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parashas kedoshim

Every man shall fear his mother and his father... (Vayikra 19:3)

GIGGLES COULD BE heard across the room. Even her morah¹ smiled. She hadn't meant it to be a funny question, but 14-year old Devorah always had a way of saying things...and sometimes in a very humorous way.

They were learning about the mitzvah of honoring one's parents, and going over the Talmud's account of Dama ben Nesina:

Rebi Eliezer was asked: "How far does the honor of parents extend?"

He answered, "See what a certain gentile called Dama ben Nesina did in Ashkelon! The rabbis wanted jewels for the Ephod,² at a profit of 600,000 [gold Dinari]...but since the key

¹ Female teacher.

² The Ephod was an elaborate garment worn by the Kohen Gadol, and upon which the Choshen, or breastplate containing the Urim and Tummim rested. It was woven out of gold, blue, purple, and scarlet threads, made of fine linen, and was embroidered with skillful work in gold thread (Shemos 28:6-14).

was lying under his father's pillow, and he did not trouble him..."³

It was at this point that Devorah had raised her hand, a very serious and confused look on her face.

"Yes, Devorah?" her teacher asked, bracing herself for what might come out of that cute and interesting 14-year old mouth.

"I don't get it," Devorah said in all seriousness. "If I did that, my father would KILL me!"

That's what caused the cascade of giggles across the room, and forced the morah to smile.

"First of all," the morah said, once the class regained its calm, "I think that 'kill' is a strong word!"

Devorah blushed. She knew what the teacher meant and realized her exaggeration. She amended her statement, "Okay, but he would get REALLY mad at me!"

"For what?" her teacher asked, knowing what her student meant but wanting her to spell it out.

"I don't know how much denarim are worth today," Devorah explained, "but 600,000 sounds like a LOT of money to me! I don't think my father would want to sleep through a chance to make SOOO much money SOOO easily!"

Devorah's emphasis and tone got a few more smiles. But it also woke up some of the other students, who until that moment had been prepared to accept the Talmud's story at face value. All of a sudden, a fellow classmate called out, "Ya, mine either!"

"Ya..." others agreed, one after the other.

The teacher was pleased. It's what she had hoped would happen, and right on cue, Devorah had got the discussion rolling.

"Well," the morah began, "according to what I read, a denarius was worth a day's pay for a skilled laborer...in other words, someone trained to do a particular job...which roughly is about \$50. So, if we multiply \$50 by 600,000, we get, oh...about \$30,000,000 in today's terms...roughly."

³ Kiddushin 31.

There was a collective gasp from all the students.

“No,” Devorah said, “I think for \$30,000,000 my father WOULD have killed me!”

Once again, the class laughed, as did her teacher.

“Okay, okay...” the morah said, “it IS funny. But Devorah is raising a good point, which we need to discuss.”

The class gradually became quiet again.

“Let’s see what Hashem thought of Dama’s actions,” she said. “HIS father obviously didn’t KILLLLL him, because Dama was still around for the second half of the story.”

“The following year, The Holy One, Blessed is He, gave him a reward. A parah adumah⁴ was born to him in his herd. When the rabbis of the Jewish people went to him [to buy it], he said to them, ‘I know you, that [even] if I asked you for all the money in the world you would pay me! But I only ask of you for the money which I lost because my father’s honor.’”

The teacher looked at all of her students to see how the conclusion registered with them. Only some had a look on their faces that indicated they were trying to process the story.

“So,” she asked them, to stimulate discussion, “does it sound as if Hashem was happy with Dama’s original decision, or upset about it?”

“Happy...” Devorah said right away.

“Happy...” said another, and then another, and then another...

“I’d say so!” the teacher agreed with a little drama.

“But let me ask you a question,” she said.

The students perked up.

“Is a non-Jew obligated in the mitzvah of honoring his or her parents?”

They didn’t know the answer.

⁴ A red heifer required for a specific purification process (Bamidbar 19:1). Their unique specifications make them very rare and extremely valuable, and there will only have been ten throughout history, the tenth being in Moshiach’s time.

“No, they aren’t,” the teacher answered for them. “In fact, the Talmud itself makes this point, saying that a person who does a mitzvah, but doesn’t have to, does not get as much a reward in Olam HaBa⁵ as someone who IS commanded to do the mitzvah. So why use an example of someone who is NOT obligated in the mitzvah of Kibud Av v’Aim⁶ instead of an example of someone who IS obligated in the mitzvah?”

“That’s a great question!” Devorah said.

“Yes it is!” the teacher agreed.

“What’s the answer?” another student asked.

“THAT’S what I want YOU to think about,” the morah said. “So this is what we’re going to do. We’re going to separate into four groups, and each group will talk about the question and think of an answer.”

“What do we get if we’re right?” one student asked, reading the minds of most of the others.

The teacher got up and walked over to the closet, and opened it. The students craned and strained to see what was inside of it, and soon whispers circulated about their favorite snacks being the reward for completing their quest.

“Worth it?” the morah asked them.

“Yes!” they said in unison, after which they were divided into groups by their teacher.

Minutes passed, and she periodically looked up from her other work to check on her students. She was pleased with the intensity of the discussion, and couldn’t wait to hear their conclusions. Fifteen minutes later, they returned to their respective seats, ready to present their answers and, with the “help of God,” reap the rewards.

“You all sounded as if you took this assignment seriously...” she started, and added, “It’s amazing how the promise of reward can motivate us...”

The students smiled at that fundamental.

“Who wants to go first?” she asked.

⁵ The World-to-Come.

⁶ Honor Your Father and Mother.

Devorah's hand exploded upward, giving her the right of the first answer.

"Yes, Devorah," her morah acknowledged. "You seem excited to give your group's answer!"

"I sure am!" Devorah agreed. "We think..." she began, looking at her "colleagues" as she spoke, "that the rabbis used the example of a non-Jew to tell us, 'Look how much someone who is NOT Jewish and who doesn't have to honor his father did so...You...meaning us Jews...have to go even FURTHER!'"

She looked at her friends to make sure that she got it right, and they all nodded in agreement. Then she looked at her teacher for her response, and got it a few seconds later.

"Very good," her morah told her. "That is a wonderful answer!"

Everyone in her group felt great, and that they clearly had answered correctly. They could almost taste the nosh sitting on the closet shelf, just waiting to be enjoyed by some lucky kids.

The only thing is, that the teacher repeated the SAME thing to ALL four groups. All of them had come up with variations of the same idea, although some went off on tangents in the end. But it didn't bother the teacher, because she had her ideas to add to the discussion. The exercise was mostly just to put her students in the proper frame of mind to hear them. The ideas were THAT important.

"I'm impressed with everyone's answers," she told the class. "You really thought deeply and articulated your answers well. In fact, I really don't know if one group deserves the prize more than another," she told them. "But I have good news! In anticipation of a tie, I made sure to buy enough nosh for EVERYONE!...You're ALL winners today."

There were big grins from face to face.

"But," she continued, "before we get to that, I would like to share something with you that I was privileged to hear from the rabbi of our shul, Rabbi Freifeld, in a shiur a few weeks ago. I think you will enjoy it too! It's ALL about reward!"

They weren't sure they agreed with their morah, but they also weren't in a position to disagree. So, they paid attention.

“By now all of you know that this world is not the place where we receive reward for our mitzvos.⁷ Everything Hashem gives us in THIS world is so we can DO mitzvos and EARN reward for them. If we don’t eat, we can’t do mitzvos. If don’t have clothes, we are limited in the mitzvos we can do. We need material things in life so we can do spiritual things in life.”

She paused and looked at their faces, and unable to read many of them, she asked, “Does everyone understand what I am saying?”

Everyone nodded affirmatively, even if they did not understand, so she continued.

“But we all just saw how important it is to know what awaits us for doing something we do not necessarily FEEL like doing. And even though we are told to serve Hashem without thinking about receiving a reward,⁸ humans...that’s us...still need to know about the reward we’re going to get for doing so...”

“That’s a LOTTT of nosh!” one child called out from the back, getting a good laugh from everyone, including their morah.

“Yes, it IS a lot of nosh!” she affectionately confirmed. Then thinking about it, she told her children, “The truth is, what is waiting for us is far more ENJOYABLE than just NOSH!”

“What’s more enjoyable than NOSH?!” a different student called out.

“That’s a good question,” their teacher told them. And THAT is what the story of Dama ben Nesina is coming to help us understand.

The children were onboard. Something they instinctively wanted to know.

“So,” she began, “we all agree that Dama’s reward was HUGE for such a small mitzvah...that he wasn’t even obligated to do, right?”

Some nodded yes. Others whispered it.

“And yet the rabbis tell us right after the story of Dama that someone who is COMMANDED to do a mitzvah gets even MORE reward than someone who is NOT commanded to do a mitzvah.

⁷ Kiddushin 39b.

⁸ Pirkei Avos 1:3.

MUCH MORE!” she added with emphasis.

“Wowwww,” Devorah said.

The teacher smiled.

“He got SO much reward,” Devorah spoke, making calculations in her mind, “and we get even more...because we HAVE to do the mitzvah?!”

“That’s right!”

“So...” Devorah continued to think out loud, “just imagine the reward we get for just washing netilas yadayim⁹ before eating bread...and making a motzei¹⁰...and dovening¹¹...and honoring OUR fathers and mothers!”

“That’s right!” her teacher agreed again happy she was getting the message.

“And,” Devorah continued, “it’s amazing how much Hashem rewarded a gentile for a mitzvah he didn’t even have kavanah¹² to do...just because it was a good thing...like the mitzvah itself.”

“You are right!” her teacher agreed, looking at the rest of the classmates to make sure they were walking the same intellectual path.

“So someone could be a billionaire,” Devorah asked, “because he did some kind of mitzvah, even though he didn’t plan to?”

“Sure!” the morah answered. “After all, how much do we benefit as Torah Jews from all of the amazing inventions the non-Jewish world has created over the thousands of years of history. Even if they didn’t want the Jews to benefit from them, if we eventually did, then God rewards them. The rabbis says that God never holds back any reward from any created being!”

“But,” she asked her teacher, “our reward comes later...in Olam HaBa.¹³ And its MASSIVE compared to any reward a non-obligated person might receive down here for any ‘mitzvah’ they might have done, even just inadvertently!”

⁹ Ritual washing before eating bread.

¹⁰ Making a blessing on bread.

¹¹ Praying.

¹² Intention.

¹³ The World-to-Come.

“That’s right!” Devorah said excitedly. Except this time she was not the student, but the teacher, a seminary teacher. It was 15 years later since that discussion about reward for mitzvos, and in the meantime she had married and given birth to two children of her own. She was also a popular teacher at a local seminary.

That class back when she was 14 years old had really impacted her way of thinking. In fact, it was what made her decide that she too would become a morah one day, so she too could share such wonderful and important ideas with her own children. And she did, the ones she gave birth to, and the ones who made a point of coming to her classes.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

A Little Perspective

ANOTHER SHUL SHOOTING. More anti-Semitic comics from the New York Times. Swastikas painted somewhere. Anti-Semitism. It just never goes away. We’d like it to, but it won’t.

“Mishuginas!”

“Hooligans!”

Yes, and so many other nasty things as well. But there’s not much we can do about it in the end. Bad people will be bad people. We can try to protect ourselves from it, perhaps even cancel our New York Times subscriptions (Did you?). But bad gets through, and before we know it, we’re on the other end of tragedy trying to make it meaningful.

Gotta do teshuvah. If you secular, become religious. If you’re religious, become MORE religious. After all, all of this is from God, or at least, He didn’t stop it from happening. Why, if not to make us improve spiritually? So, go back to what you were doing before while living in exile, just as long you make some kind of spiritual improvement. Hopefully it will be enough to save us from further tragedy.

Hmm. What’s wrong with THAT picture?

I was told that 90,000 Israelis left Eretz Yisroel for Pesach. We celebrate Pesach because it was our redemption from Egypt. So we celebrate it by going BACK “there”? Because it means not having to clean or cook for the holiday?

The Torah says in Parashas Behar, that God said that He took us out of Eretz Mitzrayim to bring us to Eretz Canaan to be our God. The Talmud takes this so literally that it says, even though it was written OUTSIDE the land, that God is really only our God in Eretz Yisroel. Yah, He’s everywhere at all times. But we relate best to Him within the borders of Eretz HaKodesh, for so many Kabbalistic reasons. And we go the OPPOSITE direction on the one holiday that celebrate all of THAT the most?

And don’t think for a moment that just because a person lives in the Diaspora everyday that it means they’re any better than those who live here and leave. At least they live here the REST of the year, if not mentally, then at least physically. How many people do either in the Diaspora?

We’ve got it all wrong. We may be doing the mitzvos, but the mitzvos aren’t doing us. They’re not impacting us the way they’re supposed to. They’re not keeping us different enough from the world around us. They’re not keeping us attached to our past in any significant conscious way. We’ve just found a way to make them work in a world we don’t want to change, not even for redemption.

We have to remember one thing though. We can define anti-Semitism any way we want to, and explain attacks in whatever way we feel like it. God doesn’t. To Him, anti-Semitism means one thing and its effects are designed to have specific effects. And HIS definition always win, and tragically, at great cost to us.

Do yourself a favor: become redemption minded. If you don’t know what that means, find out. The end of exile WILL come, ready or not, and anti-Semitism is meant to help with that.