

A Rothschild, a Bris, and a Russian Embassy

Category: Holidays, Rosh Hashana

What is the unique message of the second day of Rosh Hashanah?

The New Son-in-law

A joke is told about a poor man who would eat his meals each day in the home of Baron Rothschild. One day, the pauper appeared with a young man at his side. The next day, the young man joined again, and he continued to come, day after day.

Baron Rothschild asked the older pauper, “Who is this man you bring along each day?”

“He is my son-in-law,” the pauper responded, “and I promised, as part of his dowry, to feed him for the first year of marriage...”

The Righteous Rothschild

This joke is very characteristic of the entire Rothschild family. The family patriarch, Meir Anshel, was a successful banker, and he appointed each of his five sons to lead his bank in one of the five financial centers in Europe — London, Paris, Frankfurt, Vienna and Naples.

In the nineteenth century, the Rothschilds were the wealthiest family in Europe. In those days of the Enlightenment Movement, many Jews became secular and abandoned their Judaism, seeing themselves as enlightened “people of the big world.” This was especially true of wealthy Jews. But the Rothschilds, uniquely, remained closer to their heritage. They observed kosher to some extent, Shabbat, and other Jewish practices.

The most famous member of the family, the one who is responsible for the family’s legacy in Jewish lore, was Baron Edmond de Rothschild of Paris.

In the 1880s, the Jews in Tsarist Russia underwent a series of terrible pogroms, and the millions of Jews living there came to the conclusion that they had no future in Russia.

This was a special wakeup call — and slap in the face — for the secular Jews who hoped that by secularizing themselves, they would be welcomed into the Russian cultural “club.” When the pogroms began to spread, they realized that it was not only the riffraff who were anti-Semitic. These were state-sponsored pogroms, supported by the government and even — sometimes publicly and sometimes quietly — by the Russian intelligentsia and “people of high culture.”

This brought about a massive wave of Jewish emigration. The vast majority moved to the United States. However, a small number of Jews decided to move to the Land of Israel and establish agricultural settlements.

There was one small problem: European Jews had never been farmers, and they hadn’t the slightest idea about how to engage in agriculture. Nonetheless, they came with a lot of goodwill.

They established a settlement called Rishon L’tziyon, and got to work, but, within a short time, their goodwill had run out. Malaria, the bad climate, and the lack of experience in agriculture brought them to a state in which the settlement was at the brink of collapse.

They reached out to Baron Edmond de Rothschild and asked him to save the brand-new Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel. He graciously responded by sending large sums of money to the new settlement, and over time, he became the main sponsor of *Aliyah* to the Holy Land.

At the outset, he asked to be an anonymous sponsor. Therefore, in all the press and correspondence of the time, he is referred to as “the well-known benefactor.” Since he was involved in the wine industry in France, he sent experts to teach the settlers how to grow vineyards, and they established wineries in Rishon L’tziyon, and Zichron Yaakov, and in other locations.

As in every new beginning, it didn’t go easy, and no matter how much money he sent, there was always a need for more, and he gave money again and again.

He also purchased hundreds of thousands of acres from the Ottoman government

— who controlled the land of Israel — and from Arab landowners. He also developed community organizations. According to historians, Rothschild contributed more to the Land of Israel than the entire Jewish nation combined.

This raises a question: Why, of all Rothschilds, was he the only one that came to the aid of the Jews in Israel while his family members and counterparts didn't care to do so?

There are two explanations — one practical, and one mystical:

The practical explanation is that Edmund de Rothschild married the daughter of his first cousin, Wilhelm Karl Rothschild, who is known as “the Righteous Baron.” He was the only Rothschild that was extremely religious. For example, he wore tzitzit, and even wore them outside of his shirt on occasion. Edmund's wife, coming from a very religious home, influenced her husband to help the new Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel.

But there is also a mystical explanation.

Edmond's father, James Mayer de Rothschild, was the founder of the French branch of the Rothschild family. Now, in those days, there arose a European opposition to the Jewish tradition of circumcision. They weren't against circumcision per se; the claim was that the *traditional* form of circumcision was unsafe, and it should be switched for the so-called safer medical procedure.

The French Jewish leadership, the “Constituar,” was under pressure from the authorities, and decided to forbid the traditional form of circumcision. They went so far as to bring all the mohels to court and force them to take an oath that they wouldn't carry out circumcisions in the customary form. The head of the Constituar was none other than James Mayer de Rothschild himself, and he signed this new edict.

Then, in 1845, his wife gave birth to a baby boy.

James knew that the bris would attract his family from London and Frankfurt, and they wouldn't approve of the newfound “enlightened” attitude to the traditional bris. He was in a quandary — for the sake of his family, he wanted to do a traditional bris, but all the local mohels had sworn to cease its practice! To resolve that issue, he invited a mohel from London.

But there was another problem. He had personally signed an edict forbidding the traditional bris in Paris!

To resolve this issue, he came up with an original idea. He was good friends with the Russian ambassador to France, so he asked his friend to host the bris in the Russian embassy. By international law, an embassy is considered the territory of its home country, so the edict against bris in Paris did not apply.

The problem was solved. The entire Rothschild family gathered in the Russian embassy, the mohel from London did the traditional bris, and the baby was named Binyamin.

This baby grew to be Edmund de Rothschild. It was the child who received a traditional bris, despite the difficulties and the hurdles involved, that grew to help his Jewish brethren whenever they were in need. (From Jewish Historian Rabbi Dr. Dovid Katz).

The Second-Day Message

During the two days of Rosh Hashanah, we read in the Torah about Avraham and Yitzchak. On the first day, we read "*Vahashem pakad es sarah,*" which tells the story of Yitzchak's birth when Avraham was one hundred and Sarah was ninety. Isaac was the first child in history that had a bris when he was eight days old. Abraham invited all the dignitaries from all over the world to see the miracle for themselves. There were those who argued that they adopted a baby, for them, Sarah nursed her baby, and other babies in public to dispel this myth. Still others, claimed that Avimelech was the father, not Abraham. For this, G-d made a special miracle, that Isaac looked exactly like Abraham.

On the second day, we read "*Ve'elokim nisah es Avraham,*" the story of the Akedah, how G-d commands Avraham to offer his beloved son Isaac as an offering to G-d. Avraham moved quickly to obey G-d's command without question and indeed put his son on the altar, when the angel appeared to him and said, "Don't touch the child, and don't do anything to him..."

When we examine these two stories, we discover something interesting. Although the stories are both about the same characters, Avraham and Yitzchak, the stories are completely different.

On the first day, we read about the amazing miracle G-d did for Avraham; his wife was barren, but they miraculously had a child in their old age. But on the second day, we don't read about something G-d does for them. On the contrary, it is about what Avraham was ready to do for G-d. (See 27 Elul 5740, Sichos Kodesh vol. 3 pg. 1115).

Perhaps this is a message for us.

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we come to pray for a good year. We all want G-d to grant us happiness, health, livelihood, and *nachas* from our children (in the blessing *borei pri hagafen*, the word *gefen* stands for *gezunt*, *parnassa* and *nachas*). Essentially, the first day is about what we want from G-d.

On the second day, G-d asks what we are prepared to do for Him. Yesterday, we asked what he would do for us, and today, in response, He asks what we are willing to sacrifice for His sake.

Indeed, those who come to the synagogue on the second day of Rosh Hashanah make a sacrifice that is not easy. A whole week was lost; Monday was Labor Day and Tuesday was Rosh Hashanah. Spending Wednesday in synagogue means that only two days are left. Those of you who are here today have answered God's call: "What are you prepared to do for me?"

And when we answer G-d's call, He will, no doubt, answer ours.