



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

DISTRIBUTION DATE:

WEDNESDAY JULY 24TH, 2013 / יז' אב תשע"ג

PARSHA:

Eikev / עקב

SERMON TITLE:

Russian Jews vs Yemenite Jews

A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

The author is solely responsible for the contents of this document.

Sponsored by Shimon Aron & Devorah Leah Rosenfeld & Family
In loving memory of
Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Eikev

Russian Jews vs Yemenite Jews

What's the connection between Chasidim from Russia and immigrants from Yemen? Anyone have any idea?

Here's some background information: In the 1950s, about 50,000 Yemenite immigrants arrived in Israel in a campaign known as Operation Magic Carpet. These Taymanim, as they are known in Hebrew, were Jews who religiously kept the Torah and mitzvos, and when they arrived in the Holy Land, the government settled them in transit camps in various cities throughout Israel.

In that era, religious schools only operated in Jerusalem, Bnei Brak and Kfar Chabad, and a few in Petach Tikvah. In most places that the fresh immigrants had been settled, there were no religious institutions to take in the children of the Taymanim. So at the time, the Rebbe instructed the Chabad chasidim in Israel to fill this gap and establish religious schools for them.

In the city of Kfar Saba there was a large Yemenite community, and Chabadniks went house to house and got parents to sign forms stating that they wanted to register their kids in religious educational institutions. The Chabadniks succeeded in registering some 90 kids whose parents expressed interest in a religious education for them. And with those forms they went to the Mayor and asked that the city fund a new school, just like every existing school in the city.

At first, the Mayor told them that he didn't have a budget for such an organization, but the Chabad Chasidim suggested that until the city found the budget, they would try to put together the budget themselves, and that the city should only build a temporary structure for the school. To that, the Mayor responded that there were no available properties in all of Kfar Saba to locate the new school. The existing available properties—so he said—were already designated for construction and as such were already reserved.

Towards the end of their meeting, the Mayor lost his patience and started shouting: “What do Chabad Chasidim have to do with Taymani immigrants! If Chabadniks started settling in Kfar Saba and asked to open a school for their own children, I would honor their request. But what do care about these Yemenites”

And indeed, what is the connection between Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazic Jewish immigrants from Russia to Taymani immigrants who speak Hebrew and the Holy Tongue?

So the Chasidim responded to the Mayor that they indeed do feel very close to the Taymanim, because the Taymanim in Yemen—just like the Chasidim in Russia—guarded their traditions with great self-sacrifice.

However, nothing emerged from that stormy meeting.

Frustrated and upset, the Chasidim wrote to the Rebbe about the meeting with the Mayor, writing that he is “the Satan himself” who would not in any way allow them to open a Jewish school in town. But the Rebbe replied to them that the Mayor was a good Jew who just needed to be motivated and drawn close, and then he’d become a helper and supporter.

Some time went by, and one of the activist Chasidim asked for another meeting with the Mayor to have a heart-to-heart talk—but he didn’t succeed in getting a meeting in his office. Now there’s an expression, “If you can’t get in through the door, get in through the window”—and that’s literally what our hero Chasid did. He went to the Mayor’s office and physically climbed in through the ground-floor window. As such, the Mayor was forced to speak with him. But all the Chasid’s persuasions and arguments went up in smoke.

Then the Chasidim turned to the banker at the local bank who handled the finances for the city council, and he told them that he’d meet with the Mayor and try to have a heart-to-heart talk with him. Well, he came back from that meeting and told them that the Mayor had told him to his face, “When hair grows on the palm of my hand, they’ll build a religious school in this town.”

Still, the stubborn Chasidim went ahead and opened the school in the local Taymani synagogue.

After a few weeks, however, the gabbai received notice from the city council that the school must vacate the premises. So they simply moved the school to a shed that was sitting abandoned in the middle of town—but the very next day, a city tractor showed up and knocked the place down.

In the meantime, when the happy holiday of Purim arrived, the Rebbe instructed the Chasidim to send the traditional Mishloach Manos food gift package to the Mayor. And indeed, that was the start of a little change in the man’s relationship with the Chasidim. Later, the Rebbe instructed them to send him matzos in honor of Passover, and that too softened him and his attitude toward the entire matter. And as Rosh Hashanah approached, the Rebbe himself sent the man a letter blessing him with a happy, healthy and sweet new year—and he was very moved by the fact the no less than the Lubavitcher Rebbe himself had remembered him.

And in the end, the Mayor—the very same man whom the Chasidim had described as “Satan”—turned into a friend and supporter of the new school that the Chasidim had established. (See the biography on Rabbi Meir Blizinsky, pg. 72 et al.)

But the question first asked by the Mayor remains a good one: What do Chabadniks have to do with immigrants from Yemen? Why is their concern if there is a Taymani school in town or not? Chasidim should worry about their own kids and that’s it!

So to answer this question, we turn to no less authoritative a source than the Talmud.

The Talmud tells us about a Kohen Gadol, a High Priest, in the times of the Second Temple, over 2,000 years ago roughly. His name was Yehoshua ben Gamla. The Talmud (Tractate Bava Basra 21a) tells us that this Kohen Gadol is “zachur latov”—“remembered for good.”

Now, such a title is a great honorific. But what did Yehoshua ben Gamla do to deserve such an honor?

In his era, it was not an established and common thing that young children went to school. Instead, there were schools for teenage boys ages 15-16, but little kids would get their education at home, with their fathers literally keeping the mitzvah stated in the first portion of the Shema of “V’shinantam l’vanecha”—“and you shall teach it to your son.” In those days, every parent personally taught their little kids, and kids who didn’t grow up with a father in the house would grow up without a Jewish education at all.

So along came Yehoshua ben Gamla and established that in every city and town there be schools for little kids, and there they will learn Torah. And so therefore, he is “remembered for good.” (See Sichos Kodesh 5733 pg. 252.)

And that brings us to this week’s Torah portion.

In this week’s Parshah, we read the second portion of the Shema prayer. At first glance, it seems that the mitzvos that appear in the second portion are already mentioned in the first portion. After all, in the first portion we are told about the obligation to teach children Torah and to put on Tefillin—“Ukishartam l’os al yadecha,” and you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand. The first portion also mentions the mezuzah scrolls.

And so, why does the second portion mention those same mitzvos again?

But one of the main differences between the two portions is that in the first portion the mitzvos are mentioned in the singular, while in the second they are mentioned in the plural. In the first portion, G-d commands each Jew in a personal manner, while in the second the command is to the community as a whole.

Furthermore, in the first portion the terminology is “b’chol l’vav’cha uv’chol naf’shecha”—with all your heart and all your soul, while in the second portion it says “b’chol l’vav’chem uv’chol naf’shichem”—with all your hearts and all your souls.

What’s more, in the first portion it’s written, “asher anochi *mitzvacha* hayom”—which I command you today, while in the second portion it’s written “asher anochi metzaveh *es’chem* hayom,” “es’chem” being the plural “you.”

And that brings us to the subject at hand.

In the first portion of the Shema, we are told, “Vishinantam l’vanecha”—and you shall teach it to your son, in the singular form. This means that every father is obligated to take pains to educate his own kids. But in the second portion of the Shema, it says, “Vilimaditem osam es b’naichem”—and you shall teach them to your *sons*. Meaning, that the obligation is upon all of us to educate “b’naichem,” your sons, in the plural sense—all of them. The obligation is upon the entire community to take pains that every Jewish child gets a Jewish education.

And so Halachah, Jewish law, establishes that “it is a rule of the Sages that there be placed teachers of children in every city and town... and to impose the payment of every child-teacher in the city... upon the entire community in the city... even somebody who doesn’t have children” (Shulchan Aruch, Laws of Torah Education 1:3).

And so, it was the obligation of a group of Chabad Chasidim in Israel, immigrants from Russia who only spoke Yiddish, to ensure that Taymani children got a Jewish education. And so it is the obligation of the Chosid in New York to immigrate to China so as to take pains that local Jewish kids there get a Jewish education.

A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

The author is solely responsible for the contents of this document.

Sponsored by Shimon Aron & Devorah Leah Rosenfeld & Family

In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman אה פנחס זאב בן פנחס זייל
who loved and supported Torah learning.