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The Test of Truth

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In loving memory of

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

Ki Tisa

The Test of Truth

Good Shabbos!

And speaking of Shabbos, the law in Israel is that Shabbos is the legal Day of Rest. You officially are not allowed to work. And this is true for the military too (except, of course, in cases of immediate danger to life, which, unfortunately, is all too common in Israel.)

The law is that on Shabbos and on Jewish holidays, it's illegal to do any ordinary tasks in the military. It is the official Day of Rest.

Now, the Israel Defense Forces have a Chief Rabbinate. And the Chief Rabbinate appoints rabbis for every unit whose mission is to bring religious services to every soldier. And above them all you have the Chief Rabbi, who is responsible for all religious matters in the military.

Now, a little Israeli history here. During the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the Chief Rabbi of the Israeli military was Rabbi Mordechai Piron. He had excellent relationships with the military brass like Defense Minister Moshe Dayan and so on—friendly relationships and mutual respect.

One day, they told him that they were going to do something connected with violating the Shabbos, but they advised him to turn a blind eye to it, to not mix in.

So Rabbi Piron was in a big dilemma. On the one hand, his conscience told him that as the Chief Rabbi, he had to put up a loud hue and cry and try to stop this desecration of Shabbos. On the other hand, he thought to himself, perhaps this time it would be right to turn a blind eye to it and not ruin the close relationship he had with the military's leaders—only afterwards to work on it together so as to lead the military in the right religious direction.

But during that time, he was in the United States, and so he went to visit the Rebbe.

Now, Rabbi Piron had not shared this dilemma with anyone. But when it came to the Rebbe, he felt a need to tell him and to ask him what to do—should he turn a blind eye to the whole story? Or should he listen to his own conscience and stir up things in Israel?

The Rebbe looked at him straight in the eye and asked him: "You're familiar with the story of Rabbi Eliezer the Great, aren't you?"

The Rebbe was referring to the famous story in the Talmud of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkinus, who was one of the greatest Sages in the generation immediately after the Destruction of the Second Temple. The Sages had gathered then in the city of Yavneh, where they went and built a study hall for scholars and there established many laws at the level of "nimnu v'gamru"—they counted and ruled, meaning that they debated and deliberated over these laws until they were clarified, and after the deliberations, they ruled by majority and established the Jewish law.

So Yavneh became a center of authority immediately after the Destruction.

The Talmud (Tractate Bava Metzia 59b) tells us about a deliberation in the study hall regarding whether a specific type of oven can contract ritual impurity or not. Rabbi Eliezer argued that this particular type of oven remains pure, while the rest of the Sages argued that it can become impure, and therefore was.

The Talmud tells us that on that day of deliberations, Rabbi Eliezer tried to come up with all the explanations in the world, but did not succeed in convincing the majority of his fellow scholars in the study hall that he was right.

He tried to convince them using his supernatural powers. He said, "If the law is according to me, this carob tree shall prove it. Let this carob tree uproot itself from its place and move one hundred cubits!" (That's about 150 feet, by the way). And so a miracle happened and the tree moved. But the Sages were not convinced. They said to him, "You can't bring a proof from a carob tree." In plain English, miracles won't convince us that you're right. Still, Rabbi Eliezer tried other miracles, until he said, "The walls of the study hall shall prove it! If I am right, let the walls of the study hall lean halfway in!" And they did. But this too did not convince the Sages.

And then he said, "The Heavens will prove it!" And a Heavenly Voice came forth and proclaimed, "What do you have against Rabbi Eliezer, in whose accordance is the law in every case!"

So now, even Heaven agreed that the law was like him!

But Rabbi Yehoshua, another one of the Sages, stood up and declared, "The Torah is not in Heaven... for it has already been given on Mt. Sinai; we do not consider a Heavenly Voice, as it is already written in the Torah... 'Lean after the majority.'"

And thus, even Heaven cannot mix into a dispute among the Sages.

So finally, the law was ruled in favor of the Sages. And of course, Rabbi Eliezer didn't agree in any way, shape or form to the force of the majority. So the Sages banished him, and he lost his place in the study hall, went back home to the city of Lud, where he lived, and remained lonely until he died.

Now, the Rebbe turned to Rabbi Piron and said to him: You know the story of Rabbi Eliezer, who was not prepared to compromise on what he saw as the truth—and he paid a very heavy price for it.

And then the Rebbe asked him, "Surely the story of Akavya ben Mahalal'el you know, do you not?"

Here's that story.

Akavya was another one of the great Sages of Jewish history. He is mentioned in the Pirkei Avos, the famous Ethics of the Fathers. He lived during the Second Temple Era, which would put him before Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkinus. He lived roughly around the time of the great Hillel and Shammai, and in his prime, he was one of the greatest of the Sages and the greatest "in wisdom and fear of sin," as was testified about him.

The story is told about him that he had a dispute with the Sages of that generation on four matters regarding Temple sacrifices and ritual purity.

Now, an important delegation once came to him and gave him an offer that one couldn't refuse. They said, "Akavya, reverse your opinion on these four matters, and we shall make you the Chief Justice of Israel"—change your mind and we'll make you the Vice President of the Sanhedrin (the "Supreme Court" of ancient Israel), the Number Two man. (The Number One man was the President, followed by the Chief Justice.)

Now this is a very enticing offer. But he said, "It's better to me to be called a fool my whole life and not do one moment of sin before G-d just so they won't say that he changed his mind for power."

Akavya was thus ready to give up leadership of his people and have everyone laugh at him for passing up the opportunity just so he wouldn't be a sinner before G-d for just one moment. Because, he reasoned, if you are willing to compromise on your essential principles, on your truths, just to gain power and authority, then it's like taking bribery to change your mind.

So Akavya indeed passed up the enticing offer and stayed true to his beliefs.

Now the Rebbe asked Rabbi Piron, "So you know the story of Akavya ben Mahalal'el?" To such a rabbi, one did not need to retell the story. He knew exactly what the Rebbe was referring to. So he said to the Rebbe, why are you comparing me to Rabbi Eliezer, to Akavya ben Mahalal'el? They were some of the greatest heroes of the Jewish Nation! I'm just a little guy who's trying to stand strong. Where's the comparison?

But the Rebbe fixed Rabbi Piron with a very serious look and said to him: "A man needs to fight for the truth in his heart. It's a fight against himself, but he stands before G-d, who is the G-d of Truth."

Rabbi Piron shook when he heard these words. And then the Rebbe added: "Sometimes we see huge waves in the sea and it looks like there will be a great storm—but then, everything suddenly calms down and the water becomes quiet and you can't even tell that there was a storm."

Well, Rabbi Piron returned to Israel—where the military leaders told him, "It's good that you didn't get involved... because the whole thing got canceled anyway."

And now, we come to this week's Torah portion.

We read in the Torah portion of Ki Tisa about the Chet HaAgel, the Sin of the Golden Calf. Moshe Rabbeinu was on Mt. Sinai, and after 40 days of him being up there and being just about to come back down with the Two Tablets, G-d tells him what was going on in the camp below: "Your nation has become corrupted"—they've went ahead and made a Golden Calf down there.

And then G-d said to Moshe, "And now, leave Me... and I shall make you a great nation" (Shmos 32:10)—an enticing offer. All the people would be killed, and a new Jewish Nation would be built up from Moshe's direct descendants, with Moshe being not only the leader but also the father of the nation. They'd all come from him.

But, Moshe stayed faithful to his truths. He said to G-d, "And now, if You would lift their sin—and if not, please blot me out" (Shmos 32:32). Thus, Moshe Rabbeinu gave his life so as to save the Jewish Nation.

This story can serve us as a lesson on how far we must go for another Jew.

Now, it does happen frequently that a person will say to himself, "What's it worth?" Do I compare at all to Moshe Rabbeinu? How can I be expected to act like Moshe Rabbeinu?

Or, a person might sometimes need to forgive his friend or family member, but he's not prepared to do so. The rabbi tries to convince him: look at how Joseph forgave his brothers! Perhaps try to use him as a role model. But what does the yetzer harah, the evil inclination, say? "What's the worth? What am I—Yosef HaTzadik?! The son of Yaakov?! I'm a simple person! How can you demand such behavior of me in the first place?"

The Alter Rebbe writes in the Tanya: "Despite the fact that who can plot in his heart to approach and grasp even one thousandth of the love Moshe had for G-d, still, a tiny portion of it shines on overall Jewry in every generation because of his great goodness and light" (Tanya, 44).

What the Alter Rebbe is saying here is that every Jew has a spark of Moshe Rabbeinu inside him or her. And therefore, even though it's true that we don't expect everyone to be Moshe Rabbeinu, still, you can be Moshe Rabbeinu once in your lifetime.

You can forgive like Yosef HaTzadik once in your lifetime—not every day. Just one time. For that moment, you can be Yosef HaTzadik.

Everyone agrees that we're not on the level of Akavya ben Mahalal'el. But perhaps when it next happens that we're in a dilemma about what to do, we'll stand fast by the our inner truth like Akavya.

For now, we can, and must, try to be like all these giants the Torah tells us about.

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