



Parashat Chayei Sarah - #256

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On the Haftarah... A King in Perplexity

[Melachim 1 1:1-31]

"And King David was elderly, advanced in years, and they covered him with clothes, but he could not become warm" (Melachim 1 1:1). Amazing! Was this a king's palace or an elderly home in such poor financial state that the heating system was not working properly? Did King David reach a state of senility so that it was necessary to cover him? Wasn't he able to dress himself? The words of his servants which follow are even more startling: "Let a young virgin be sought for my master the king, and let her stand before the king and be his attendant, and let her lie on his chest so that my master the king becomes warm" (ibid. 2). What a strange way to warm a holy king, whose life was filled with trials, and who climbed to the highest spiritual peaks. As the Psalms of David testify, his was an incomparable soul burning for Hashem.

A parallel historical document tells us about the tireless efforts of this honored king, at precisely the same time in his life. "When David was elderly and full of days, he made his son Shlomo king over Israel" (Divrei Hayamim 1 23:1). It is extremely wise to be concerned about appointing one's successor. "David provided abundant materials before his death. He called for Shlomo, his son, and charged him to build a house for Hashem, G-d of Israel" (ibid. 22:5-6). These were not only political but also spiritual preparations: he gave the plans of the Temple to his son (ibid. 28:11), and arranged a list of tens of thousands of Levi'im, designating each of them for specific roles (chapters 23-27). What is happening here? What exactly is the mental state of our holy King David?

Rashi, our great commentator, revealed the answer to this riddle through the words of our Sages (Pirkei De-Rebbe Eliezer, chapter 43): "When David saw the angel standing in Jerusalem with a sword in his hand, his blood chilled from fear" (Rashi to

Melachim 1 1:1). There is no issue of senility here – there is only a question of inner spiritual concern. What led to the incident of the angel with the sword? The Tanach relates that King David instructed Yoav, the commander of the army, to take a census. Yoav tried to convince him that it was not necessary, and was in fact improper, "And Hashem, your G-d, will add many more to this Nation, a hundredfold, and the eyes of the king see. Why then does my master the king desire this thing?" (Shmuel 2 24:3). But the king gave in to his evil inclination and held fast to his command. Yoav, as the commander of the army, obeyed and conducted the census. "And there were eight hundred thousand soldiers who drew the sword in Israel and five hundred thousand men of Yehudah" (ibid. 9). Blessed is Hashem, this is a good-standing army, but "David's heart was struck after he had counted the people. And David said to Hashem: I have sinned greatly in what I have done" (10). What was this fateful sin? If this census had been necessary for a military purpose, it would have been permissible according to the Halachah. But since the military did not see a need for it, it was clearly motivated by absent-minded militarism. One must recognize the great merit of King David in establishing for us an army worth its name, and the fact that he transformed a tortured Nation into a great power, but "a man does not live by bread alone" and also not by an infantry alone. There was a misplaced sense of priorities here which was dangerous. "And Hashem sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning until the appointed time, and seventy thousand men died from Dan to Beersheva. When the angel stretched his hand over Jerusalem to destroy it, Hashem relented of the evil, and said to the angel who destroyed the people: Hold back your hand...and David said to Hashem when he saw the angel striking the Nation and said:" Behold, I have sinned and I have transgressed, but what have these sheep done?" (ibid. 15-17). And then, as our Sages graphically describe, the angel took his avenging sword, dripping with blood, and wiped it on David's clothing. This act caused him to be plagued by trembling for the rest of his life (Pirkei De-Rebbe Eliezer, chapter 43). This explains why the king was distressed and immobilized.

At the end of his life, David completed all of his great activities: independence, a military, conquests, a strong national economy – almost everything that makes a strong nation. But it was still lacking a soul! When the members of the court, which included some fools, saw their king worried and bothered, they concluded that he was simply cold, and if he married an amicable and exciting young woman, he would be revived him. As is related in the Tanach, King David did not even bother to respond to them. He floated high above these small politicians. Nonetheless, he agreed that the young woman would serve the role of a new secretary - but nothing more: "And the young woman was very fair and she attended the king and served him, but the king had no intimacy with her" (Melachim 1 1:4). Our Sages also reveal to us that this young woman much later became one of King Shlomo's wives (Sanhedrin 22a).

In any event, King David had concerns on a completely different level, and he dedicated his final days to activities important beyond measure, particularly to filling the Nation's spiritual hole: choosing a successor, preparing for the building of the

Temple, organizing the Levi'im, the law enforcers and the judges (Divrei Hayamim 1 23:4). And, of course, delivering his great spiritual message to the Nation, in a major speech to "all of the princes of Israel, the princes of the tribes, the captains of the companies who served the king by divisions, the captains over the thousands, the captains over the hundreds, the stewards over all of the property...and with the officers, the mighty men and with all of the mighty soldiers..." (ibid. 28:1). The great king, rich with life experience of closeness to Hashem, made a declaration which can be heard to this very day: "Observe and seek out all the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, so that you may possess this good Land and leave it as an inheritance to your children after you for eternity" (8).

He then turned to the entire assembly (ibid. 29:10) in order to bless Hashem and strengthen the faith of the Nation. This is the section which we recite each morning in our prayers while standing, and with proper intention. It begins: "And David blessed Hashem in front of the entire assembly."

Rav Aviner on...

Not all who wish to become Jews may do so – Part 2

[Be-Ahavah U-Be-Emunah – Vayera 5773 – translated by R. Blumberg]

Question: Perhaps now is the time to take action, lest our holy country be inundated with hundreds of thousands of non-Jews in mixed marriages with Jews. Perhaps we should pave the way for easy conversions, with no demand that they accept mitzvah observance, knowing that they will not live up to it anyway. Rather, we should make do with a sincere desire to belong to the Jewish people, as in Ruth's words: "Your people are my people" (Rut 1:16).

Answer: Any school child knows that Ruth didn't just say, "Your people are my people." Rather, she said, "Your G-d is my G-d" (ibid.). G-d spoke all the words of the entire Torah to us, so conversion includes undertaking sincere, honest, profound and serious Mitzvah observance.

One might ask: Doesn't Rambam rule that, ex post facto, a conversion without the undertaking Mitzvah observance (Isurei Biah 13:17) is valid? This doesn't apply to our case. True, there are times when there is something that ideally one should not do, but after the fact it is accepted. But that only applies as an individual stop-gap measure. One cannot, a priori, build up a less-than-ideal program for an entire nation, for hundreds and thousands of people. Moreover, Rambam is talking about a case in which the candidate was not informed that there are Mitzvot, but, had he been told of them, he still would have converted. In our day, however, non-Jews in Israel know full-well that there are both G-d-fearing Jews and Jews who are not observant. There are no secrets here. These non-Jews who wish to convert are explicit in their intent NOT to keep the Mitzvot.

True, Shut Achiezer permitted the conversion of a woman who wanted to convert in order to wed a Jew. She declared that she wanted to keep Mitzvot, but the Rabbinic judge was certain that she was just saying so, and really had no intention of becoming observant. Even so, Achiezer accepted her conversion since there was still a slim chance that she would become observant, and that sufficed. Yet he writes that if it is known for sure that she is not going to be observant, it is impossible to convert her (Achiezer 3:26). The same holds in our own case. Many people will not lie and say that they intend to keep the Mitzvot, and many others who do make the declaration can clearly be assumed to be lying.

One might say: Surely Hillel the Elder accepted a convert who refused to keep the entire Oral Torah (Shabbat 31a). Rashi asks about this, pointing out that someone who seeks to be converted and declares that he accepts the entire Torah except for one Mitzvah is rejected.

Rashi answers that Hillel the Elder wisely foresaw that that convert would ultimately accept the entire Torah (Shabbat 31a). Our Halachic luminaries wrote that rabbinic justices have nothing more than what their eyes see, such that today, to the contrary, what we see is that they do not really intend to keep the Torah.

Moreover, even if we picture the conversion being declared valid, we have to consider what benefit we are bringing to the Jewish People by accepting such converts who will not be keeping Torah and Mitzvot. In doing so, we are leading tens or hundreds of thousands of Jews to think that one can be a Jew without Torah and mitzvot. It's true that we are thereby saving the Jewish spouse from the sin of marrying a non-Jew, but at the same time we are leading him to sin regarding the entire Torah. Ha-Gaon Ha-Rav Moshe Feinstein likewise expressed his puzzlement, asking, "What benefit are they thereby bringing to the Jewish People when they accept such converts? It certainly is not good for G-d or for the Jewish People for such converts to mix in with the Jewish People" (Shut Igrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah #157).

Ha-Gaon Ha-Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach likewise wrote, "As far as the sin of placing a stumbling block before the blind (Vayikra 19:14)... Regarding that type of convert... whose heart is not in it, and we are almost certain that he has no intention of keeping G-d's Mitzvot, I humbly believe that whoever assists such a conversion, mistakenly thinking these people are true converts, violates the sin of placing a stumbling block before the blind. I believe he violates this even in terms of his own way of thinking. After all, anything done against G-d's will is called a stumbling block. If such a convert violated the Shabbat and ate non-kosher food before his conversion, no sin was committed and no stumbling block was involved. Now, however, when he continues to follow this path in the future as well, all his deeds are transformed to a serious impediment and stumbling block." (Shut Minchat Shlomo 35:3)

Similarly, Maran Ha-Rav Kook wrote: "As far as accepting converts not in accordance with proper Jewish law, our holy Sages certainly had this in mind when they said that evil would befall those who accept converts under such circumstances... Yet if those candidates strive to become Jewish, then we do accept them. Obviously, however, that is only when we know of them that they are converting wholeheartedly and sincerely. As for those who accept non-Jews who are converting with ulterior motives... such converts are as difficult for the Jewish People as a plague, and they introduce thorns into the vineyard of the House of Israel.

After all, our Sages said explicitly that a non-Jew who seeks to accept the entire Torah except for one Mitzvah is rejected. How then can we accept converts when we know for sure that after their conversion they will violate the Torah? And even though we rule like the opinion that says that [after such a ceremony] all of them are considered converts... including those who convert for the sake of a woman... that applies only when the conversion was complete, including the candidate's undertaking Mitzvah observance. Yet when the candidate does not thus convert completely, i.e., he converts without undertaking Mitzvah observance and then observing mitzvot, then his conversion is worthless... Even worse, those accepting them violate 'Do not place a stumbling block before the blind.' After all, if we say that their conversion is invalid even after the fact, then we cause the public to stumble by treating these non-Jews as Jews, and how many stumbling blocks and how much destruction derives from that... If, on the other hand, they really are converts, then those accepting them cause them to stumble, for they cause them to incur punishments for Torah prohibitions they violate" (Shut Da'at Cohain #154).

It must further be stated that from another vantage point the conversion does not hold, according to the view of those Medieval sages who say that today we are executing the will of the ancient sages who had "semicha" [Rabbinic ordination on a level non-existent today].

How can it be that we are executing their will when we bring those converts to sin against the Torah?

Along these lines, regarding the sincere conversion candidate for whom circumcision was physically life-threatening, Rav Kook wrote: Even if we say that circumcision is not part of the conversion ceremony, but only the first Mitzvah that one incurs when one becomes

Jewish, we still have no mandate to convert that person such that we will be introducing him into a situation in which he will be unable to undergo circumcision due to his physical condition, because we have no mandate to cause him to incur the obligation to be circumcised, when due to his unavoidable physical condition that circumcision cannot be carried out (Shut Da'at Cohain #150). What then shall we say about our own case?

Let us not look for hasty solutions which lead to a bitter end. Let us traverse the beaten path, equip ourselves with our historic patience as we await the gradual redemption. G-d will not prevent goodness from befalling those who operate in complete faith (see Shut She'eilat Shlomo 3:296).

Shut She'eilat Shlomo - Questions of Jewish Law

Laws of Mourning

A Mourner Visiting a Cemetery during the First year of Mourning

Question: Is a person who is in mourning for his mother permitted to visit the cemetery every month?

Answer: Yes. It is permissible to visit every week or every month. There is no limit. Regarding what the halachic authorities write, that it is forbidden to visit a cemetery every week, this is not a halachic concern but a spiritual one, since it is not spiritually healthy to spent a large amount of time in a cemetery.

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