

An Atheist? Don't Believe Him!

Aharon Barak, the ideological head of Israel's left, was photographed wearing tefillin. Can an Israeli really be an atheist?

The Picture

This week, a picture circulated in Israel of former High Court Justice Aharon Barak putting on tefillin.

Why was the picture significant?

There's a heated debate going on right now between the Israeli Left and Right over the jurisdiction and rights of the High Court. It's a debate that's playing out within the Knesset, throughout the media, and even in mass protests on the streets. Much of it pertains to religious values and the Jewish nature of the state. Aharon Barack is considered the left's ideological leader, a paragon of secular virtues, and nonetheless, here he was wearing tefillin. And he didn't put on tefillin to please anyone; he put them on because he chose to.

It tells you something about Israel's "secular left."

The Rebbe once had a long conversation with a close chassid from London, during which the Rebbe expressed his displeasure about the fact that the media, and especially the Israeli media, portray Israelis as secular.

The Rebbe continued: “During your recent trip to Israel, I hope that you reached the conclusion that there are no atheists in Israel. If an Israeli tells you he is an atheist, don’t believe him. Despite never visiting the holy land myself, this is my conclusion.

The Rebbe explained that anyone who has ever studied a Torah portion, or has found a portion of Jeremiah to be relevant, cannot remain an atheist.

The Rebbe concluded by asking him to publicize their conversation.

When this fellow left the Rebbe’s room, the secretary asked him if the Rebbe had told him anything notable. When he repeated this conversation, the secretary was sure that he had misunderstood. “There are many atheists in Israel; you probably didn’t understand what the Rebbe said.”

The next day, the chassid transcribed the basic points of their conversation and submitted it to the Rebbe, asking whether he had correctly understood his intentions. The Rebbe confirmed that he had understood him perfectly — there are no atheists in Israel.

A year later, in 1978, he traveled again from London to New York on an El Al flight. The El Al security agents, as usual, asked him several questions to ensure that he was not a danger to the flight, and then the security agent looks at him and says, “Tell me, are you a Chabadnik?” Yes, he responded.

“I heard the Rebbe’s health isn’t the best,” the security office

commented.

This was several months after the Rebbe suffered a severe heart attack on Simchas Torah. “Recently,” the chassid replied, “he’s actually doing much better.”

“Will you be seeing him?”

“I do hope to see him, but I don’t believe I’ll have the opportunity to speak to him.”

The Chabadnik couldn’t understand the security official’s interest in the Rebbe’s health. He wasn’t wearing any religious identification, and he didn’t seem religious at all.

“Are you religious?” he asked him.

“No, I’m an atheist!”

Remembering this conversation with the Rebbe a year earlier, the chassid said, “I have a message for you from the Rebbe... The Rebbe said that an Israeli that says he is an atheist – do not believe him...”

The security officer’s face totally changed. He got emotional and teary-eyed. Embarrassed, he waved them on, “Go, go.”

The chassid’s wife tried to invite him for a Shabbat meal, but he wasn’t interested. But as they were walking away, he called out, “Give the Rebbe my best wishes for a speedy recovery.”

When he recounted the story, the chassid said, “Perhaps this was the atheist that the Rebbe was talking about.”

Will They Believe Me?

Since last week, we've been reading the story about the Exodus from Egypt. It began with the story of the burning bush: God commands Moses to gather the elders of Israel and tell them that they were soon to be redeemed. Moses wasn't comfortable with the mission. He countered that the Israelites wouldn't believe him. To resolve that issue, God gave him a series of miracles that would demonstrate his authenticity.

The first miracle was the ability to turn his staff into a snake, and the second one was the ability to turn his hand snow white with leprosy.

Why did God choose these miracles? Rashi explains that it was a subtle reference to Moses's negative speech about the Jewish people. Slandering others is known as the "skill of the snake," and its punishment is leprosy (Shemos 4:3-6). These miracles were chosen to demonstrate that G-d was displeased with the way Moses spoke about the Jewish people.

The Talmud has a sharp commentary on this exchange as well:

"Reish Lakish said, one who falsely accuses others is punished in his body. As we see with Moses, who claimed that the Jewish people wouldn't believe him when God knew that they would. God told him, 'they are believers, the sons of believers, but you will ultimately not believe...'"

In other words, Moses ultimately failed in this very same matter that he accused them of — a lack of faith.

Where did he fail? Every child knows that Moses didn't enter the

Land of Israel because he hit the rock instead of speaking to it as he was commanded. And G-d told them, "Since you didn't believe in me... you will not bring this congregation into the land."

He didn't have faith in the Jewish people's ability to have faith in G-d, and that was ultimately his own undoing.

It Was a Battle of Mind and Heart

But why was Moses so skeptical? Why didn't he think that the Jewish people had faith?

The Rebbe once explained that Moses recognized that the Jews would believe his message and accept its veracity. But that would only be in their minds; their hearts would fail to accept it. After all their years of servitude, it would just be too much to believe that the end was really around the corner.

I think this is evident in the way the story actually played out in this Parsha. When Moses brings his message to the Jewish people, the Torah says that "They didn't listen to him because of their shortness of breath and the intensity of their labor." It doesn't say that they didn't believe him, but it was clearly too much to handle.

But, the Rebbe said, Moses should have seen them in a better light. He should have believed that the Jewish people, even after all their years in slavery, retained that Jewish spark that reminds them that they aren't real slaves. He should have recognized that the Jewish soul always remains wholesome, and is not influenced even by the longest exile.

This is true about our day and age as well, the Rebbe said. We may have experienced 1900 years of exile, but the Jewish people have transcended the exile. The moment a chance of redemption appears, they find inspiration and await their freedom.

(Sichat Hashavuah 1150, Chumash Kol Menachem - Shemos pg. 21, based on Sefer Hasichos 5751 v. 1 pg. 246).