



The Brash Diplomat

The story of the brash Israeli diplomat and his humble beginnings.

David's Legacy

James Baker was U.S. Secretary of State during the presidency of George H.W. Bush (that's Bush Senior). Mr. Baker was not exactly friendly to Israel, and that's putting it mildly. He forced Israel to agree to concessions that seriously jeopardized its security.

In 1989, a newly-appointed Foreign Minister of Israel arrived in Washington for the first time, along with his entire entourage, to meet the American Secretary of State.

The Shabbos before, at the Farbrengen, the Rebbe said publicly, that a top official from the Israeli Government is coming to meet with the United States government, and he should defend the security of the land of Israel, stand strong and not give in.

Two Chabad Rabbis who knew the Foreign Minister decided to deliver the Rebbe's message to him. When he came down to the hotel lobby on his way to the meeting, they were waiting for him. The Minister recognized them and greeted them and they were able to tell him that the Rebbe said to be strong!

When they entered the meeting, Mr. Baker presented his counterpart with a list of written American demands regarding the halting of all kinds of activity in the West Bank and Gaza.

The brash Israeli Foreign Minister replied as follows. "As you know, I represent an independent nation-state... and as a general rule, if you had wanted to send me such a letter, you should have faxed it—not summon me all the way here." The Minister then stood up in a fury and told his group, "We're leaving!"

Mr. Baker jumped up and followed him, apologized and offered to serve him a drink. From that point on, he knew who he was dealing

with—and ultimately, they became friends.

That Minister was none other than legendary Israeli political leader and diplomat who recently passed away—Mr. David Levy. Years later, Mr. Levy commented that the Rebbe's message that was delivered to him, gave him the strength to stand up to Baker.

David's Story

David Levy was born in Morocco in 1937. In 1957, at the age of 19, he made Aliyah to Israel along with his parents and entire family. They were settled in Beit She'an, then a refugee camp and now a flourishing Israeli city.

But back then, life in Beit She'an was very hard. They could not find steady work, and David worked at whatever job was available. He married and shortly had his first child, a girl—but then had no success finding any work at all. Once, feeling frustrated after a long period of unemployment, he broke the door of the local employment office. The cops arrested him and he sat in a holding cell for 12 days.

He later would relate that all through his short “prison sentence,” he refused to shave—he wanted a mourner's face, and when he looked in the mirror in his cell's restroom, tears flowed from his eyes. He wept for the cruelty of life; everything came back before him in one image—the day they had left Morocco with so much love for the Land of Israel in their hearts, with so much faith and hope. Before his eyes he also saw the days before their departure from Morocco—he recalled their Passover Seders, the days when his father walked tall and proud, the days when they just felt happy about life.

But then, David Levy suddenly found himself not crying. He stopped feeling sorry for himself. He thought, “What can I do to change my situation—and also the situation of those whose lot in life is like my family's lot in life?” He realized that turning over tables at the employment office is not the way to go—it was a path to prison. Instead, it was incumbent upon him to find a path that would lead him forward to a position of influence, from which he could change things at their very root.

That was the turning point of his life. David Levy walked out of that holding cell a new man.

He soon found work as a construction worker, and later ran for election on the Beit She'an City Council. He won. He shortly was appointed as vice chairman of the council, and from there, his political

career took off—leading him to 40 years in the Knesset, including 29 years as a Minister in Israel’s national government. But what was even more significant than that was that he became the face of “the second class Israel”—that of all the immigrants who never quite acclimated to Israeli society, who lived in neighborhoods plagued by deprivation and poverty. He became the voice of all those who had no voice.

In fact, David Levy became a warrior for the poor and downtrodden. It was David Levy who pioneered one of Israel’s neighborhood rehab projects, working to improve deprived areas that had become hotbeds of crime, poverty and suffering.

Don’t Forget

Throughout all those years, even when Mr. Levy was serving as Foreign Minister, he never forgot who he really was. He never abandoned Beit She’an—he came back home whenever he had the chance. In his extensive travels abroad, he didn’t look for a high class hotel; his one and only concern was making sure there was kosher food there.

He was a man accustomed to going to shul to pray every Shabbos. Once while serving as Foreign Minister, he was walking out of shul on a Shabbos afternoon with his nephew as his entire security entourage and a police car tagged along. He turned to his nephew, who had just completed his mandatory military service, and said, “You see this entire entourage behind me? These are the security guards for the Foreign Minister of Israel—not David Levy! Never forget where you come from!”

In 1990, he visited the Rebbe to receive a dollar and a blessing. The Rebbe received him very warmly. Levy commented to the Rebbe that the Aliyah of twenty thousand Jews from the former Soviet Union was a miracle that only believing Jews could possibly understand, because it seemed impossible just a short time earlier. “It was the finger of G-d,” he told the Rebbe.

The Rebbe responded, “It wasn’t just the finger, it was a full hand—five times over!” Before he left, the Rebbe gave him a blessing for long leadership.

The Three Prayers

The story of David Levy, really a rags-to-riches story, reminded me of a teaching I heard from the Rebbe about a different David—King David.

We are now celebrating the holiday of Shavuot, which is the birthday and yahrzeit of King David, who passed away when he was seventy years old. King David is mentioned in the Tanach more than any other figure. His name is mentioned 1023 times; for the sake of comparison, Moses is mentioned only 770 times, King Saul is mentioned 407 times, and King Solomon is mentioned only 293 times.

King David, in addition to being the monarch over the United Kingdom of Israel, was the first author of a Jewish prayer book—the book of psalms.

Now, there are a variety of prayers in psalms. Some chapters begin with the phrase, “Tefilah L’Moshe” (a prayer of Moshe). Some other chapters begin with, “Tefilah L’David” (a prayer of David). And yet others begin with, “Tefilah L’Ani” (a prayer for a poor man). Moshe, David and the Ani symbolize the three categories of prayer, which actually harken back to the Temple era when we brought sacrifices, not prayers.

There were several levels of sacrifices. A rich man who could afford an expensive korban brought a bull, sheep or goat. Someone neither rich nor poor—what we’d call “middle class”—brought a bird as a korban: a pigeon or a dove. And a poor person made do with a bit of flour, oil and incense.

Now, not only will the pauper’s sacrifice be accepted by G-d like the rich man’s, on the contrary—the poor man’s sacrifice is dearer to G-d than that of the rich man! Rashi comments on the verse (Vayikra 2:1), “V’nefesh ki sakriv” (and if a soul brings): “Regarding all the sacrifices which were donated voluntarily, the only instance where Scripture states the word ‘soul’ is in the case of the meal-offering. Now, who usually donates a meal-offering? A poor man. G-d says: ‘I account it for him as if he has sacrificed his very soul!’” In other words, because the poor man literally takes food for himself and his family and brings it as a korban to G-d, it’s considered as if he sacrificed his very life itself.

Now, today, when we do not have the Bais Hamikdash, the Sages tell us (Talmud, Tractate 26:2), “the prayers were established to correspond to the sacrifices.” And just as the korbanos have three categories, prayers also have three categories.

“Tefilah L’Moshe” represents the prayer of the rich man. This is because Moshe is the one who gave us the Torah referred to as “Toras Moshe” (Moshe’s Torah). So, “Tefilah L’Moshe” symbolizes the Jew who is a talmid chacham, a Torah scholar—the Jew who keeps the

mitzvos and also studies the Torah. He is spiritually wealthy and feels good about himself.

“Tefilah L’David” is the prayer of the middle class. Now, King David is referred to as “Ne’im Zemiros Yisrael” (the Sweet Singer of Israel)—meaning that he symbolizes the Jew for whom Torah scholarship is not his strong point—but a Jew who knows how to pray and indeed does. This Jew is not rich but rather, somewhere in the middle.

Then we’ve got the “Tefilah L’Ani” Jew, a person who is spiritually poor. This is a Jewish person who was never taught how to pray, who just stands there with the crowd when he comes to shul on Yom Kippur but doesn’t really recite any of the prayers from the Machzor.

The Rebbe quotes from the Zohar which says that the prayers of the rich man and the average man are answered by G-d only when the prayers of the poor man arrive. It is precisely the poor man who succeeds in piercing the heavens. In truth, it is precisely the Jew who goes to shul once a year who gets a lot more inspired by the prayers than those who go to shul every Shabbos. The power in the “Tefilah L’Ani” elevate all the other prayers. (Toras Menachem 16, pg. 73.) One might even say that this is why the Yom Kippur prayers are most readily accepted by G-d—because it is Yom Kippur when all those Jews come whose prayers pierce the heavens, and in whose merit our prayers are accepted, too.

David’s Legacy

David Levy has the same name as King David, but he represents the Tefillah L’Ani, the prayer of the poor man. He grew up in difficult circumstances and worked hard to make a difference for his fellow Jews.

David Levy’s prayers were answered.