

Sweet Revenge

Category: Acharei Mos, Vayikra

The secret to Jewish existence.

Sweet Revenge

On the occasion of Holocaust Remembrance Day, a story was published about Thomas “Toby” Blatt.

Tobi was one of the planners in the uprising and escape from the Sobibor extermination camp in 1943, an incident in which some 300 prisoners escaped. Most of them were captured and executed; he was one of the only survivors.

After escaping Sobibor and surviving a harrowing time in the forests among the partisans, Tobi returned to his childhood home in the Polish town of Izbitz. When he approached his house and saw that it was still standing, he was very excited. He was sure that all his local acquaintances and friends would be happy to see that he had survived the terrible destruction. He knocked on the door, and it was opened by the nanny who had raised him with devotion in his youth. He was sure she would welcome him enthusiastically, but to his shock, the door immediately slammed shut. After knocking repeatedly, her husband opened the door and yelled at him to leave, and never to return. At that specific moment, he said, it felt as if the entire world collapsed.

In a heightened emotional state, he concocted a plot of sweet revenge.

In his youth, his father taught about the Midrash that before the conquest of the Land of Israel by Joshua ben Nun, the Amorites buried their treasures in the walls of their homes, so G-d brought leprosy on those houses—which were then destroyed—and the treasures were discovered. This gave him an idea.

The next morning, he returned to the scene, and again, after knocking on the door, he was chased away with shouts and threats, with the caregiver claiming that they did not know him and that the house had never belonged to him. He refused to budge. He told them that he was asking for only one thing: the diamonds that his father had hidden in the walls of the house before being

deported—a story that was, obviously, false. The residents seemed to believe what he said, and this threw them into a bigger rage, emerging and beating him until he left the area.

After about a year, Tobi returned to the town, and discovered that the house had become a heap of ruins. It had been completely dismantled; the family had decided to look for the treasure—but in vain.

“This was my revenge,” Tobi finished his story (by Rabbi Dahan, in *Yisrael Shelanu*).

The Only Good Response

These days, as we hear so many stories about the Holocaust, many ask the eternal question:

“How could G-d allow such a terrible thing to occur?”

This question was posed to Rabbi Yisrael Lau, the former Chief Rabbi of Israel and one of the most famous Holocaust survivors alive today.

In response, he said, “What is the alternative? Should we give victory to the murderers or give the victory to their victims? If one turns his back on G-d because he is angry and doesn’t understand, and therefore rejects Shabbat, holidays, tallit and tefillin—and so will his wife and children—he hands a victory to those who wanted to destroy the Jews not only physically but also spiritually. They wanted to exterminate the very idea of Judaism!

“I decided,” says Rabbi Lau, “that the murderers of my father and mother don’t deserve to win. My father and mother deserve to win—in the knowledge that their grandchildren live in the Land of Israel and continue their Jewish traditions.”

This is the best and most practical answer that any person can get.

Yom Kippur

In this week’s Torah portion, the Torah speaks of the service of the High Priest on Yom Kippur.

One of the most important services in the Temple on Yom Kippur was associated with casting lots. The Torah commands the priest to take two goats, and, as the Torah says, “and he took the two goats and presented them before G-d... and Aaron places lots upon the goats, one lot for G-d and one for *Azazel*.” This is what’s known as the scapegoat. Rashi says: “He puts one goat to the right and one to the left, places both his hands in the ballot box and takes one lot in his right hand and the other in his left and places them on the goats. The lot that says, ‘To G-d,’ is for G-d, and the lot that says ‘*la’azazel*’ goes to the *Azazel*” (Acharei Mos 16:8).

In simple terms, two goats are taken and fate decides which will stay in the Temple and which will be sent to its death.

The Talmud adds that two goats must be equal in all respects, since the Torah doubles the word “two,” three times with regard to these goats: “Two, two, two’—why [the repetition]? To teach us that they should look the same, be of the same height, and the same price” (Yoma 62b). Then, the lots determine who will be sacrificed and who will be sent to the mountain.

What is the symbolism of this service?

Lots

What is a raffle?

The verse says, “Lots are cast into the lap; the decision depends on G-d” (Proverbs 16:3). Casting lots represents a choice that transcends reason. We bring two goats that are very similar—and we leave the choice to the raffle.

The world calls the Jews, the Chosen People. This is a true statement; we say in prayer every day, before reciting Shema, “And you have chosen us from among the nations...” Also, when we recite the blessing over the Torah, we say, “...who chose us from all the nations.”

True free choice, explains the Rebbe (Toras Menachem v. 19 p. 186), can only exist between two equal things. For example, if you have a choice between two prayer books, one blue and the other green, your decision is not based on free choice. You chose one because you prefer one color over the other.

True free choice can exist only when there is no difference between the two items, when there is no logical reason to prefer one over the other. Only then, is there room for the concept of “choice.” When two things are completely equal and we choose one of them, that is free choice. The decision has no logical explanation; it transcends it.

When G-d chose the people of Israel from all the nations of the world, it was not because we were smarter or cuter. He chose us because that is what He wanted—and therefore, our relationship with G-d transcends logic. This is what the two goats symbolize: both are similar in appearance, height and cost—but one remains in the Temple and the other is sent off.

The fact that G-d forgives us on the Yom Kippur is a phenomenon that has no logical explanation. On Yom Kippur, G-d’s transcendental love for the Jewish people is revealed. Therefore, even though last year we promised to be good boys, and two years ago and three years ago, etc., and yet once again we are here, promising the same thing again—He nonetheless forgives us and gives us a good year.

Why? Because!

Is There a Real Reason?

The same is true of anti-Semitism.

As the Prime Minister said in his speech at Yad Vashem this week, why is it that 3,500 years ago Pharaoh decided to exterminate all the Hebrew males, 1000 years later Haman wanted to exterminate all the Jews, 700 years ago the English expelled its Jews, 500 years ago Spain followed, and 350 years ago in Yemen, and so on?

What is the motive? What is the root-cause for anti-Semitism?

There is no answer. There is no reason for anti-Semitism. In every generation, anti-Semitism takes a different form and supposedly finds a different reason.

Sometimes, we are persecuted because we are different; because we have different customs—kosher, Shabbat, prayers. This led many Jews to assimilate among the gentiles, but then the anti-Semites attacked the Jews precisely because

they assimilated into their environment and “defiled” their race. When Jews are successful, it’s a reason for anti-Semitism. When Jews are not, it’s also a reason for anti-Semitism.

Whenever we are tempted to believe that we have entered a new, liberal, modern era in which people no longer hold on to their hatred for Jews, reality comes and slaps us in the face, and we discover that anti-Semitism is much deeper than we imagined.

The secret of our existence transcends reason. Just as G-d transcends reason, the people of Israel—who exist through their connection to him—are above reason. And with G-d’s help, we will continue to exist and to thrive for all eternity. *Am Yisrael Chai!*