

KOL TODA

Gateways to Gratitude: Giving Thanks to Hashem



DAWN'S GLORY AFTER DARKNESS

The *Shulchan Aruch* (*siman* 493) tells us that on the day of Lag B'Omer the students of Rabbi Akiva stopped dying; therefore it is a day of joy.

The *Pri Chadash* questions this statement. What kind of reason is this for joy? The students of Rabbi Akiva stopped dying when the last of them had died. Why is this a joyous occasion?

Let us try to learn about Rabbi Akiva and how he accepted *yissurim*, his suffering in life. After twenty-four years of *mesirus nefesh*,



self-sacrifice for the sake of learning Torah, living separated and far from his family, Rabbi Akiva merited teaching Torah to twenty-four thousand students. Then, one year, within 33 days beginning from Pesach, all his students died. Every day hundreds died. Rabbi Akiva saw all his students being buried, and all his Torah teaching vanishing. Did he need another reason to fall into despair and depression?

But, no, Rabbi Akiva didn't despair. He gathered himself up and traveled south, where he garnered together five new students to teach them Torah. Through these new students the Torah was revived and passed on to generations thereafter.

Rabbi Akiva was no longer young. How did he find the strength to get up and start anew?

The verse in *Mishlei* (3:12) says: "...for Hashem reproves the one He loves, as a father the son in whom he delights." What is the meaning of "as a father the son in whom he delights"? Rashi explains: "He delights in his son, and wants to do good and appease him after striking him, so the goodness will be sweet after the strike." The *Gra* explains further: "When a father finishes striking his child, he desires to fulfill his wishes and to comfort and appease him. Therefore, do not abhor *yissurim*, because when [Hashem] brings them upon you it proves that you are beloved to Him like a child, and afterwards, like

a father to a child He will appease you and fulfill your wishes."

Our compassionate Father in Heaven sometimes needs to bring *yissurim* upon us, His beloved children. Yet, if we accept Hashem's Will and these *yissurim* with love, then He is filled with compassion and will surely bring us a *yeshua*, a great deliverance.

Rabbi Akiva felt and saw throughout his life that he had a loving Father. If Hashem caused him pain, it was surely for the ultimate good; he knew that immediately after causing him pain, Hashem would be filled with powerful love and compassion for him, even more than beforehand. The *Sha'arei Teshuva* (2:5) brings home this message: "And the one who trusts in God should hope even in times of strife, for the darkness will be the reason for light, as it is written (*Micha* 7:8): 'Rejoice not against me, O my enemy; when I fall, I will arise; when I sit in darkness, Hashem will be a light to me.' Our Sages (*Midrash Tehillim* 22) explain: 'If I had not fallen I would not have risen; had I not sat in the darkness, I would not have had light.'"

Indeed, on that very date that Rabbi Akiva's students ceased to die, one of his five subsequent students, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, revealed years later the hidden wisdom of the Torah, as recorded in the holy *Zohar*. And so it was that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: "The day of Lag B'Omer is my day of joy" ("*Pri Eitz Chaim*").

All the great light of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai sprouted from the darkness that preceded it years earlier. A great light of eternal *simcha* filled the day of Lag B'Omer because of the hidden Torah he revealed – a great light after the darkness.

Lag B'Omer was established as a day of happiness, celebration, and thanksgiving to Hashem for the great light that we received that day. The joy of Lag B'Omer teaches us for generations onward, that even when we are immersed in darkness, we still have a loving Father and everything He does is for our good. If we only accept His afflictions with love, thank Hashem and not balk, then "the darkness will be the reason for the light"; the pain will surely be a prelude to a great and everlasting joy. Out of the darkness will sprout a great light that will illuminate forever.

By way of further illustration, in "*Gam Zu l'Tova*" the author tells of a young man who was going through a very difficult period in his

life, yet he accepted it as Hashem's Will and with love. When the difficulties had passed, he experienced a personal *eis ratzon*, a favorable time for his prayers. Taking advantage of this auspicious time, he prayed to Hashem to merit opening a *kollel* for Torah study. And indeed, this man opened a wonderful *kollel* and stands at its helm, spreading Torah to many students. He is still reaping the fruits that followed his *yissurim*; the fruits that came with double the love of Hashem.

May it be Hashem's Will that we merit the light that will illuminate forever.

TZADDIKIM THANK HASHEM

The *gaon* Rabbi Zalman Nechemia Goldberg, *shlit"a*, tells about the tremendous gratitude of his father-in-law, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, *ztz"l*:

"My father-in-law was always on the lookout for ways to thank Hashem for each and every kindness that Hashem did for him. When my eldest daughter was born, the Rav wanted to recite a blessing to thank Hashem for his new granddaughter, even though she was not his first grandchild. Although such a blessing on the birth of a grandchild does not exist, the Rav found a solution. He procured two kinds of wine, one more superb than the other. Then he proceeded to recite the blessing of '*Borei Pri HaGafen*' on the first, simpler wine, and when presented with the second finer wine, he recited, '*HaTov v'haMeitiv*'."

The son of Rabbi Shlomo Zalman recounts how his father would recite "*Bircas HaMazon*, the Blessing After a Meal": "At times I wanted to bring people in to see how my father recited the blessing, so they would see how one needs to really recite *Bircas HaMazon*."

"The Rav would say the words '*Nodeh Lecha, Hashem Elokeinu*, We thank You, Hashem, our God' with such palpable feeling, that it was as if I had never heard them before in my life! Once, after the Rav had already recited '*Nodeh Lecha...*' but before beginning the next passage, someone noticed that he backtracked and again recited '*Nodeh Lecha...*' The Rav later explained: 'When I said "*Nodeh Lecha*" the first time, I was lacking proper *kavana*, proper intention. Since "*Nodeh Lecha*" is about thanking Hashem, I had to repeat the passage. Without having proper intention, it would have been as if I had not said "*Nodeh Lecha*" at all.'"

A WORD OF GRATITUDE

"If one thanks Hashem for all the good, it is as if he is bringing a *Korban Toda*, a thanksgiving offering before Hashem, and he brings upon himself and the whole world further great kindnesses, as it is written (*Mizmor l'Toda, Tehillim* 100:4-5): "...thank Him, bless His Name. **For Hashem is good; His kindness is forever...**" – His kindnesses continue upon the whole world." (Rabbi Aharon Roth, *ztz"l*, "*Shomer Emunim*", part 1)

ABOVE AND BEYOND/ A PERSONAL STORY

The telephone rang. On the line was my older brother. "Danny? It's me..." The familiar voice of my dear brother filled my ears.

"Yaron?!" I answered emotionally. Yaron, my beloved only brother, was thirteen years older than me. We were very close to each other and had enjoyed a warm relationship in our youth, but when we grew up and my brother became a world-renown doctor, I felt somewhat intimidated by him.

"Danny, how are you doing?" my older brother asked. "I am here in Eretz Yisrael now with my wife and kids. We really would like to get together, can we come to visit you?"

"What a great surprise! When can you come??"

I was prepared to host my brother whenever



he would come, but his answer really threw me off. "How about Friday afternoon?"

Friday afternoon? Friday, the most hectic, frazzled time of the week, when my wife I are rushing about trying to beat the clock and get everything done for Shabbos? But I couldn't say all that to my brother, who still didn't know anything about the joys of a Torah life, so I bit my tongue and managed to answer, "Sure... Can't wait to see you!"

I sat down to discuss it with my wife and we came up with a plan. We decided that this could be the perfect opportunity to make a great *kiddush Hashem*. We would get the whole house ready on Thursday. By Friday when he showed up, the whole house would be clean and filled with the heavenly smell of chalos baking in the oven. The children would all be bathed and the Shabbos food all prepared. Then, we could sit and enjoy each other's company until it was time to light the candles and then my brother would join us for the Shabbos meal. Although he wouldn't do a full Shabbos, who would not be inspired by a beautiful Shabbos meal with good food, joy, and the peacefulness of *Shabbos kodesh*? He would surely be inspired by the Shabbos and perhaps his viewpoint would change....

We agreed to do our best and I was calm that it would all work out. But as we all know, man plans and God laughs. All our plans went down the drain when Thursday afternoon rolled around and my wife was lying in bed with the flu. The house was rolling, laundry – clean and dirty – was flying, and the food was nowhere near being cooked. The kids were unruly and it looked like

store-bought challa would just have to do.

That afternoon, I didn't go into *kollel* to learn. Instead, I stayed home to babysit and try to clean up the chaos. By one in the morning when I finally hit the pillow, I was nowhere near having accomplished half of what I had planned. Lego pieces were everywhere and the kids had still not been bathed. I hoped for the best and fell asleep.

On Friday morning, my wife was feeling slightly better so she told me to go to *kollel* and she would try to finish up. But when I came home just after noon, I saw that nothing was doing. She was still in the middle of preparing the food, and the house was still a wreck. And then we heard the doorbell – it was my honored brother, arriving right on schedule.

It was an emotional reunion. I led them into our tiny living room, kicking some "cliks" under the couch so they wouldn't trip over them, and I sat them down at our still-unset table. Our house looked nothing like a home that knew of Shabbos. How would I be able to inspire him this way? What would he think?

I went into the kitchen to prepare some drinks and heard my five-year old asking his cousin (quite loudly), "Are you Jewish? Why don't you wear a *kippa*?" I cringed. How many times had we told the kids not to say such sentences? How many times did we warn them? Then, on the way back to the living room, I slipped on some runaway playmobil children, the drinks spilled all over the

floor, and I fell flat on my face. Internally, I was ready to explode. I had had enough. I felt that I could no longer handle the situation and was about to lose control. All my plans for making a good impression, a *kiddush Hashem*, showing him the joys of a Torah life – all that went down the drain. I ran out to the little porch to try to get a grip on myself.

Lifting my eyes up the sky, I cried out: "Blessed are You, Hashem! I wanted it all to be different. I wanted the house to be clean, the food to be cooked and chalos browning in the oven, filling the house with the heavenly smell of Shabbos. I wanted my brother to be impressed with the beauty of Shabbos, but You want it differently?"

And then I surprised myself: "Thank You, Hashem. If this is what You want, then I thank You. It is surely for the good. You know what is best... thank You...thank You...." I spent the next few minutes thanking Hashem for the things that were going as I wanted and for that which was not... "Thank You, Hashem, for my wife and my children, for the topsy-turvy house, also for all the toys.... Thank You for showing me how to live a life...." I don't know how long I stood there but I felt like those minutes were giving me back my sanity. I returned to the living room calm and serene, and I smiled at my brother a real smile. The mess no longer bothered me. Whatever would happen was clearly not in my hands and I was grateful for it.

A week went by and the following Thursday night I was again privileged to receive a phone call from my dear brother Yaron. By now I was very embarrassed over what had happened, but

before I could explain, Yaron began to speak.

"Danny, I want to share something with you. Do you remember my *tefillin* from my Bar Mitzva? I went to our parents' house and found them in the closet. I just wanted to tell you that, today, after 36 years, I took them out of the closet and went to the old neighborhood synagogue. I'll tell you the truth; it was that visit with you last week that greatly affected me, that triggered this change." The VISIT? That disaster? How could my cool brother have become enchanted by Torah life from that mess he met up with?

Thankfully, my brother couldn't read my thoughts and continued to talk. "You know, Danny, I know you well. I know how much you like having everything under control, neat and predictable. I know how much order and cleanliness means to you and how lack of it can really set you off. When I saw you that day amidst all the disorder, and you smiled at me calmly and joyfully, at peace with yourself and the circumstances, I understood that this wasn't just anything. I understood that the Torah you were learning and the lifestyle you were living had changed you. If you could change like that, then I had to check it out."

I was astounded and emotionally moved. Hashem had done what was best, opposite all our careful plans to make a *kiddush Hashem*. Against all human predictions, my brother was inspired by his visit with us, and continues to grow in his quest.

How I learned from all this. How often do we trust that what we want and plan is the best, and that it must be that way. Yet *Hashem Yisbarach*, Who knows what is hidden, sometimes arranges things completely opposite to what we think is right, and it's all for the good.

We are now in the middle of *Sefiras HaOmer*, a time of working on our *middos*, our character traits. I've taken it upon myself as much as I am able, to thank Hashem, Who gives us the strength to break and overcome negative *middos*. When we implant in our hearts the knowledge that everything is from Hashem and for our good, and we thank Him also for His ways that we don't understand – this gives us the strength to overcome anger and other negative traits and to act instead with *emuna*, complete faith in Hashem. I hope that we will strengthen ourselves in this always, and that we will merit to thank Hashem at all times, in complete joy and faith.

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