

Siyum on Masechet Makkot

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We all are aware of the classic enumeration of Mitzvot in our Torah. The Gemara on Makkot 23b quotes R. Simlai as teaching that Moshe Rabbeynu was told 613 commandments that are in turn composed of 365 prohibitions corresponding to the days of a solar year and 248 positive activities corresponding to the number of limbs in the human body. Rashi explains that each limb of the body urges us to “do a mitzvah” with that limb and that the same limbs warn us every day of the year not to transgress any commandment. Although there are many Mitzvot that don’t apply to us at the current time, several hundred commandments still represent quite a lot of responsibilities.

The Gemara continues and teaches that Dovid HaMelech found a way to categorize the 613 Mitzvot to 11 Mitzvot. Within a single Perek of Tehillim (15), we learn about 11 ways to behave in this world that will facilitate our journey to Olam Haba – the next world.

Yeshayahu finds a way to distill the Mitzvot to 6 items and Michah further reduces the count to 3 – we are all familiar with the Pasuk in Perek Shishi that states:

“הַגִּיד לְךָ אָדָם מֵה טוֹב וּמֵה רָ' דוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ כִּי אִם עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֵסֶד וְהִצַּנֵּעַ לְכַת עִם (ה') אֲלֵהֶיךָ”.

Interestingly, Yeshayahu returns and continues the Mitzva reduction from 613 to just two. He bases his proposal on a divine request in Perek 56:

“כֹּה אָמַר ה' שְׁמְרוּ מִשְׁפָּט וְעֲשׂוּ צְדָקָה”.

Rashi notes that the reason Yeshayahu reduces the number of Mitzvot relates to a certain sobering, existential reality of the prophet’s era – with each passing generation, the adherence to performance of the Mitzvot eroded until asking for Jews to maintain a loyalty to Torah meant to ask them to keep just two Mitzvot – that is, Observe just ways of living and perform righteous deeds.

Finally, the Navi Amos reduces the Mitzva count from 613 to 1 – how?

“כֹּה אָמַר ה' לְבֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל דַּרְשׁוּנִי וְחִיו”.

HaShem says to the Children of Israel – Search for Me and live! The Gemara objects to this line of reasoning pointing out that Dirshuni could also mean – study my Torah and perform

as many Mitzvot as you can and earn a reward of eternal life – thus, the count of Mitzvot has not really been reduced to 1.

The Gemara pivots and quotes the Navi Habakuk who announces: **וְצַדִּיק בְּאַמוּנָתוֹ יַחִיָּה** – telling us that, ultimately, a righteous person lives through their faith. A simple faith in HaShem, an unshakeable and immovable Emunah. A confidence that the Jewish people, starting with one human being, Avraham Avinu, so many generations ago, continues in unbroken fashion through all the centuries, to us, here, today.

It is therefore no surprise that the final segment of the Mesechta carries forward this theme of Emunah in HaShem and the Torah in a most beautiful and poignant way. A group of four Rabbis, R. Gamliel, R. Elazar ben Azarya, R. Yehushua, and R. Akiva (all living in the shadow of the Churban Bayis Sheni in the latter part of the first century CE) were walking up to Yerushalayim **וְשָׁבוּ פַעַם אֶחָת הָיוּ עוֹלִין לְיְרוּשָׁלַיִם** - and they reached Mount Scopus where the site of the destroyed Beit HaMikdash became into view - **כִּיּוֹן שָׁהֲגִיעוּ לְהַר הַצּוֹפִים** - They performed the Avelut practice of tearing a part of their clothing - **קָרְעוּ בְּגָדֵיהֶם** - They continued their walk and soon reached the Temple Mount - **כִּיּוֹן שָׁהֲגִיעוּ לְהַר הַבַּיִת** - At that moment, a fox emerges from the location where the Kodosh Kodoshim had been located - **וְהִתְחִילוּ הֵן בּוֹכִין** - Three of the Rabbis burst into tears - **רָאוּ שׁוֹעֵל שֹׁיֵצָא מִבַּיִת קִדְשֵׁי הַקִּדְשִׁים** - a fox running around the holiest site of our religious world. Oh, how the holiest of places is now sullied and stark. Suddenly, R. Akiva started to laugh - **וְרַבִּי עָקִיבָא מְצַחֵק** - The Rabbi said to R. Akiva – why are you laughing? **מַפְנֵי מָה אַתָּה מְצַחֵק**? – He responded to them – why are you crying - **מַפְנֵי מָה אַתֶּם בּוֹכִים** -

Said the Rabbis to R. Akiva – the Torah teaches us that a non-Kohen who comes close to this place shall die and now foxes walk through it – how can we not break into tears? **אָמְרוּ לּוֹ: מִקּוֹם שֶׁכְּתוּב בּוֹ "וְהִזְרַתְּ הַקֶּרֶב יוֹמֵת", וְעַכְשָׁיו שׁוֹעֵלִים הֹלְכִים בּוֹ, וְלֹא נִבְכָּה**!?

R. Akiva replies – that’s exactly why I am joyful! The Tanach in Sefer Yeshayahu tells us that “and I (says HaShem) will take to Me faithful witnesses to testify: Uriah the Kohen and Zecharya the son of Yeverechyahu”. - **וְאֶעֱיִדָה לִּי עֲדִים נְאֻמָּנִים אֶת אֲוִרְיָה הַכֹּהֵן וְאֶת זְכַרְיָה** - **בֶּן יְבֵרְכָיָהוּ** - What is the relationship between Uriah and Zecharya?

Uriah was a Navi during the 1st Temple period and Zecharya was a Navi during the Bayis Sheni. **וְזַכַּרְיָה בְּמִקְדָּשׁ שֵׁנִי** - **וְזַכַּרְיָה בְּמִקְדָּשׁ רִאשׁוֹן**, **וְזַכַּרְיָה בְּמִקְדָּשׁ שֵׁנִי** - After all, they were prophets at two different times! R. Akiva answers that the pasuk creates a relationship between the prophecy of Zecharya and that of Uriah. **אֵלֶּא: תְּלָה הַכְּתוּב נְבוֹאָתוֹ** - **שֶׁל זְכַרְיָה בְּנְבוּאָתוֹ שֶׁל אֲוִרְיָה** - By Uriah, the Navi writes: “Therefore, for your sake, Zion will be plowed under like a field” - **בְּאֲוִרְיָה כְּתִיב "לָכֵן בְּגִלְלָתְכֶם צִיּוֹן שְׂדֵה תִּחְרַשׁ"** -

written – “There shall yet be elderly men and women living along the streets of Yerushalayim” - “בְּזִכְרֶיהָ כָּתִיב “עוֹד יֵשְׁבוּ זְקֵנִים וְזִקְנוֹת בְּרַחוּבוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם”.

The lesson, says R. Akiva, is that, until the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, I was worried that the prophecy of Zecharya would not be fulfilled. עַד שֶׁלֹּא נִתְקַיְּמָה נְבוּאָתוֹ שֶׁל אֲוִרְיָה הֵייתִי - But now that the prophecy of Uriah has been fulfilled, it is clear to me that the prophecy of Zecharya still and will be fulfilled. עַכְשָׁיו שֶׁנִּתְקַיְּמָה - נְבוּאָתוֹ שֶׁל אֲוִרְיָה - בְּיָדוּעַ שֶׁנְּבוּאָתוֹ שֶׁל זְכַרְיָה מִתְקַיְּמָת - The lesson has been framed. The Rabbis now understand. Together, with one voice, they look up to him with tear-stained eyes but now with the beginning of a smile in their faces and say: Akiva, you have comforted us, Akiva, you have comforted us! בְּלִשׁוֹן הַזֶּה אָמְרוּ לוֹ: עֲקִיבָא נִחְמַתְנוּ, עֲקִיבָא נִחְמַתְנוּ.

What are the themes of this compelling passage of Aggadeta?

1. Destruction and Redemption are Connected – Rabbi Akiva sees that the destruction is not just a tragedy, it is a necessary stage in the unfolding of redemption. Pain and suffering are not the end of the story – they are part of a bigger, redemptive process.
2. Emuna beyond what is visible – When most people see foxes crawling around the Churban, they weep. R. Akiva teaches us that true Emunah is the ability to see beyond – to see what will be.
3. The soothing comfort of a friend – The Rabbis repeat the phrase – Akiva, you have comforted us. From the depths of their shaken-ness they emerge slowly, along the way, they need encouragement – it’s not always just a one-step return to normal; here, the Rabbis inform R. Akiva of the steps in their healing.
4. The fox – In Judaism, the symbol of the fox is that of something lowly, an animal that inhabits a ruins. Yet, R. Akiva sees this animal as a symbol of change, as proof of the truth of a prophecy. The fox becomes part of the Jewish national redemption.
5. The historical echo – the Jews were now living in the aftermath of catastrophe and future prospects seems pretty bleak. Yet, if R Akiva could see the ruins and draw on his Emunah to believe in a Geula, then so can we.

Finally, the Baal Shem Tov teaches that true Simcha comes not from ignoring pain, but from seeing the hidden good within the pain itself. R. Akiva didn’t just “wait” for the Geulah. He already rejoiced because he trusted that the seeds of the Geulah were planted within the destruction itself. Within the darkness is a hidden light.

The story is told about R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev. Once, after a terrible decree against the Jews, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak danced and sang. His students asked him how he could rejoice at such a time. He answered: **"If such bitter decrees have come — how sweet**

must the redemption be that is waiting just around the corner!". May all of us merit the sweetness of an end to our communal suffering and may we together see the coming of Mashiach, Bimhayra B'yamaynu.

הדרן עלך אלו הן הלוקין וסליקא לה מסכת מכות