



Who Are We Relying On?

America's threat to withhold ammunition has raised serious concerns. What should this problem teach us?

G-d can help us too

This week, the big news is about the threat from the US to halt weapon shipments to Israel, if Israel insists on entering Rafah. In Israel, many see the relationship with America to be absolutely critical to Israel's survival, so this development is very concerning.

This reminds me of a story about a couple from a village who went to visit the Rebbe of Kozhnitz. As was customary among Chassidic groups (not Chabad), they laid a silver coin on the table, and told him that they were coming for his blessing. They'd been robbed and they had lost a lot of money, so they turned to the righteous man hoping his spiritual powers would help them recover what was stolen.

The Rebbe replied, "I can't help you."

Thinking perhaps the Rebbe wanted more money, they put down more coins. Again, he said he couldn't help. They repeated the process, placing more coins and repeating their story. They kept donating, and the Rebbe kept declining, while the coins accumulated on the table.

Finally, the woman's patience wore thin. She gathered the coins, turned to her husband, and said, "Let's go. G-d can help us too."

Suddenly, the Rebbe changed his tone. "Now you'll see salvation," he said. "I couldn't help you, because you forgot about G-d; you relied solely on me. Now that you've remembered G-d, you'll see a miracle."

This is exactly the story of Israel and America. Until now, we relied on America to come to our rescue. Now we know it's only G-d who will save us. That's the key to miracles.

The Chain of Jewish History

During the weeks between Passover and Shavuot, it's customary to study Pirkei Avot, also known as the Ethics of the Fathers. Pirkei Avot comprises six chapters, and each Shabbat, we read one chapter. While most tractates of the Mishna delve into halachic matters concerning Jewish life, Pirkei Avot is unique because it focuses solely on ethics.

Another interesting aspect in Pirkei Avot is the "chain of tradition," a record tracing the transmission of Torah knowledge from Moses down to the sages of the Mishnah. They also included a teaching from each sage. For instance, the Mishnah records Hillel the Elder as saying, "Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace." When we want to recall Hillel, we remember him by his message. The Rebbe added that the teachings mentioned in the names of those sages weren't just "some smart saying they once said"; they lived their lives according to those teachings. These weren't mere words; it was their way of life.

Hillel the Elder not only preached, "Love peace and pursue peace, love people and draw them near to the Torah," but he dedicated his entire life to loving all creatures. He was a living example of these principles.

Similarly, behind the statement of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachya, "Judge every person favorably," lies a profound drama.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachya isn't as famous a name as Hillel, but he had a very famous disciple: "that man."

Once, as Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachya was traveling from Egypt to Israel with this disciple, they stayed at an inn where they were accorded a lot of honor. Rabbi Yehoshua remarked, "This inn is beautiful!" This disciple, however, said, "Rabbi, the eyes of the hostess are ugly." Rabbi Yehoshua rebuked him for his coarse attitude, and evicted him from his company.

The disciple came to his master, begging to be taken back, but his master paid no heed. One day, he arrived when Rabbi Yehoshua was in the middle of Shema, and Rabbi Yehoshua thought to accept him back and signaled to wait until he finished his prayer. The disciple thought he was being dismissed, so he became angry and immediately went to worship idols.

Afterwards, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachya asked him to return to Judaism, but the disciple said, "From you, I learned that one who sins

and leads others to sin has no capacity to repent.”

The Rebbe concluded that if Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachya had judged his disciple favorably, he could have saved him, sparing the Jewish people many troubles in the future for thousands of years. (Sichos Kodesh vol. 3 pg. 683).

Be Cautious with the Authorities

This Shabbat, we read the second chapter. In the third Mishnah, it is said: “Be cautious with those in authority, for they befriend a person only for their own needs. They appear to be friends when it is to their benefit, but they do not stand by a person in his time of need.”

Authority refers to governance; throughout Jewish history, the Jewish people have always had to deal with local governments, but Rabban Gamliel was telling all the Jewish leaders and activists that although—in their role—they must cultivate relationships with the authorities, they should always remember not to rely on them entirely. When they need you for elections, they are very nice, but in an instant, heaven forbid, everything can change.

The first example of this is with Joseph. Joseph saved Egypt from famine. Without Joseph, Egypt would have perished from hunger. In addition, he turned it into a global superpower. And what did he receive in return? “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.” Rashi comments that it was actually the same old king, but, “he acted as if he didn’t know.” It doesn’t matter if it was the same Pharaoh who suddenly forgot everything Joseph did for Egypt, or if it was truly a new king who ignored the history—the result was anyway the same.

Another example is from about five hundred years ago in Spain, where a Jew named Don Isaac Abarbanel lived. He was a great Torah scholar who wrote a comprehensive commentary on the Torah. Alongside this, he was Spain’s finance minister. He was very wealthy and provided loans to the treasury in the millions, to the extent that he became the personal representative of the Queen of Spain in all her financial affairs.

Then, without prior notice, a royal decree was given to expel all Jews from Spain shortly before the ninth of Av of the year 1492. The decree was published on April 29th, and Jews were given the choice to convert or leave until July 31st, the seventh of Av.

Don Isaac Abarbanel tried everything to change the decree. He met

with the king three times, offering to provide a considerable sum to annul the decree. However, the king, under the influence of his wife, the queen (to whom Abarbanel was the financial advisor), was not willing to give in. And so, hundreds of thousands of Jews had to leave Spain and wander to other countries. These examples remind us time and again that while we need to make efforts and build relationships, our ultimate reliance should only be on G-d himself.

Support The Right Causes

But here comes the question that many might ask themselves: The instruction “Be cautious with those in authority” seems to only apply to community leaders. How is this Mishnah relevant to an ordinary Jew studying Chapter 2 of Pirkei Avot on a Shabbos afternoon?

The Rebbe explains (Sichos Kodosh 5739 vol 2 pg. 637) that the term “authority” also alludes to the “authority” that governs the individual himself. Our sages describe the human body as a “small city” where two armies fight: the evil inclination, which tries to persuade a person to do what is convenient and comfortable for him, and the good inclination, which tries to convince him to be a bit more spiritual. Both battle over the individual.

Who decides what a person does? There are two rulers: the intellect and the heart. The intellect tells a person what is right and wrong, but intellect alone is not enough. A person who only uses intellect can become as cold as ice. Therefore, along with intellect, a person must have the heart to give life to the intellect. The intellect should generate emotions like love of G-d—it begins with the intellect, which then engenders the feeling of love in one’s heart.

Every person makes decisions based on these two rulers, the intellect and the emotion. The Mishnah comes and says, “Be cautious with your rulers.” Sometimes a person’s intellect can persuade him that what he is doing is very positive, and he is blind to the fact that those wonderful excuses are only excuses to cover up his personal interest. The same goes for the heart. People show compassion to the cruelest group in the world today, convinced they are performing the noblest of deeds by demonstrating for their sake when, in fact, they are committing the most cruel act. As our sages say, “Whoever has compassion on the cruel will ultimately become cruel to the compassionate.”

The Mishnah therefore tells us, “Be cautious with your rulers.” Do not let your intellect and heart lead you astray. A person must examine himself to see if he is objective in his decisions.

One of the most effective ways to do this is written in the first chapter of Pirkei Avot: "Make for yourself a teacher." Every Jew needs a personal mentor, and every time he has a dilemma, he should turn to his personal mentor and seek his advice.

The Rebbe often promoted this idea, because, as our sages say, "A person is close to himself" (Sanhedrin 9b). In simple terms, a person cannot be objective about matters that concern him. Therefore, when faced with a personal decision, it is best to present the question to someone else who has no personal interest and is not affected by it. He will help him do the right thing, regardless of whether his "rabbi" is greater or lesser than him; the main thing is that you are not your own "rabbi."

My friends, the right thing to do these days is to strengthen our trust in G-d, who will protect us and bring us Moshiach very soon.