



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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SERMON TITLE:
“Did you see G-d?”

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In loving memory of

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

SHEMINI

"Did you see G-d?"

I'd like to tell you a story about a survivor of the Holocaust which connects to this week's Torah portion.

There was a young survivor named Naftali Lavi. After the war, he moved to the Holy Land, where he went to visit the Gerrer Rebbe, who himself had lost his wife and children in the Holocaust.

The Gerrer Rebbe invited him to take a walk that night in the streets of Jerusalem. The two of them walked quietly for one full hour—the bereaved Rebbe and the 19-year-old orphan.

Suddenly the Gerrer Rebbe stopped and turned to the young man and asked him, "Did you see the chimneys?" He was referring to the smokestacks of the ovens in the death camps—the incinerators where they disposed of the bodies of gassed Jews.

"Yes," said the young man.

They continued walking silently in the dark. Suddenly the Rebbe stopped again. "Did you see the smoke?"

"Yes," said the young man.

The walking continued silently. The Gerrer Rebbe suddenly asked him, "And did you see G-d?" Meaning, did you succeed in still seeing G-d in the midst of this whole inferno?

There is an amazing story told in the Talmud about Moshe Rabbeinu, our Master Moses, the greatest Jew who ever lived, and Rabbi Akiva, one of the great Jewish leaders of the Talmudic era. Even though Moshe lived about 1,500 years before Rabbi Akiva, there is a story that links them.

The Talmud (Tractate Menachos 29b) tells us that when Moshe went up on Mt. Sinai, he asked G-d to show him “each generation and its leading exponents.” Moses wanted G-d to show him the leaders of the generations to come—he wanted to see the future.

So, the Talmud tells us, G-d showed Moshe the generation of Rabbi Akiva.

Moshe suddenly found himself in the *beis medrash*, the study hall, of Rabbi Akiva, as Rabbi Akiva was teaching Torah. Moshe went and sat in the back in the last row, listened to the lecture, but didn’t succeed in understanding what Rabbi Akiva was teaching. “He did not know what they were saying,” the Talmud tells us—the level of the class was so high and Moshe felt very hurt.

The Talmud continues: Until Rabbi Akiva taught something specific and his students asked him, “Rebbe, what is your source?” and Rabbi Akiva replied, “It’s a law given to Moshe at Sinai”—meaning that there’s a tradition that Moshe taught it and that’s the bottom line. Once Moshe heard these words, he calmed down.

In a talk from the Torah portion of Shmini in 1966, the Rebbe asks: What’s going on here? The Torah states explicitly, “And the man Moshe was very humble, more so than any man on the face of the earth” (Bamidbar 12:3). And if that’s the case, how can a humble man feel hurt by the fact that there was someone whose level of Torah scholarship was higher than his? On the contrary—let there be more glory to the Torah!

Not only that, but the end of the story is also not understood: How is it that only when Moshe heard Rabbi Akiva giving him credit, saying, “It’s a law given to Moshe at Sinai,” did he calm down? Such behavior can be expected from ordinary people, not from a man as great as Moshe!

For example, if a rabbi forgets to mention someone during the synagogue services, G-d forbid, or if the synagogue newsletter accidentally leaves his or her name out, or spells someone's name wrongly, it's the end of the world!

That kind of reaction is understood from regular people, but from Moshe we expect different behavior altogether. A humble man wouldn't feel stressed by such things.

But the answer, my friends, is that Moshe was worried and hurt from something else altogether.

When Moshe saw a mighty scholar succeeding in explaining everything using reasoning, succeeding in providing strong intellectual proofs on how everything is understandable, and using iron logic to explain all the laws of the Torah so that one *understands* why one needs to observe them... Moshe didn't like it.

Moshe knew that the Torah's secret of survival was "*Na'aseh v'nishmah*"—the famous response of the Jews to G-d's offer of the Torah: We will do and we will listen. First we will accept it, and only then will we understand it.

Moshe knew that the secret of the Torah's survival was to observe it simply because G-d said it. Why? Because that's the way it is! Moshe knew that a law would ultimately arise that would not be explainable—and for such laws, one would need the foundation of acceptance, the foundation of "*Na'aseh v'nishmah*."

In our lives too, my friends, there are events like this which have no logical explanation—not even by the Torah's logic.

So when Moshe saw a man who based everything on logic and reason, "he was upset and worried"—he knew that this path could not endure.

But the very moment Rabbi Akiva came to a matter that had no logical explanation and explained it by saying “It’s a law given to Moshe at Sinai”, then he saw that behind all this logic was a firm basis of acceptance of the yoke of G-d—of “this is how it is and that’s it.” Only then was his mind put at ease.

In this week’s Torah portion, Parshas Shmini, we read about which animals are permitted to be eaten and which are not—in short, the entire concept of kosher.

When it comes to keeping kosher, people tried all through the generations to provide explanations on why we should keep kosher.

The problem is that if you keep kosher for some logical reason, the minute the reason no longer applies, logic dictates that there’s no longer any need to keep kashrus. But the Jew, however, who accepts the Yoke of Heaven, the Jew of “Na’aseh v’nishmah,” knows that it doesn’t matter what might be the reason, or even if there is a reason—he or she keeps kosher because that’s what G-d said.

And this is true not just for mitzvos but for all of life in general.

To survive something as evil as the Holocaust and find G-d in it is only possible with acceptance—those who tried to understand everything G-d does using logic did not succeed in standing firm; they didn’t survive the Holocaust as believing Jews.

It is specifically those who followed the path of acceptance, of “this is how it is and that’s it” regardless of what met their eyes, who succeeded in surviving the Holocaust and remaining faithful Jews.

Elie Wiesel was once asked, “After all you were through and all you experienced during the Holocaust, are you still a man of faith?” He answered: “After all I went through, it’s impossible to not have faith.”

Every Holocaust survivor who saw all that death before his or her eyes so many times, also saw G-d each and every time he or she was saved. And if such a person was saved, as Wiesel put it, "it's impossible to not have faith."

I am not at all saying that one should not think. Rather, the message of this week's Torah portion, and indeed, that of the Holocaust, is that thinking ultimately must be based on faith—that there is a point at which we must stop using our minds and start using our souls.

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