

Gratitude even to an Opponent

Category: Bo,Shemos

When Jimmy Carter left the White House and Ronald Reagan took his place, the Rebbe focused on the positive of the outgoing president, instead of talking about the new administration.

Until Self-Sacrifice

Today is the yahrzeit of the previous Rebbe, and also the day—a year later—when the Rebbe assumed the leadership of Chabad. I want to share with you a story that happened with the previous Rebbe in his youth, during the lifetime of his father, the Rebbe Rashab.

When he was a young man, his father sent him to Petersburg, the capital city of Russia at that time, to overturn a certain decree that was going to be imposed on Jewish education.

“How long should I stay in Petersburg?” the young Rebbe asked his father.

“Until self-sacrifice,” replied the Rebbe Rashab.

A short time after arriving in Petersburg, the young Rebbe learned that the decision had already reached the desk of the Minister of the Interior, Stolypin, and awaited his approval. The Czar of the day was not particularly known for being very intelligent—some say he wasn’t intelligent at all. Therefore, whether the law would be accepted or not depended solely on the Minister of the Interior, Stolypin, who was known for his anti-Semitic views and personally organized pogroms in which hundreds of Jews were killed.

After a flurry of meetings with various individuals, the Rebbe learned that there was an elderly man living in the city who had served as Stolypin’s teacher in his youth. The Rebbe found his address and knocked on his door.

The teacher wasn’t exactly a Jew-lover, but he was deeply impressed by the Rebbe and his extensive knowledge, and the two spent hours in discussion. When he felt that the teacher was friendly enough, the Rebbe told him about his mission in

Petersburg and pleaded with him to speak to Stolypin and try to soften the harsh decree.

“Even if I talk to him, it will be a waste of time,” the elderly man replied without hesitation. “I know him since his childhood; he is a wicked and cruel person. There’s no point in trying to reach him.” However, he added, “Because I taught Stolypin in his youth, I received a special pass to enter the Ministry of the Interior whenever I want. I am willing to give you that pass, and you can use it as you wish.”

When the Rebbe left the man’s house late that night, it was freezing cold. In those days, you couldn’t order an uber—the only option (especially late at night) was to walk. The Rebbe began his journey back, and although he was wearing a thick fur coat, the cold was so intense that he had to stop and enter a tavern to warm up.

The next morning, the Rebbe made his way to the Ministry of the Interior. The guard at the entrance was surprised to see a Jew, adorned with peyos and a beard, with a distinct Yiddish accent, holding a pass that looked authentic. But in Russia, you don’t ask questions; if the pass was qualified, the guard let you in. So he gained entry.

At first, the Rebbe couldn’t locate the correct office, and he wandered around, lost in the long corridors. Finally, with no other choice, he had to ask one of the workers where the office of the Minister of the Interior was, risking exposure. The worker showed him the way to the office, and as the Rebbe made his way there, Stolypin himself passed by without paying him any attention.

The Rebbe entered the vacant office, where he saw piles of papers and stamps beside them. One stamp read “Approved,” and the other “Rejected.” The Rebbe hurriedly searched the worktable and found the draft of the law, awaiting the approval of the Minister of the Interior. He took the stamp and stamped it with “Rejected.” Then, he placed the document in the pile of rejected laws and quickly left the building.

The Fur Coat

The Rebbe shared this story during the Yud Shevat farbrengen in 1981-5741, and added that even from the specific details of the story as they were retold by the

previous Rebbe, one can draw a lesson for ourselves.

When a Jew steps out of the Jewish environment to fulfill his mission in the world, the Rebbe said, he must wear a warm fur coat! Before leaving the warmth of the Jewish surroundings, an environment of Torah and mitzvot, to an environment which is cold and indifferent towards Judaism, he must dress well and take along warm spiritual clothing. In other words, he must be a warm Jew!

When you are among Jews, a low level of warmth is sufficient because the environment is naturally warm. But when you go to a spiritually foreign environment, you need to take heavier clothing. You may argue that the coat is too heavy, why shlep such a thick coat—but when you arrive in a place which is cold to Judaism, your Jewish coat will come into use. When you encounter the cold and foreign world outside, your Jewish coat will enable you to stay warm on the inside, and even share your warmth with your surroundings. (Sichos Kodesh 5741 v. 2 p. 162).

The Outgoing President

Yud Shevat that year, 1981, coincided with the changing of administrations: President Jimmy Carter left the White House, and Ronald Reagan took his place.

Interestingly, the Rebbe chose to focus specifically on Jimmy Carter, the outgoing president. The Rebbe noted that people commonly focus on the shortcomings of an outgoing president, using the opportunity of his exit to “pour salt on his wounds,” forgetting all the good things he did. The Rebbe explained that this was wrong; an outgoing president doesn’t usually get credit because there is nothing he could give back to those who praise him, but the Rebbe felt that this was contrary to Torah values, according to which a person should be rewarded for the good he accomplished, regardless of his stature at the moment.

You might argue that it was not a wise political move to praise an outgoing president from a different party; it might anger the new administration. But the Rebbe explained that one should believe that, on the contrary, the new president will appreciate the recognition for the good that was accomplished by his predecessor.

What was Carter’s accomplishment? The Rebbe pointed out that during Carter’s

four years of presidency, there were several times when the U.S. was at the brink of war, and yet Carter prevented it. A war involving the U.S. would drag in several more countries, possibly leading to a world war, yet Carter managed to avoid any such disaster—and he deserved credit for it.

The Camp David Accords

However, the Rebbe made a clarification:

Jimmy Carter initiated the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt, an agreement that the Rebbe strongly opposed. Israel agreed to return the entire Sinai Peninsula, a territory twice the size of Israel, which was so rich in oil that it could have sufficed for all of Israel and for export to other countries as well. This would have made Israel self-sufficient, and not dependent on the goodwill of other nations for oil, a vital resource for any country's existence.

More importantly, the Rebbe had warned that returning territories opens a process that will never end—because Syria, Jordan, and the Palestinians in Judea and Samaria will each want their share, and there will be no end to it (which is exactly what has happened).

So, on this occasion, the Rebbe explained that Carter was so in need of a peace treaty for his domestic political legacy that even if Israel had insisted on not returning all of Sinai, Carter would have agreed, and achieved a peace-treaty nonetheless. The Rebbe's opposition was to the Israeli's agreement, not to Carter's attempts at peace; the Rebbe acknowledged Carter for seeking peace and ensuring that the world did not end up embroiled in a world war. (Sichos Kodesh 5741 v. 2 pg. 169).

Gratitude to Egyptians?

In this week's Torah portion, Parshat Bo, we read the story of the Exodus, focusing particularly on the last three plagues—locusts, darkness, and most significantly, the death of the firstborn. This last plague representing the most severe punishment for the Egyptians, as payback for their oppression of the Israelites for eighty years, for subjecting them to harsh labor and for throwing Jewish infants into the Nile—for trying to annihilate Jewish children. And, every

year, we are commanded to commemorate these events, to reflect on the hardships inflicted by the Egyptians and the miracles and wonders we experienced while leaving Egypt.

However, the Torah commands us in Devarim: “You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land.” Rashi adds, “Even though they threw your baby boys into the Nile, they hosted you at a moment of distress.” (Deuteronomy 23:8). When there was a famine in the land of Canaan, in the days of our forefather Jacob, Egypt welcomed Jacob’s family with open arms. Seventy souls entered Egypt, and they settled in the land of Goshen, the best portion of the land.

So, the Torah teaches us that alongside remembering the hardships we suffered, we need to remain a “*mensch*.” If someone has done a good deed, gratitude is in order.

We just began an election year, and the political atmosphere is heating up. Each person is convinced that the second candidate is a disaster for the country. We must remember that every individual has done good things and made a positive impact. The Torah teaches us that we should express gratitude, regardless of whom we vote for.

And, when we express gratitude to others, the Almighty will express gratitude to us.