



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

DISTRIBUTION DATE:

TUESDAY JUNE 21ST, 2011 / י"ט סיון

PARSHA:

Korach / קרח

SERMON TITLE:

Hitting Rock Bottom

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

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

Korach

Hitting Rock Bottom

Good Shabbos!

I'd like to begin with a little story.

Three historical figures have an audience with G-d: Vladimir Putin of Russia, Nicholas Sarkozy of France, and Yasser Arafat, the father of modern-day terrorism, may his name be erased.

Putin asks G-d: "When will Mother Russia dominate the world as in the glory days of Czar Peter the Great?" G-d replies, "Not in your lifetime." And Putin leaves, wailing, "Not in my lifetime! Woe is me!"

Next, Sarkozy asks G-d: "When will our great Republic dominate the world as in the days of the mighty Napoleon Bonaparte?" G-d replies, "Not in your lifetime." And Sarkozy leaves, wailing, "Not in my lifetime! Woe is me!"

Finally, Arafat asks G-d: "Hey, G-d! When will we push Israel into the sea and finally wipe out the Jews once and for all?"

And G-d replies, "Not in My lifetime."

With that in mind, I'd like to talk a little bit about Helen Thomas. Remember her?

She was that 90-year-old journalist who turned out to be a Jew-hater. She had covered the White House for decades. But somebody caught her on camera saying that the Jews should leave "Palestine" and that they should "go home" to "Germany and Poland." And she didn't say it in a particularly nice way either.

Naturally, the whole civilized world was shocked, because that's exactly how our "friend" Mr. Ahmadinejad of Iran talks. However, here we had a supposedly respectable 90-year-old Washington journalist saying the same things.

But the Rebbe, whose yahrzeit is approaching, taught us that everything that happens has a positive side to it. And so when it comes to attacks on Israel, we need to find the positive side of the story.

So here comes another story.

The story is told in the Talmud (Tractate Makkos 24b) about the famous Rabbi Akiva, one of the greatest of the Sages who had lived in the generation after the destruction of the Second Temple. He and several of his fellow Sages once went up to Jerusalem.

Among the group visiting the city was Rabban Gamliel, the president of the Sanhedrin; Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, the next in line as Sanhedrin president; and Rabbi Yehoshua, the chief justice and some sort of vice president to Rabban Gamliel. You may recognize these names from the Haggadah we read each Pesach.

Says the Talmud: "When they came to the Temple Mount, they saw a fox emerge from the place of the Holy of Holies."

Now, the Holy of Holies, the *Kodesh HaKodashim*, was the place in which sat the *Aron*, the Holy Ark, which contained the *Luchos*, the tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. It was the place where only the *Kohein Gadol*, the High Priest, could enter, and only once a year—and only if he were a *tzadik*, a righteous man, would he emerge alive. And now, the Sages saw that out of the ruins of the Temple, out of the very place on which stood the *Kodesh HaKodashim*, a fox came running out.

The Talmud continues: “They started weeping and Rabbi Akiva laughed.”

The three other Sages had the most natural reaction when they saw such destruction: They burst out in tears. But Rabbi Akiva was laughing! The Talmud continues: “They said to him, ‘Why are you laughing?’ ” What’s so funny here? What exactly is making you so happy?

Now, a Jew always answers a question with another question. And so the Talmud continues: “He said to them, ‘Why are you weeping?’ They said to him: ‘The place on which the Torah writes, “And the stranger who comes close shall die” now has foxes walking through it; shall we not weep?!”

So Rabbi Akiva answered them: “Said he to them, ‘This is exactly why I laugh.’”

There is an old Jewish folk tale about the rich Jew in the shtetl who lost his property, and thus slipped further and further into poverty. He lost his savings, he lost his stocks and lost his business, and things only kept getting worse. He eventually lost his house and was literally left with nothing.

So one fine day, our friend goes to the mikvah, undresses and goes to dunk himself in the water. When he comes out and goes back to the dressing area, to his surprise, he finds that his clothing is missing! Somebody put on his clothes and left.

So while this poor man is standing there like Adam before the sin of the Forbidden Fruit, he breaks out dancing. Everyone around him thought, "What a pity. This poor Jew, because of all his troubles, just lost his mind."

So they went and brought him some clothing so that he'd at least be able to leave the mikvah.

A short time after that, the man's fortune began shining upon him again. He started engaging in small business and slowly got back to himself. As days went by, a close friend of his told him that he had been a witness to his dance in the mikvah, and he asked him what was the meaning of his insane dance?

So the restored rich man answered: "Life is a wheel of fortune, and so as long as I was falling and falling and losing my fortune I was very worried, because I knew that it could get worse, and I tried to stop it."

"But when I came out of the mikvah and discovered that I had quite literally lost my pants, I then knew that I had hit the rock bottom —and that from that moment onward, the situation would only improve. And so I started dancing for joy, because I knew that my salvation was soon to come."

Perhaps we can say that this is what happened to Rabbi Akiva.

The situation of the Jewish Nation had started dropping downward during the First Temple Era, followed by the Exile of the Ten Tribes, and so on. Then came the Destruction of the First Temple. But with the First Temple, the Talmud Yerushalmi tells us, only the roof was destroyed. The walls remained. The destruction was not complete.

In other words, things could have been worse.

But after the destruction of the Second Temple, when Rabbi Akiva saw a fox running out of the place where once stood the Kodesh HaKodashim, he thought to himself, “Now we’ve really hit rock bottom. Now we’ve really gotten to the bottom of the wheel of fortune.” Nothing worse could have possibly happened to the Beis Hamikdash—and so from this moment onward, the situation could only get better.

And so Rabbi Akiva laughed.

In this week’s Parshah, we read about the dispute between Korach and Moshe Rabbeinu.

What’s interesting about it is that after the story of Korach, we don’t find any more accounts of arguments or disputes in the desert—sort of like how the Tanach tells us about Jewish victories later, “And the Land was silent for forty years.”

Now, what exactly happened that after this story the Jewish Nation was suddenly silent?

Some people might say, “Well, if you saw people getting swallowed alive by the very earth, you’d also understand that there’s no more games and that anyone who makes problems will find himself Korach’s neighbor.”

But there’s something more here.

From the moment the Jewish Nation left Egypt, they complained many times to Moshe Rabbeinu. As soon as they crossed the Reed Sea, they were already complained to Moshe, “Were there no graves in Egypt? What’s this that you have done to us?” Only three days later, they complained to Moshe, “What will we drink?” and other complaints: We want bread. We want meat. And then, the Sin of the Golden Calf.

Each time, they pushed their rebelliousness a little further. They kept crossing lines. But Moshe Rabbeinu, faithful shepherd that he was, would constantly pray for them and save them.

Then came the story of the Meraglim, the Spies, which we read about last week—and again the Jewish Nation crossed the line yet again: Now they didn't want to enter the Holy Land. But again, Moshe Rabbeinu defended them.

But then came the story of Korach. Here, the Jewish People arrived at the lowest possible level: Korach actually challenged the leadership of Moshe Rabbeinu. He

challenged his legitimacy as a leader: "The entire community is all holy... why do you elevate yourself above G-d's congregation?"

You might even say he was history's first anarchist.

Now here, all bets were off. Now it wasn't a legitimate dispute on whether the Jews should enter the Holy Land or not. In all previous cases, you could find some justification or defense that they had made a mistake—but here they had gotten to the bottom of the ladder. Now it became clear suddenly that what had been behind all the complaints was that they didn't want to accept the authority of Moshe, or of G-d. They could not have gone any farther than that—and so it was precisely this episode that caused the turning point for the generation of the desert.

From then on, there were no complaints.

And today, my friends, we have the same phenomenon.

The dispute over the Holy Land has been carrying on for decades already. First they said that the Sinai doesn't belong to us, that it belongs to Egypt—and besides, it's not even part of Biblical Israel. So in the end, they gave back the Sinai to Egypt.

Then they argued that the Gaza Strip is full of Arab residents and that it's not right or moral to dominate and control an entire other nation. So they gave back the Gaza Strip too.

Then they complained that they really need to establish a “Palestinian” state in the “occupied territories,” and only then will there exist “peace between the two nations” as they live lovingly side by side. And the government agreed even to this.

Then the dispute on Jerusalem began, with the argument that this too belongs to them, that we could perhaps turn Jerusalem into an “international city” and all sorts of other insane ideas. And throughout this debate, these arguments “seemed” legitimate: “It’s not that we have something against Jews or against Israel—we are simply concerned about an ‘oppressed nation’ and we’re just saying that we need to give them a chance and that it’s not right to conquer another nation...”

But thanks to people like the reporter mentioned above, it’s all become perfectly clear: The argument is really that the Jews have no right to the Holy Land at all. “You don’t belong there and it doesn’t belong to you. You need to go home!” And “home,” is Germany and Poland?!

Now, my friends, we’ve gotten to the lowest level—because when it comes to “Jews go home!”, no “peace activist” could possibly agree. That’s because here, we discover that the argument is not over the size of the territory that we need to give to the Arabs but, sadly, whether a White House reporter thinks that the Jewish Nation has any right to set foot on the Holy Land.

So now, my friends, we can laugh like Rabbi Akiva—because in the debate over Israel, it really can’t get worse. And so, G-d willing, from this moment onward, a new movement will begin in the opposite direction!

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 אביר פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.