



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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Action Counts

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Devarim

Action Counts

Not too long ago, the White House released recordings from the year 1973. Among them were comments by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to late former president Richard Nixon to the effect that Jewish communities of the Soviet Union do not concern the foreign policy of the United States, and that poison gas attacks on those Jews are not an American concern but perhaps a humanitarian concern.

The disclosure of the comments stirred up a lot of controversy, especially since Kissinger himself, a native-born German Jew, fled with his family from the Nazis in 1938.

Kissinger explained that his comments related to U.S. diplomacy with regards to Soviet Jewry, and that the United States never had an official position on Soviet Jewish emigration—not because the U.S. lacked a sense of morality but because the U.S. believed that more could be accomplished with quiet diplomacy. (This was actually the Rebbe’s view on the subject.)

And indeed, during Kissinger’s time, Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union rose from 700 Jews in 1969 to 40,000 in 1972.

But because Senator Henry Jackson then tried to pass a certain law that would force the USSR to free its Jews, and because the president asked Kissinger to convince the Senator that quiet diplomacy was the best approach, Kissinger was recorded saying that this was not an official problem for the United States.

But what happened here was that secret tapes were publicized almost 40 years later—but for Mr. Kissinger, it was too early.

And we find a similar story in the Torah.

In this week’s Torah portion, we read about a man who was “mekosheish eitzim b’yom haShabbos”—who was gathering branches on the Shabbos day. However, the Torah doesn’t tell us who he was.

In the Talmud (Tractate Shabbos 96b), there is a discussion over who this anonymous wood-gatherer was. Rabbi Akiva comes along and says he was Tzelaftad, a member of the tribe of Menasheh who famously left only five daughters but no sons.

Using verses from other parts of the Torah, Rabbi Akiva proves that the wood-gatherer was that very same Tzelaftad whose daughters later came before Moshe and demanded their father’s land inheritance in the Holy Land.

The Talmud tells us that Rabbi Yehudah Ben Beseirah, another Sage, said to Rabbi Akiva: "One way or another, you will render a verdict—and if it is as you say, then the Torah covered it up and you're revealing it!"

In other words, why are you probing who he was? The Torah intentionally did not state his name out of a desire to protect the dignity of Tzela'fchad and his daughters—so why, Rabbi Akiva, are you announcing to everyone who "the wood-gatherer" was?

And what's interesting is that even though Rabbi Yehuda ben Beseira seems to be right, the Amora'im—the Sages who compiled the Talmud 300 years after the actual conversation between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yehudah—chose to include Rabbi Akiva's words and declare to the whole world who the Shabbos wood-gatherer was.

So again, we come back to Rabbi Yehudah's question: Why did the Talmud publicize something that the Torah hid?

And this week's Torah portion provokes the same question.

This week, we start reading the Book of Devarim; Deuteronomy. And this book of the Torah, the fifth book, was dictated and written by Moshe five weeks before his passing.

In Judaism, this book is known as "Mishneh Torah," or "Study of Torah," because it is a general review on all that occurred to the Jewish Nation over their 40 years in the desert.

So the Book of Devarim begins with these words: "Eileh HaDevarim asher diber Moshe el kol Yisroel"—these are the words that Moshe spoke to all of Israel.

However, the Torah then tells us that Moshe spoke those words "across the Jordan."

Until that point, it's all fine and good and self-explanatory—but then, the Torah launches into a list of places, and it's totally not understood why the Torah mentions these places at all.

So along comes Rashi and explains.

Rashi says, "It's because they are words of rebuke, and here are listed all the places that they provoked anger before G-d. Therefore, Moshe shortened his words and mentioned them by hint."

In other words, Rashi is saying that while Moshe wanted to rebuke the Jewish Nation and remind them of their undesirable behavior, he also didn't want to humiliate them. So he did what a sensitive teacher does when he wants to remind his students of their bad behavior but also doesn't want to embarrass them.

What does a good teacher do? He or she says: "I hope that this time you won't act like you acted on our last trip." The teacher doesn't have to explicitly state what happened on the last trip. The kid will remember by himself; you don't need to embarrass him. The goal, however, is just to ensure that he won't act like that again.

And for the same reason, Moshe Rabbeinu acted the same way. He reminded the Jewish Nation of the names of the places where they had gotten G-d angry—and that was enough to know exactly what he meant.

But if that's the case, then why does Rashi actually go ahead and specify what sins exactly took place in each place? And I quote: "In Aravah, they sinned with Baal Peor..." So the Rebbe asks the same question here that Rabbi Yehudah ben Beseirah asked of Rabbi Akiva in the Talmud: Why is Rashi revealing what the Torah is hiding?

However, the Rebbe explains, this idea of limiting your words and saying what you want to say using hints was for the most part needed during the time of Moshe Rabbeinu, because Tzelafchad's daughters were alive at the time and it was, as it is, against Torah law to embarrass someone for the sins of their family members, even many generations later.

But 1,500 years later, when the Talmud was written, it was already permissible to publicize it. And on the contrary—then it helps with understanding other stories in the Torah, and helps understanding the big picture of what happened in the desert.

And the same thing applies with our Torah portion.

Yes, Moshe Rabbeinu at the time didn't want to embarrass the Jewish Nation when they were right in front of him and mention to them negative things that their parents had been involved in in a personal way. But over 2,000 years later? Then Rashi has full permission to expose it—and on the contrary, it's necessary to reveal the facts so that we can better understand the meaning of the verse.

The story is told that during the first few days of the Yom Kippur War, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir called Henry Kissinger and asked that the United States urgently send weapons and supplies, since Israel was left without any weapons.

When Prime Minister Meir felt that the matter was being delayed more than necessary, she appealed to Kissinger's emotional side and told him that as a Jew, he must help Israel. She tried to invoke a sense of guilt in him.

So Kissinger replied, "Golda, let me explain something to you. I am first and foremost the U.S. Secretary of State. Then, I am an American. And finally, I am a Jew."

And Golda Meir, legendary for her wit, was not shocked. "That's okay, Henry," she replied. "In Hebrew we read from right to left."

Bottom line? Thanks to Henry Kissinger, an airlift and sealift of military ammunition and equipment was sent to Israel over the next month, with 1,000 tons of war materiel arriving each day, including 74 new fighter jets.

The emergency aid budget for that airlift to Israel stood at 2.2 billion dollars—and this is over 40 years ago. And this is also in addition to the numbers of Jews who escaped the Iron Curtain during that period.

The Rebbe would always quote the Sifri, who says that when a person loses a coin from his pocket and a poor person finds it and comes back to himself because of it, it's considered charity for that person even though he didn't intend it to be charity and didn't even know that he lost a coin.

Why? Because in Judaism, it doesn't matter what you said or promised. It matters what you do. A person is judged not so much on what he said, but mainly on what he did. "Action is the essence."

Similarly, it may be that Henry Kissinger acted for the wrong reasons, but the bottom line is, he acted. And action, not thought or talk, is the essence.

Back then, in the 1970s, exposing what he said would have embarrassed and humiliated him but today, not—or at least not so much. At least today, we have an explanation for what he said.

The Rebbe always said, "Hamaaseh hu haikar"—action is the essence.

So this Shabbos, let us resolve to take action—good action—in whatever area, large or small, in our lives that could use action. And may this inspire G-d to take the ultimate counteraction by sending Moshiach, speedily in our days, amen!

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