

Ki Tisa: Humility and the Daf Yomi Siyum

- Nisson Shulman.

A discussion of the achievement of the Daf Yomi Siyum and the humility our forbears had when they learned and prayed. The temptation that pride of achievement might overshadow that essential humility. Moshe's rays of light as an illustration.

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The Jewish community this week celebrates the Daf Yomi Siyum. It is an awesome achievement, and fifty years ago someone describing that such an event were possible, would have been considered out of his mind. The learning of so many together, the completion and starting again, the very revival this portends, is thrilling.

Even so, there is a sin we must guard against, to which such an achievement might make us vulnerable. It is possible to grow too proud of such an achievement. And lose the essential humility that true learning requires. Let me explain.

We live in the 21st century. But we are part of a people whose history encompasses 40 centuries and more. And throughout most of that time, the greatest value and virtue of our people was our Torah learning.

Now, occasionally, people talk to me about the "good old days". They mean days of family togetherness, and of traditional gatherings and celebrations. But if we would go back to even only our European origins, or examine Jewish culture in any area of the world, we could point with pride to the prominent position learning occupied in the daily program of our forebears.

The vast majority of the Jews, who lived and struggled in the shtetle, or in the larger cities of Europe, devoted some part of the day to study of Torah. Regardless of how busy or burdened they were with their responsibilities, with eking out a livelihood, they reserved time for study. Either early in the morning before going to business or in the evening after a hard day's work, they would visit the Bet Midrash where a seat was usually at a premium, to join others in the study of Tana"ch, Mishnah, Shulchan Arukh, the Talmud. Compared to the pressures of their very difficult lives, we must acknowledge that today following a daily regiment of learning like the daf yomi is relatively easy.

Strange though it may seem, however, these men who studied so much had the feeling that they did not know enough. They were awed by the unfathomed depth and unlimited expanse of knowledge in the Torah. The more they studied, the more fervent was their desire to know more. When they were puzzled by a contradiction in the Talmud or by an obscure passage of the Bible, they didn't blame the Torah or ridicule the sages, but attributed the difficulty to their own lack of wisdom and insufficient training. They were upset if they couldn't fathom the real meaning in a commentary, and sought help from those more learned than they.

Listen to the comment Rashi, foremost Bible commentator of all time, makes: Davar zeh lo

lamadeti merabotai velo yadati perusho - "This matter I have not learned from my teachers, and I do not know its meaning." How much humility and greatness there is in that admission! The same spirit is found everywhere in the vast literature, about Bible, Jewish law, that spans the centuries. Men like Rabbi Akiva Eger, Chasam Sofer, and many others before and after, who were puzzled by a difficult statement in Maimonides, or other codifiers and teachers, generally wrote a statement like this: "Because of my deficiencies and imperfections, I did not merit to understand his sacred words."

Today, admittedly, many of us devote time to Jewish studies. Perhaps not as much as our forbears. Yet we strive to study in the spirit that they maintained. So we should expect the spirit of humility to be everywhere. Unfortunately, however, we rarely meet a Jew who honestly feels he doesn't know enough; that he needs further instruction in Jewish practice, customs, laws, traditions, philosophy, world view. The average Jew feels that he, thank God, knows all he has to know. When he faces something beyond his grasp, he remains calm, nonchalant. The attitude is almost, "So I don't understand it. So what?" Or worse, he has preconceived ideas of what Judaism ought to be, and we even hear some say, "Why don't the Rabbis get their act together and change this?"

Now the same holds true about piety. In the past, and especially in communities where everyone observed Torah's commandments as far as they were able, the hearts of our forbears still retained a strong sense of guilt. When in the Shemone Esre they recited the confession, "Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned," they meant what they said. But today, when piety is practised by a chosen few, everyone insists he is "a good Jew". Some limit the statement a bit, saying, "I'm a good Jew at heart". As if Judaism is limited to what you decide you ought to feel inside.

This reminds me of the young girl who was visiting her uncle, a well-known rabbi. She said to him that she was afraid she was guilty of the sin of haughtiness. "What makes you think that?" asked her uncle. "Because every morning when I look into the mirror I think how beautiful I am, and I am proud of myself." The wise man looked at his niece for a moment, and said: "Don't be afraid, my child. Yours is not a sin. It is only a terrible mistake." So too, the people arrogant enough to think they know it all, or without observance of God's commandments have sufficient Torah piety, are making a terrible mistake.

The end of this week's Sidrah tells how Moshe's face shone with rays of glory. The Midrash asks how this came about? The Midrash answers, "There were drops of ink left on Moshe's pen when he finished writing the Torah, and he touched his forehead with the pen. From these drops left over, came the radiance of his face. (Yalkut, Exodus, 406).

This Midrash has a hidden symbolic meaning. According to an old tradition there are fifty steps to the highest knowledge of Torah. Moshe knew only 49. On Moshe's pen there was enough ink left to write the fiftieth, but try as he might it eluded him. With this ink, of the explanation he still did not know, Moshe's face gained its radiance.

So it is with all our people. The real radiance of the Jew comes from the parts of Torah we do not yet know, and strive to learn. That is the lesson of Moshe; of the Midrash; of the way our people lived and learned for millennia; the lesson of all our great people, who were conscious of their

limitations, imperfections, and their humility added to their everlasting fame and glory.

I plead today for a revival of that kind of humility; of recognizing what we don't know, and striving to learn it. I suggest that the pride in the achievement of the Daf Yomi Siyum be tempered with the recognition that a Siyum means a new beginning, and therefore an impetus to further study and awareness of how much there is to learn. May the example of Moshe inspire us all to regain the lost rays of glory, the radiance our people inherited from Moshe himself.

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)