

The Hostage Crisis

Category: Shemos, Yisro

Lessons from Texas.

Last Saturday, the world held its breath as a terrorist entered a Temple in Colleyville, Texas and took four hostages, including the rabbi. The terrorist held them for 11 hours, until miraculously, they escaped.

It turns out that this Pakistani from Britain knocked on the synagogue door at 10 a.m., before the service began, and asked to enter. The rabbi thought he was homeless, and since it was very cold that morning, he invited him in and served him a cup of tea. It was only when they started praying that they heard the click of his weapon; they quickly realized they were in trouble.

People who were watching the service on zoom saw the saga unfold and immediately called the police. This began an 11-hour hostage crisis in which the FBI held the terrorist on the phone and tried to negotiate with him. Among other things, they put his brother, who lived in England, on the phone; the brother tried to persuade him to surrender, but to no avail.

As the hours passed, the four hostages were able to reach a certain level of trust and goodwill with him, and after six hours, they managed to persuade him to release one of the captives.

As the evening progressed, they inched closer and closer to an exit. One especially opportune moment was when a pizza delivery was brought to the door. But, by nine o'clock in the evening, the terrorist began to lose his patience.

He asked the rabbi for some fruit juice, which the rabbi brought him, and then, as he was arguing with the FBI, he lost his temper and ordered them to get down on their knees.

It wasn't a good sign. But at the same moment, the rabbi noticed that the weapon wasn't in a good position. This was a moment he was waiting for; he motioned to the other two hostages to run away, and at the same time picked up a chair and threw it at the terrorist with all his might. As soon as the first two fellows ran out, the rabbi followed them.

Amazingly, they weren't rescued or released; they managed to escape the scene on their own before the terrorist had the opportunity to hurt them.

Minutes later, the security forces entered and shot him.

A Sword on the Neck

This story is a great expression of the teaching of our sages, "Even if a sharp sword is placed on a person's neck, he should not cease to pray for mercy." (Berachos 10b).

Interestingly, the source for this teaching is this week's Torah portion.

At the beginning of the Torah portion, we read about Jethro: he heard about the miracles that had taken place for the people of Israel during the Exodus, so he took his daughter Zipporah — the wife of Moses — and Zipporah's two sons to the encampment of the Jewish people in the desert.

To understand this story, we need to retract a bit.

Parshat Shemot describes how a young Moses leaves the royal palace of his childhood to see the plight of his brethren. He sees an Egyptian officer hitting a Hebrew man and trying to kill him. Moses intervenes; he kills the Egyptian and buries him in the sand.

By the next day, someone had reported Moses to the government; Pharaoh issued a death sentence, and he was forced to flee to Midian. Upon his arrival, near the well, he met the daughters of Jethro, and he eventually married one of them — Zipporah.

Years later, G-d appeared to him in the Burning Bush and told him to go to Egypt to redeem the people of Israel. With his new mission in hand, he put his wife and two sons on a donkey and made the journey to Egypt. Before his arrival, he was met by his brother Aaron.

Aaron said to him, "Who are these?"

He responded, "This is my wife whom I married in Midian and these are my sons."

"Where are you taking them?" Aaron asked.

“To Egypt,” Moses replied.

“We are sorry about the first ones [who are already here], and you are bringing more!?” Aaron asked incredulously.

Moses turned to his wife and said, “Go to your father’s house.”

She took her two sons and left.

(Yisro 18:2, Rashi).

In our parsha, the people of Israel have already left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea. Now that they were safe, Jethro decided it was time to reunite the family. He took Zipporah and her two sons and brought them out to the Israelite encampment — and this is what the Torah tells us in the first verses of the parsha.

When mentioning the names of his sons, the Torah explains their meaning:

“The first one’s name was Gershom, because he said, ‘I was a stranger in a foreign land.’” The word Gershom comes from the word Ger, which means, ‘stranger.’ His son Gershom’s name would always remind him of his humble beginnings in Midian; he would never forget how it all started.

The next verse says, “And the other one was named Eliezer, because, ‘The G-d of my father helped me and saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.’” The name Eliezer is a combination which means, “My G-d helped.” In the name of his second son, Moses recalled the event in which Pharaoh wanted to kill him and he was forced to escape to Midian.

Our Sages asked: Why does the Torah write that he was saved from Pharaoh’s sword, instead of simply saying that he was saved from Pharaoh himself?

In response, they explain that Moses’s head was already on the guillotine and through a big miracle he escaped. That’s why Moses said that he was saved from Pharaoh’s sword; he didn’t say that he was saved from Pharaoh, to teach us that even if a sharp sword is placed on one’s neck, G-d will save him from it.” (Yerushalmi, Avodah Zarah 3a).

In other words, the sages understand that verse to mean that Pharaoh’s sword

had already been placed at his neck, and nonetheless, despite the immediate danger, he had managed to escape.

Finding the Gershom

This is the message of the name Eliezer.

Now I want to share with you a story that happened last summer that explains the message of the name, “Gershom.”

In the 1940s, the Rebbe instituted a system in which Chabad yeshivah students travel to remote cities during the summer months to visit and connect with local Jews.

Last summer, two young men went on one such mission to Arizona, to a town where there is no Chabad and no other Jewish institution.

On the first day of their visit, they decided to go to the local mall, hoping to find someone Jewish. In recent decades, there are many young Israelis who operate “carts,” portable stalls where they sell natural cosmetics, Dead Sea products (of course, made in China), fashion products, and so on. In almost every mall in the United States, you can meet these young people.

The two Yeshivah students came to the mall and indeed met a group of Israelis. One of them approached a redheaded fellow and offered him to put on tefillin. To his surprise, the fellow replied, “Thank you, I put on every day.” But then he added, “I want to install mezuzahs in my apartment, and I’ll be happy to get your help.”

They exchanged phone numbers, and the Chabadnik said that he would call him the next day to make an appointment. The next day, he tried to call the gingi — but he didn’t answer his phone.

A few days passed and he tried again, but no response was forthcoming.

Almost three weeks passed.

On the last day of their visit, before returning to New York, the Yeshivah student decided to try one last time.

Sure enough, this time the Israeli picked up the phone. He apologized and explained that he had been out of town and had only recently returned, and that he would be happy to have him at his house. The Chabadnik wasted no time and headed over with the mezuzahs. After putting them up and reciting the blessing, they sat down to chat.

During the conversation, the redhead tells him, “You know, I actually have some family connections to Chabad.”

“What connection do you mean?” the Chabadnik asked.

“A large part of my grandmother’s family are Chabad,” he replied.

“What’s the family name?” the Chabad boy wanted to know.

To his astonishment, the Israeli mentioned his very own family name! It turns out that the Yeshivah student and the redhead share the same great-grandfather!

At first, the Israeli didn’t believe him, but when the Yeshivah student showed him pictures and told him about his own grandparents, he realized that he had met his very own cousin.

Needless to say, the tone of the conversation changed immediately, and the young Israeli began telling his story.

As a young boy in Bnei Brak, he didn’t do well in school and he was expelled from the local institutions. He did not get along with his parents, and by age 13 he moved in to live with his uncle. From there, it wasn’t long until he was on the streets. Today, he is 25, and he sells cosmetics in a mall in a remote city in Arizona.

From that chance meeting, these two cousins — who had never known about each other — began a special relationship.

This story symbolizes the name of Moshe’s eldest son, Gershon, “I was a stranger in a foreign land.” In some strange land, a young Jewish man wanders in a place where there is no Jewish presence at all. But to there, the Rebbe sends a messenger to look for Jews — and who does he find? His own cousin!!

The Midrash says, “*Geirim* — foreigners, are beloved; all the prophets called

themselves *geirim*. Abraham said, '*Ger vetoshav anochi*, I am a stranger among you.' Moses said, '*Ger hayiti*, I was a stranger.' David said, '*Ki ger anochi imach*, I am a foreigner among you'..." (Mishnas Rabbi Eliezer chp. 16)

The Rebbe loved these 'strangers,' those lost Jews who roam in strange places, cut off of Jewish life; he sent his emissaries to look for those lost Jews and to bring them back home.

And when we search out those foreigners, the Gershoms, we will experience "Eliezer" — the G-d of our fathers will come to our assistance.