



SIMCHAT SHMUEL

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One of the many interesting segments of the *Hagada* text is the story of the Sages who gathered together in *Bnai Brak* and spent the entire evening discussing the Exodus from Egypt .

“It happened that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon gathered together (for the Seder) in Bnai Brak. They spoke and elucidated regarding the departure from Egypt for that entire night, until their students announced: ‘Masters, it is time to recite the morning Shema’ ...”

The most familiar lesson drawn from this well known text is that the *mitzva* of retelling and recalling the Exodus is so vital, that these great Sage s l literally stayed awake until daybreak deep in their discussion!

However there are actually many other lessons and questions to be drawn from this intriguing paragraph! Why were these Sages, each a great scholar and leader of their own community, gathered together? Why specifically these leaders and not others? Why did they come together specifically in *Bnai Brak*?

According to tradition, Rabbi Akiva lived in *Bnai Brak*, thus it seems Rabbi Akiva was the host of this momentous *Seder*.

Rabbi Akiva was also the spiritual mentor of *Simon Bar Kochba*, the great warrior who organized a failed revolt against the Roman Empire . It is Rabbi Akiva who gives an encouraging religious perspective, who offers hope during this dark period of Jewish history.

There is a very interesting story that concludes the Talmudic tractate of *Makot*. Rabbi Akiva, together with a small group of some of those same important rabbinic luminaries mentioned in our *Hagada* text, has traveled to Jerusalem to gaze upon the ruins following the Roman conquest of the Holy City . The Talmud describes that as the Rabbis began to gaze out over Mount Scopus , they collectively ripped their garments to mourn the destruction they now witnessed first hand. When they continued on to look at the Temple Mount , they saw a fox wandering in the area that once was the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of the Holy Temple . The sages began to cry, while Rabbi Akiva began to laugh. The other sages of course were dumbfounded; how could Rabbi Akiva laugh when foxes are running wild on the holiest space on the Temple Mount ?

Rabbi Akiva’s reply is both fascinating and challenging. Rabbi Akiva cites a verse from the book of Isaiah (Chapter 8, verse 2):

“ V’aeeda li eidim neemanim et Uria HaKohein, v’et Zecharia ben Yeverechayu.”

 **Mazel Tov to** 
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“And I took for myself as faithful witnesses, Uria the Priest, and the prophet Zecharia.”

The Talmud asks the question- what is the connection between Uria, who lived during the First Temple Period, and Zecharia, who lived during the Second Temple Period?

Regarding the time period of Uria, the Talmud suggests, it is written:

“And Zion shall be plowed as a field, Jerusalem should become a heap of ruins, and Jerusalem a shrine in the wilderness” (Micha, 3:12).

While in Zecharia it is written: *“Thus said the Lord of Hosts:*

“Old men and women shall again dwell in the broad corridors of Jerusalem .” (Zecharia, 8:4)

The Talmud then continues with Rabbi Akiva’s answer to the other Sages:

“ Until Uria’s dire prediction of Jerusalem ‘s destruction had been fulfilled, I was afraid that we might never again see the vision of Zecharia’s prophecy (of men and women growing old in the streets of Jerusalem). Now that I have seen with my own eyes the destruction prophesized by Uria, I know for a fact that Zecharia’s vision will one day come true as well...”

And the tractate of *Makkot*, concludes with this last line:

“They (the other Sages) replied to him: ‘Akiva, you have comforted us, Akiva you have comforted us...”

Rabbi Akiva, upon seeing the ruins of the Second Temple , and the city of Jerusalem left decimated by the Romans, was able to laugh, to see that destruction as a step in the fulfillment of subsequent

prophecies predicting the redemption of the Jewish people, and the building of the Third Temple .

Perhaps, it is Rabbi Akiva’s unique capacity to see the decimation levied by the Roman legionnaires as a necessary step in the process of redemption, to offer hope and a perspective of light shining just beyond the darkness, which serves as the impetus for these same Sages gathering together on the night of Pesach. During a time of much despair, even these great luminaries needed to come together with Rabbi Akiva, who through his inspired visionary perspective could remind them just what the celebratory nature of this night of freedom was truly all about.

Rabbi Avigdor HaLevi Nebentzahl, shlita, the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem ‘s Old City , offers another interesting perspective on this *Hagada* segment. In his work *Yerushalayim B’Moadeha*, he writes:

“We must examine why the names of the Sages are recalled in such detail. And there are those who explain that Rabbi Akiva was the son of converts and Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua were Leviim; while Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya

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were Kohanim. One might think that converts, Leviim and Kohanim would not be required to tell and relive the Exodus, since we might think they did not experience enslavement in Egypt (According to Rashi the entire tribe of Levi was exempted from the rigors of slavery, while converts were not part of the Jewish people at all until the time of the conversion...). Therefore we recall, that even those who would not have been enslaved in Egypt, are still required to tell of the Exodus from Egypt, because the entire Jewish People are required to fulfill this mitzva. It is for this purpose that even though there might very well have been additional Sages present, they are not recalled here, they are not recalled since this section is trying to emphasize that even those who might think the Exodus story would not be relevant to them, very well must recall the Exodus, that it is indeed relevant to each and every Jew..."

From Rav Nebentzahl's words, one might infer that redemption, the freedom we embrace and celebrate on the Seder night, is not solely the freedom from physical slave labor, but perhaps equally profound- the freedom to become who each of us as individuals is truly destined to be, no matter our background or life experiences until this point.

Yet another beautiful interpretation of this rabbinic teaching was offered by **Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook zy'a**. Rav Kook saw it significant that these rabbis had gathered in Bnai Brak, citing a Talmudic entry from Tractate *Ketubot* (111b):

"Rami bar Yechezkel came to visit Bnai Brak where he saw goats grazing under fig-trees while honey was flowing from

the figs, and milk ran forth from the goats, and these mingled with each other.'This is indeed', he remarked, '[a land] flowing with milk and honey'..."

Rav Kook explained the gathering of Sages on the Seder night based on this Talmudic teaching- the sages chose to gather to celebrate the redemption from Egypt, not solely as a means to recall the bondage left behind, but as a reminder of the destination, the ultimate goal to live in freedom in the Land of Israel. During this very dark period of Jewish History, these sages convened specifically in *Bnai Brak*, and all it represents based on this Talmudic teaching, to remind us for all posterity the goodness that is personified by the 'land flowing with milk and honey...'

Rabbi Yochanan Sofer, The Erlau Rebbe zy'a in a powerful lecture to educators in the Erlau educational system, suggests that the *Baal Hagada* includes this story to emphasize a fundamental pedagogical approach. More than details or minutiae, what our students and children recall most are the stories of *tzadikim*, of the earlier generations who faced hardship with heroism, perseverance and faith.

The story of the Sages conducting the Seder in *Bnai Brak* really helps to define the many facets of freedom and redemption which are part and parcel of the very essence of Pesach as Zman Cheiruteinu- the season of our freedom.

'Hashata Hacha, L'shana HaBa'a B'Ara D'Yisrael. Hashata Avdei, L'Shana Ha Ba'a bnai chorin...'

'Presently we are here, but next year may we be in the land of Israel. Now, we remain in servitude, but next year may we truly be free...'

These words, and the many beautiful teachings cited above, are particularly important for us to heed this year. *Yehi Ratzon*, may we continue to have strength and spiritual fortitude, and may we merit to experience *geula* in the days ahead.

*Chag Kasher V'Sameach...*Rabbi Sam Shor ■

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