

Mussar HaTorah

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Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Toldos

“THERE ARE TWO NATIONS IN YOUR BELLY...” (BEREISHIS 25:23)

Antoninus used to secretly learn Torah with R. Yehudah HaNasi

THE TALMUD (Avoda Zara 10b-11a, quoted by Rabbeinu Bechaya) tells us that the, “Two nations” in the *pasuk* above is also referring to two prominent representatives of these nations who shared an unusual relationship: R. Yehuda HaNasi – the scholar that was a descendant of Yaakov – and Antoninus – the Roman ruler and descendant of Esav. The Talmud continues to tell an amazing story: Antoninus used to secretly learn Torah with R. Yehudah HaNasi. There was a concealed tunnel into R. Yehudah HaNasi’s home that Antoninus used for these clandestine meetings. Antoninus used to bring two servants along with him. One, he would kill before entering R. Yehudah HaNasi’s home. The second, he would kill upon his return home. To further insure that word of his Torah learning would not leak out, Antoninus warned R. Yehudah HaNasi to make sure that no one else should be at his home at the time of their meetings.

One time, Antoninus entered the home to find that R. Chanina bar Chama was also there. Antoninus confronted R. Yehudah HaNasi: “Did I not warn you to not have anyone here?” R. Yehudah HaNasi responded: “R. Chanina is so sublime and like the angels that it is as if he’s not mortal.” (And therefore his presence is not a problem.) Antoninus – in an attempt to test R. Chanina – asked him to go “wake up” the servant in the tunnel entrance and tell him to come here. R. Chanina went to the tunnel and found the guard dead. He said to himself: “If I tell Antoninus that his servant is dead, it is not proper for the one sent on a mission to tell the sender bad news (see Megilla 15a). If I leave without telling Antoninus, I am insulting the king.” So he prayed to Hashem to bring the servant back to life. His prayer was answered, and he sent the guard to Antoninus.

Why did R. Chanina pray for Hashem to perform a miracle?

R. Chanina’s actions are difficult to understand. He could have returned to tell Antoninus the truth – that the servant was dead. We see from the *gemara*, which does not mention any concern other than the lack of *derech erez*, that his hesitation was not due to fear of a negative reaction from Antoninus. If so, why did R. Chanina pray for Hashem to perform a miracle? Of course, one should not violate *derech erez* if one has a choice, but in this situation, it would seem that R. Chanina did not have any option. Revival of the dead is a blatant and direct contradiction to the laws of nature. We know that Hashem runs the world in a way that seems normal, avoiding any obvious miracles. Why did R. Chanina feel the overwhelming need to ask Hashem to temporarily overturn the rules of nature and request an open miracle?

They are actual, binding rules of behavior

R. Chanina’s decision reveals to us the importance of even a small measure of *derech erez*. R. Chanina had a choice: Tell Antoninus the truth (a truth that R. Chanina most probably realized that Antoninus already knew), or to beseech Hashem for an awesome and obvious miracle. However, R. Chanina felt that he could not – under almost any circumstance – violate a rule of *derech erez*. *Derech erez*, we see, is not just fine details of etiquette or social graces. These “ways of the land” are not merely societal norms, something extraneous or voluntary. They are actual, binding rules of behavior that have *halachic* significance just like any other rule of the Torah. *Derech erez* is an integral and basic part of being a Jew and a *mentch*. Let us constantly reinforce and remind ourselves, through the study of *mussar* and the words of our sages, of the greatness expected of us, in our actions relating to others and in all our endeavors.