do does not precipitate this simple faith, then we have to question if we’re learning properly, with the right attitude. Many answers are beyond human (and sometimes angelic) comprehension. We also have to recognize that NOTHING BELONGS TO US, not even ourselves. Hashem owns everything: Time, space, humanity, history, all finite within His Infinity. HaRav Yosef Soloveichik in his classic work “Kol Dofek Dodi” explains that life is like a tapestry. Hashem sees everything from the front while we view it, dulled colors, knots and all, from the back. There’s nothing wrong with asking the hard questions. Where we have to exercise caution is in presuming we’re entitled to the answers.

Permit me please to share a very personal experience. A number of years ago Dr. Abe Chames (Hollywood, Florida) passed away. He was in his early fifties. He came home from Shul one Shabbos morning and literally, in the middle of a conversation with his wife, he simply passed away. It happened in a moment. To say that Abe was beloved throughout South Florida is no exaggeration. The lawn people and the garbage collectors cried real tears when they heard the news. My wife and I left their home following a shiva visit, and my wife looked at me sobbing and asked, “How do you understand all of this”? I said to her that in that moment I could not explain anything. BUT, there will come a day after her passing where she will be in the Olom Ha’Emes and, after giving an accounting for her life, have the opportunity to ask her questions. “Hashem, please help me understand what happened to Abe Chames.” I told her Hashem will pull out that tapestry and show her the portion that explains Abe. She will see that

the stitching is perfect and the colors fit together in a way that only Hashem can weave. She'll take a look and respond, "Now I understand". I told her that the problem is that at that point, Hashem will be able to ask her, "Why didn't you have faith in Me and My judgment"? We're blessed to have the knowledge that every moment, the world is under the watchful Eye (the Hashgocho and Shefa) of Hashem Yisborach. How firmly we believe this is answered when we *don't* understand what's going on around us. We're not entitled to every answer the moment the question is asked. Accepting this runs hand in hand with the humility that is part and parcel of Jewish character.

Even within this philosophy, Hashem is remarkably sensitive to us and the boundaries that come with being human. The Gemara in Kiddushin (72b) teaches us that on the day Rabbi Akiva was martyred, Rav Yehuda HaNasi (Rebbi) was born. The day Rav Yehudah HaNasi passed away, Rav Yehuda was born. Rava was born the day Rav Yehuda passed away, and the day Rava passed on, Rav Ashi was born. At all times, Hashem Yisborach provides a shining star to lead His people. The real lesson of this Gemara is patience!! We want to see everything, understand what's happening in the moment. Hashem is telling us to trust Him. Whatever questions existed concerning the future of the Mesorah were answered before they were asked. His five students covered his generation. The next generation was already in place on the fateful Yom Kippur day Rabbi Akiva was martyred.

So at the end of the day, I still do not understand why the passing of Sarah unfolded the way it did. I'm at peace with it because that, and all of Jewish history rests in the Holy Hands of that entity that is best suited to guide our people. The 'Avinu Malkaynu' recited from Rosh Hashana through Yom Kippur express this best. Hashem starts out as King of the universe, the ruler over *everything* within the framework of creation. He is the King who remains actively involved in the unfolding of human history, balancing the free will we are blessed with and His Hashgocho Protis, ongoing Divine involvement and intervention as He deems it's needed. Simultaneously, all of this is accomplished

with Hashem as our Father, Avinu. It's done with an Infinite measure of love, compassion, and mercy while maintaining the historical imperative to move forward. All of this manifests itself on the national level and simultaneously on the most personal, individualistic level. What we need to ask ourselves is how do we see the world? Have we trained our eyes and minds to see beyond the physical, to sense *G-dliness* in everything that surrounds us, from our families to the wonders of nature? Is Hashem the author of everything scientific, blessing researchers with the ability to discover what was always there and innovate at the very moment Hashem decided it was appropriate? To whatever degree we are entitled to the answers, we need to make sure that we're looking through the proper eyes and are focused to comprehend the answers Hashem deems proper for us at that moment. At the end of the day, one thing I can promise you comes from none other than Rabbi Akiva.

KOL MAN D'OVID RACHMANA, L'TAV OVID
EVERYTHING HASHEM DOES, HE DOES FOR THE GOOD

(*Rebbi Akiva's five students: Rav Meir and Rav Nechemya focused on Halacha. The Halachot of Rav Meir served as the foundation of the Mishna compiled by Rebbi, Rav Yehudah HaNasi while Rav Nechemya's collection became the Tosefta. The format of the Tosefta serves as a companion to the Mishna. Rav Yehudah bar Ilai authored the Sifra and Sifre on Vayikra, Bamidbar and Devorim. Rav Yosef ben Chalafta was an expert in Kabbalah, Halacha and Jewish History. He authored Seder Olam Rabbah and Seder Olam Zuta. Rebbi Akiva's fifth student was Rav Shimon bar Yochai. Also a master of Halacha, he is famous for his expertise in Kabbalah. He later became one of the teachers of Rav Yehudah HaNasi.)