

Rabbi Sacks' Path to Leadership

Category: Bereishis, Chayei Sarah

When a young Cambridge student visited the Rebbe in the 1970's to ask philosophical questions, he didn't expect to be challenged in reverse. The meeting that made a profound impact on future Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

Change the Situation

Good Shabbos!

Last week, we were saddened by the news of the passing of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of England and world-famous Jewish thinker. He was also known for his connection to - and profound admiration for - for the Rebbe

When he was the Guest of Honor at the International Shluchim Convention in 2011, shared how he had been drawn to the Rebbe.

In 1968, as a college student at Cambridge University, he decided then to visit the United States and meet with the greatest of America's rabbis.

During his visit, every rabbi he met told him that he had to meet the Rebbe. So he came to 770 Eastern Parkway, approached the first Chassid he met, and said that he was interested in meeting with the Rebbe.

The Chassid burst out in laughter, replying that he could forget about it—thousands of others were also interested in meeting with the Rebbe. But Rabbi Sacks left the Chassid with the phone number of his aunt in California, where he would be staying, and told him that if he could somehow arrange a meeting he should call and leave a message.

Several weeks later, on Saturday night, the phone rang in Rabbi Sacks' aunt's house in California, notifying Rabbi Sacks that the Rebbe was ready to meet with him that Thursday night.

So Rabbi Sacks quickly got on a Greyhound bus and traveled 72 hours across the country to get to New York.

He arrived at 770, and ultimately found himself entering the Rebbe's office to ask the Rebbe the same philosophical questions he posed to many rabbis. But the Rebbe suddenly switched roles on him—the Rebbe began asking him questions: How many Jewish students are there at Cambridge? How many of them are involved in Jewish life? What is he doing to get other Jewish students to join in Jewish life?

He had not prepared for this. He had come to interview the Rebbe—and to his surprise, the Rebbe turned the tables on him!

So Rabbi Sacks tried to defend himself, saying, "In the situation in which I currently find myself..."

The Rebbe cut him off mid-sentence with a statement that changed Rabbi Sacks's life: "No one finds himself in a specific situation. You got yourself into a certain situation, and you can put yourself into another situation."

What the Rebbe had taught him was that he didn't need to accept the situation as it was, but rather, to change it. Rabbi Sacks added that it was at that moment that he arrived at a deep understanding: Every rabbi had tried to turn him into a student, but the Rebbe, on the other hand, had convinced him to become a leader.

All Three, and More...

Rabbi Sacks returned to England, concluded his studies at college, went to study in yeshivah in Kfar Chabad, Israel, and then returned to England, where he got married, studied philosophy, and received rabbinical ordination.

Ten years later, in 1978, he came back to the United States to meet the Rebbe again and ask him about continuing his path in life. There were three paths before him, Rabbi Sacks told the Rebbe: One, to become an academic or professor at Cambridge or something of the sort; two, to study economics and become an economist; or three, to study law and become an attorney.

Rabbi Sacks had written it all down on a slip of paper which he had handed to the Rebbe. The Rebbe read all three options and said, "Not this, not this and not this." Instead, the Rebbe told him that British Jewry had a shortage of rabbis, and that it was incumbent upon him to ordain young new rabbis—and to accomplish that, he

himself would have to personally serve as a synagogue rabbi so that his students could listen to his sermons and learn from them.

Rabbi Sacks listened to the Rebbe, abandoned his plans and became a rabbi. And thirteen years after serving as a synagogue rabbi, he was chosen as Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom.

Continuing his story, Rabbi Sacks said that ultimately, all his dreams were realized. He also became a university professor, also delivered important economic lectures and even spoke on Jewish law before a conference of 600 attorneys. Rabbi Sacks said that when one puts Judaism at the top of the list of priorities, one ultimately loses nothing.

Rav and Shmuel's Debate

Concluding his comments, Rabbi Sacks ended with a powerful idea about Chanukah, which is quickly approaching:

On every menorah we light on Chanukah, there are eight candles and one shamash. One of the purposes of the shamash is to serve as the candle with which we light the other candles. And there is a debate in the Talmud whether one needs a shamash in the first place, or if one can light one Chanukah candle from another Chanukah candle.

The Talmud (Tractate Shabbos 22a) mentions a dispute between two of the Talmudic Rabbis of Bavel, Rav and Shmuel: "Rav says we do not light from candle to candle, and Shmuel says we do light." Rav holds that it's forbidden to light from one candle to the next, because "It lessens the mitzvah"—by lighting a Chanukah candle with another Chanukah candle, it can seem like we're taking away a bit from the first candle. In other words, it can appear as if the first candle is losing something. Shmuel, on the other hand, is not worried about the problem of the loss of the mitzvah. He doesn't think that the first candle loses something when you light another candle with it. And so he believes that one can light a candle with another candle.

What are they really arguing about?

Every Jew is a candle that illuminates the world. There are Jews who think that if

they go out to light another candle, if they leave their religious environment and go to a faraway place to light the torch of other Jews, they will lose something of their own fire—their own light will weaken, their spirituality will be hurt, their kids will not grow up in a religious environment. Something will be missing. They agree with Rav, that it is forbidden to light one candle from another—that they need to worry about their own candles and those of their family members.

But the Rebbe, noted Rabbi Sacks, thought the opposite. He believed that we are obligated to go out and light other candles—and not only would this not suppress our own candles, not only would our own spirituality not be damaged, but on the contrary, “our minds and hearts would be purified one thousand times over,” that in the merit of our igniting the soul of another Jew, our own fires would become torches.

And the most interesting thing, Rabbi Sacks ended, is that the rule in the Talmud is that whenever there is a dispute between Rav and Shmuel, the law goes according to Rav—but here, the law is ruled according to Shmuel, that one can light one Chanukah candle from another (even though we actually use a shamash).

The spiritual lesson is clear: Every Jew must light up another Jew—and not only will he not lose out because of that, but on the contrary, in that merit, his life will shine forever.