

What Is A Rebbe?

Category: Bamidbar, Korach

Lessons from the Rebbe, his predecessor, and even Moses.

In the 1960s, the Rebbe's secretary, Rabbi Hodakov, called over one of the Yeshivah students with a unique mission. For this particular boy, (Rabbi) Asher Zeilingold, it wasn't the first time.

The secretary had a letter in his hand. He explained that the Rebbe had received it from a woman who lived on Eastern Parkway; she wrote that she wanted her son to attend Yeshivah University but could not afford the tuition, and therefore asked for the Rebbe's help.

Rabbi Hodakov instructed the Yeshivah boy to visit the woman, find out exactly what she needed, and help her work it out. If she wanted her son to attend Yeshiva university, he was to help her arrange just that.

He asked to see the letter to better understand the situation, but Rabbi Hodakov remarked that the letter was written in the garbled Yiddish of a Yiddishe Mama and therefore difficult to understand. He suggested that Asher take the letter to his own mother for interpretation. Indeed, Asher's mother was able to decipher her writing.

The main instruction he received from Rabbi Hodakov was that the woman was not allowed to know, under any circumstance, where the money came from. He was to give her the money and she was to do with it as she saw fit. Asher thought to persuade her to send her son to a Chabad Yeshiva, but Rabbi Hodakov rejected the idea entirely.

Several years later, a group of students came to Crown Heights for a weekend known as Pegisha, where college students heard lectures about Judaism and got to spend Shabbat with the Rebbe. At one of the sessions, Rabbi Zalman Posner spoke to the students and then opened the floor for questions.

One student stood up and asked: "Why does Chabad only do things for itself?"

Rabbi Zeilingold who was present at this event, looked to see who asked the

question. It was the same student whose tuition had been personally sponsored by the Rebbe.

(Rabbi Asher Zeilingold, Kfar Chabad 1905).

Why am I sharing this story with you?

Tonight, the third of Tammuz, is the yartzeit of the Rebbe, and this story sheds light on his personality. People often ask me, "What is a Rebbe? What makes him special?"

A Rebbe is someone who dedicates his entire life to others. He doesn't need and doesn't want any credit; to him, the most important thing is that another Jewish boy should have the Jewish education he desires.

The Previous Rebbe and Lulav's Shame

Let me tell you a similar story, about the Previous Rebbe:

In 1927, the Previous Rebbe was arrested by the Bolsheviks for his efforts to preserve Jewish life. This was in the early days of the Soviet Union, when they made every effort to stamp out all religious observance, with a special focus on Judaism.

Most rabbis and Jewish leaders concluded that there is no future for Judaism in Russia and left the country in short order. But the Previous Rebbe realized that the majority of the Jewish population would remain no matter what, and if all the rabbis left, the entire population would be left to the forces of assimilation. He therefore remained behind, and established a wide network of underground Jewish institutions like schools, synagogues, and mikvas.

He dispatched teachers and leaders to all corners of Soviet empire where they taught Torah with tremendous self-sacrifice; many of them were arrested and never seen again.

The KGB knew exactly who was behind the operation, and one day, they decided to put it to an end. Late one night in 1927, a group of soldiers stormed his apartment in Leningrad and searched for incriminating evidence for over 2 hours. After collecting a trove of documents, the head of the operation approached the

Rebbe and said, “Rebbe, *kumt mit unz*, come with us.”

How does a KGB officer know Yiddish? The answer is a very painful one: the officer was a Jewish boy who had been raised in a traditional home, only to later join the Communist party and rise in the ranks of the KGB. Unfortunately, it was the Jews who felt the need to demonstrate their extra fealty to the communist cause; they persecuted Jews and the Jewish religion with more zeal than their non-Jewish communist colleagues.

In the Rebbe’s case, the two leading officers were actually children of Chabad Chasidic homes. One was named Nachmanson, and the other was Lulav; it doesn’t get more Jewish than that. Think about it: their parents would have done anything the Rebbe asked of them, and here they were arresting the Rebbe.

As they got ready to leave, the Rebbe prepared a small suitcase with several holy books, his Tallis and tefillin and so on, and he handed it to one of the soldiers. Lulav, the son and grandson of Chassidim, jumped to take it from the soldier. “Let me take your suitcase. Chassidim remain Chassidim. My grandfather carried your grandfather’s suitcase, and I will carry yours.”

The Previous Rebbe took the suitcase and handed it back to the soldier. “Your grandfather had the merit to carry the suitcases of my grandfather to where he wanted to go. You want to carry my suitcases to where you want me to go.”

When he was brought in for interrogations, he informed the officers that he would speak only in Yiddish. And so, the Rebbe and the former chassid/KGB interrogator sat in the headquarters of the KGB and held a full conversations in yiddish.

At first, the Rebbe was sentenced to death, and later the sentence was commuted to a three-year exile in the forsaken town of Kostroma. On 3 Tammuz, he left Leningrad for his city of exile, and only ten days later, the Soviets released him under immense international pressure. Several months later, he left the Soviet Union for good and settled in Riga, Latvia.

Listen to what happened next:

There was a chossid living in Riga who was embarrassed to show his face to the Rebbe when he arrived. You see, his name was Lulav, and it was his own son who had caused the Rebbe so much suffering. But the Rebbe sent him a message that

he holds nothing against him, and that he would like to see him.

About twenty years ago, the Chabad Rabbi at Harvard, Rabbi Hershel Zarchi met a student at the university. He was an immigrant from Russia, and his name was Lulav. Sure enough, it was his own grandfather who had arrested the Previous Rebbe. He knew about his family history and was therefore embarrassed to enter the Chabad House, but over time, the rabbi managed to break the ice and he warmed up to Judaism.

Moses and On's Shame

There's a similar story in the 'behind the scenes' of this week's Torah portion.

This week, we read the famous story of Korach. Korach complains to Moses, "Everybody is holy; why do you hold yourself above the people?" We all heard G-d speak at Mount Sinai, he said. Why are you better than anyone else? Why did Moses get to become the leader and Aaron the High Priest? It was first class nepotism!

But that was only the 'official' accusation. There was another reason as well:

Korach was a first cousin of Moses and Aaron. He couldn't bear watching his cousins lead the people while he remained a mediocre Levite. Therefore, he tried to provoke a rebellion.

He ganged up with Dasan and Aviram, two rabble rousers who were always ready to make trouble. And everyone knows the end of the story. The earth opened up and swallowed Korach and his entire crew.

But there is a detail in the story that is less famous. The opening verse lists the leading troublemakers: Korach, Dasan & Aviram, and a fellow by the name of On ben Peles. But strangely, his name does not reappear in the story again (nor does it appear anywhere else in the Torah, for that matter).

What happened to On ben Peles?

The Talmud says that when Mr. On came home and told his wife about the planned rebellion against Moses, she gave him a piece of her mind. "In the competition of who will be the leader, it will be between Moses and Korach. You

don't count; you're not even in the equation. Why are you wasting your energy on someone else's battle?"

As always, the wife is right. Mr. On realized that it was a foolish endeavor. But he had promised his participation! He wasn't sure how to extricate himself from the whole business.

"Don't worry about it," his wife told him. "I'll work it out."

She plied him with wine and put him to sleep. Then she sat at the opening of their tent in an immodest manner. When the rebellion crew came to pick him up, they were embarrassed to approach, and they were forced to move on without him. (Sanhedrin 119b).

What happened to him afterwards?

The Midrash tells us the continuation of the story:

After the entire debacle was over, Mr. On refused to leave his tent. "I'm ashamed to show my face to Moses," he told his wife. You can imagine how he felt. Korach and the rest of them were lucky; they never had to face Moses again. But he was still alive, to his dismay. He wasn't sure how he would ever show his face again.

Again, his wife came to the rescue. She went to the tent of Moses and began yelling and crying.

"What's the deal with this lady?" asked Moses.

She told over the entire story, and explained that her husband was ashamed to show his face in public.

Moses was not insulted. He walked with her to her tent and called On to the doorway.

"G-d will forgive you," he calmed him.

Real Leadership

This is characteristic of someone who is the Tzaddik of the generation. He not only forgives the very person that sought to undermine his credibility, but even

goes out of his way to extricate him from his embarrassment and shame.

With the Yahrzeit approaching, it's time to take a lesson from their character. Let's encourage our friends and neighbors to be involved in Judaism, do an extra mitzvah, and especially help those that are 'scared to show their face' and make sure that they feel welcome and part of our Jewish family.

With the Rebbe's power, it's definitely possible.