

Shlach 5777

BS"D Parashat Shlach 5777

Rabbi Nachman Kahana

The Parsha and Current Events: Ascending the ladder of sanctity and Torah erudition

Rabbi Yochanan in tractate Eruvin 53a depicts a depressing state of affairs in the world of Torah erudition.

אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן :אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן
אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן - אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן
אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן :אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן .אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן - אמר ר' יוחנן ,אמר ר' יוחנן
אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן .אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן - אמר ר' יוחנן ,אמר ר' יוחנן
- אמר ר' יוחנן :אמר ר' יוחנן .אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן :אמר ר' יוחנן .אמר ר' יוחנן
.אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן :אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן ,אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן אמר ר' יוחנן

In the earlier generations such as the one of Rabbi Akiva, the hearts and minds of Torah scholars were as wide as the entrance to the Ulam (antechamber) of the Holy Temple (20 amot, 10 meters wide); but in later generation like that of Rabbi Elazer ben Shamuah, the width of understanding became like the aperture at the head of a needle.

The great Babylonian Amoraim (Jewish scholars from about 200 to 500 CE) Rava and Abayai downgraded their generation's

understanding to even more limited levels of understanding.

If we maintain those proportions between the generations, but ascend from Rabbi Akiva's time to that of the early Tannaim (Rabbinic sages whose views are recorded in the Mishnah, from approximately 10-220 CE), and further to the prophets until King David and to Moshe Rabbeinu there is no way that we can fathom the depths of their understanding. However, this is puzzling, because there is a vast but certainly limited amount of information in the Torah relating to how we are commanded to conduct ourselves. So how are we to understand the enormous intellectual discrepancies between the generations?

This is what I wish to explain.

The Rashi and Tosafot commentaries are intended to explain and expound on the Gemara. If one cannot understand their commentaries, then one can surely not understand the Gemara's text.

The Gemara comes to explain and expound on the Mishna. The rabbis of the Gemara era (app. 300 CE to 600 CE) resolved seeming contradictions within the Mishna and many other issues which demanded explanation.

The six sections of the Mishna detail and expound on the written Torah. For example: The written Torah does not specify the 39 major and many more secondary activities which the Torah prohibits from being performed on Shabbat and Festivals, nor does the written Torah detail the five Halachot that deal with Shchita (ritual slaughter), nor for the other 611 mitzvot. This is left to the Mishna (Oral Torah).

As we ascend to the next rung of Torah erudition – the written Torah itself, we are still far far away from the end goal.

For the written Torah comes to explain and expound on that which is hidden. The written Torah is the instruction manual of how one is to live and "use" Eretz Yisrael. The over 200

laws dealing with the Bet Hamikdash. The agricultural laws, how to work the land, and the tithes that have to be portioned out to Kohanim and Levi'im. The Shemita and Yovel (Jubilee) years. The laws pertaining to heads of state, such as the Monarch, Kohen Gadol, Sanhedrin and reigning prophet of the times. Not to mention the borders of the Jewish state.

And the study of Eretz Yisrael itself, through its topography, fauna, weather patterns and varied, heterogeneous, variegated flora comes to reveal the hidden secrets of Gan Eden (the Garden of Eden). One who can decode the secrets of the holy land in all its aspects would have a wide understanding of the structure and content of Gan Eden; like one who is versed in reading a map.

And finally, one who understands Gan Eden will have an idea of what Eden itself is all about.

Harav Chaim of Volozhin, disciple of the Vilna Gaon, authored a classic work on the relation between body and soul called "Nefesh Ha'Chaim", and established that the Jewish nation through our abiding by the Torah is the neshama – life force – of the universe.

Among other things, the sefer (book) tells us that the total creation can be likened to a multilayered object which can be peeled away layer by layer.

In God's creation, each inner world serves as the neshama of the one more external to it. Peel away our world and you will find its 'neshama'; peel that one away and you will find its neshama, and so it goes until we reach the ultimate neshama of all things – HaShem.

Hence, the Gemara is the neshama or the giver of life for the Rashi and Tosafot commentaries.

The Mishna (Oral Torah) is the neshama of the Gemara. The neshama of the Mishna is the written Torah. Eretz Yisrael is

the neshama of the written Torah. Gan Eden is what gives life and reality to Eretz Yisrael, and Eden is the neshama of the Garden.

As we ascend the ladder of sanctity and Torah erudition, the intellect breaches the bonds of its limitations and one's mind is merited to enter a higher dimension of understanding.

In a manner of explanation. Rabbi Akiva and his generation understood the Oral Torah, so their minds were able to penetrate the written Torah. The prophets totally understood the written Torah so their intellect was upgraded to understand Eretz Yisrael. Moshe and Aharon understood Eretz Yisrael so they were upgraded to understand the Garden of Eden. And the neshamot in the Garden of Eden are exposed to the secrets of Eden itself.

Today's Meraglim

I often think how different my life would be if I could for just a moment see the face of my great grandfather Aharon, the first kohen, or the face of my great uncle, Moshe Rabbeinu. But obviously we cannot envision how the greats of that generation looked.

But lo and behold, I have been shown the faces of certain personalities of that era, albeit not in the fashion that I would have preferred.

I have seen the faces of these ten men: Shammua son of Zakkur, Shaphat son of Hori, Igal son of Joseph, Palti son of Raphu, Gaddiel son of Sodi, Gaddi son of Susi, Ammiel son of Gemalli, Sethur son of Michael, Nahbi son of Vophsi and Geuel son of Maki – the infamous Meraglim.

I saw them in a video of the demonstration in New York this week of the haters of Eretz Yisrael, as they sputter out their venom against the holy State of Israel. These are the Meraglim

of our generation. They look so pious as they speak in the name of God in the sacrosanct tongue of Chassidism, Yiddish; except for one who spoke good old American English.

The cumulative sanctity and piety of the tens of thousands who applaud every vilification of the Jewish State does not even come up to the boots of two young Tzahal soldiers – observant or not – standing guard on one of our borders in the protection of the Jewish people in HaShem's Holy Land.

But HaShem in His greatness has injected a bit of His humor into this vile state of affairs. He has lead the planners of this chillul HaShem to stage their farce during the week when we will read on Shabbat the episode of the Meraglim in Parshat Shlach.

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

Copyright © 5777/2017 Nachman Kahana