

The Best Birthday Gift

Category: Metzora, Vayikra

How did Moses celebrate his 120th birthday?

The Humble Rabbi

This Tuesday will be Yud Alef Nissan, the Rebbe's 120th birthday. The first time the Rebbe himself publicly marked his birthday with a farbrengen was in 1962, when he turned 60 years old.

During that farbrengen, the Rebbe cited the Talmudic story about Rabbi Yosef, who held a 'birthday party' when he turned sixty (Moed Katan 28a).

Rabbi Yosef was one of the leading rabbis in Pumpedisa, in Babylonia (modern-day Iraq). Who exactly was he and what was he like? The Rebbe cited another story from the Talmud:

In those days, there were two centers of Torah learning, one in Sura and one in Pumpedisa. These were academies that existed for generations; the Yeshivah in Pumpedisa existed for eight hundred years.

The first head of the Yeshivah in Pumpedisa was Rabbi Yehuda bar Yechezkel, and when he passed away, there were two candidates to succeed him, Rabbah bar Nachmeini and Rabbi Yosef. They were both great scholars. Rabbah was known for his brilliance; he knew how to find a solution for every Halachic issue that arose through his breathtaking analytical skills, and he was therefore known as the "uprooter of mountains." Rabbi Yosef, on the other hand, was known for the breadth of his knowledge; he was able to resolve all questions based on his thorough familiarity with the entire Oral law, and was therefore nicknamed "Sinai" — it was as if he had received the Torah directly at Sinai.

When Rabbi Yehudah passed away, there were conflicting voices regarding the succession; some preferred Rabbah bar Nachmeini, and some preferred Rabbi Yosef. The academy decided to send the question to the wise men of the Land of Israel, where there were prestigious Yeshivos as well.

The message came back from the Land of Israel: "Sinai is preferable," i.e., Rabbi Yosef should be chosen, because everyone needs someone who is actually familiar with the laws. Analytical skills are nice, but we first need to know what was actually taught by the previous generations.

Despite this answer, Rabbi Yosef insisted that Rabbah be appointed to lead the Yeshivah, and he was very deferential towards him for many years. Rabbah served as the Rosh Yeshiva for 22 years, and only after his passing was Rabbi Yosef appointed to succeed him.

The Talmud relates that throughout those 22 years, no doctor visited Rabbi Yosef's home. He and his family experienced perfect health, and they never needed the services of a physician (according to the Ramah רמ"ה) (end of Tractate Horiyos).

The Rebbe points out that this is a phenomenal miracle. According to Jewish law, a Torah scholar is forbidden to live in a place which doesn't have a doctor (Hilchos Deios end of cp. 4), because it is the normal, natural course of events that a person should need medical services occasionally. We all know how often we run to the doctors these days; sometimes it's your head, sometimes your heart, your stomach, your feet — it's a never ending project. The fact that Rabbi Yosef and his entire family never needed a doctor is simply miraculous.

The Rebbe explained (citing from the commentaries) that it was Rabbi Yosef's humility in passing the leadership to Rabbah that protected him and his family from ailments for those 22 years (Likkutei Sichos vol. 5 pg. 137).

This is all — to get back to our story — the Rabbi who marked his sixtieth birthday with a great celebration.

The 120th Birthday Party

This week, we will be marking the Rebbe's 120th birthday. Moses lived to 120; everyone knows how to say "*biz hundred un tzvantzig*," a saying which is modeled after the 120 years of Moses. So, we need to figure out: how did Moses mark his 120th birthday? What did he do on that day?

The Midrash says:

“The Rabbis said: Since Moses knew he would die that day, what did he do? Rabbi Yanai says, he wrote thirteen Torah scrolls — twelve for the twelve tribes and one he placed in the ark (Midrash Rabbah Vayelech 9). On the day of his passing — or the day before — he was busy completing thirteen Torah scrolls.

Why did he bother himself to write so many of them? Rashi writes, “I heard that on that day when Moses gave the Torah to the tribe of Levi...the People of Israel came before Moses and said to him, ‘Moses, we also stood at Sinai and received the Torah and it was given to us. Why are you placing your tribe in control of it? Tomorrow they will tell us, “He didn’t give it to you; he only gave it to us!”’ Moses was happy [to hear their argument].”

Therefore, Moses wrote a Torah scroll for each tribe; he wanted each tribe to feel as if the Torah belonged to them personally.

In the Rebbe’s words:

“When Moses reached his final day...instead of being engaged in his own spiritual pursuits, he sat down to write a Torah scroll... for every single tribe... Obviously, writing the Torahs prevented him from engaging in other matters. Nonetheless, he put all his other endeavors aside to personally write these Torah scrolls and bring them to every tribe — Torah scrolls which will guide them for generations to come (and he did so instead of simply commissioning others, like Yehoshua or Aharon and his sons, to write them on his behalf). This is all an expression of his love for his fellow Jews” (Hisvaaduyos 5743 vol. 3 pg. 1724).

The Best Example

These two stories — Moshe’s final day and Rabbi Yosef’s humility — are the best representation of the Rebbe’s life. Humility means that a person is not occupied with himself. He asks himself, what is the best thing for the Jewish people as a whole. It’s not about you. The world doesn’t revolve around you. A person should think about what G-d wants him to accomplish, not “what personal gain will I have and what will I earn...”

On Moshe’s 120th birthday, he was busy writing Torah scrolls and giving them to each tribe, so that each tribe would feel that the Torah belongs to them. In our day, there are Tanachs available for whoever wants them, but the problem is that

there are Jews all over the world who think that the Torah is not relevant to their lives. That's why the Rebbe sent his Shluchim to every corner of the globe — to connect them with the Torah scrolls that Moses wrote for them. To inspire them to pull out the Chumash or Siddur or Tanach from the attic, dust it off, and to make use of it again.

Let me share with you two stories which took place with Shluchim I know personally — both which took place in the past two weeks.

Many of you probably heard about the lockdown in Shanghai, China, in the wake of the Coronavirus outbreak. As many of you know, my brother is a Shliach in Shanghai, and has been living there for many years with his family. He is also in the lockdown. The problem is that Pesach is in a week, and the container with matzah and wine and all the Pesach needs for the local Jewish community are stuck in the port, and they are not being released due to the lockdown — and it seems that the lockdown will continue until after Pesach...

Luckily, he has several pounds of matzah from last year; you probably know that last year's matzos taste just as good as fresh ones...

In a different part of the world, my brother-in-law is a Shliach in Odessa, Ukraine. He already evacuated together with his entire orphanage and school and many women and children to Germany, but as Purim came around, he decided to return to Odessa, because thousands of Jews remained in the city. Someone needed to be there to ensure that there were Mishloach Manos on Purim, Matzos for Pesach, public seders and so on.

These Shluchim combine the qualities of Moses and Rabbi Yosef: humility and self-sacrifice to teach Torah to another Jew.

The Rebbe said many times that every Jew is a Shliach. Each one of us is obligated to do something to bring other Jews closer to their Judaism. As soon as we decide to make this a priority, we will find a way to make it happen.

That would be the Rebbe's best birthday gift.