

## Bamidbar – A Watery Lesson – R. Sholom Segal

ב סיון תשע"ז – 27<sup>th</sup> May 2017 – שבת פ' במדבר

In this week's פרשה, the census teaches us of the immense value of each and every member of ישראל. We learn of the accumulative effect, a lesson also imparted by Rabbi Akiva.

Most will be familiar with the story of Akiva the Shepherd who didn't even know his Aleph Beis. Well actually, as has been pointed out by various commentators, including Harav Eziel Rosenbaum שליט"א, a closer reading of the story reveals that he was even well-versed in Nach. As a young child in חדר, he looked at the towering figures of the senior generation and felt the gap was simply too large to bridge. There and then, he threw in the towel.

One day, his whole perspective underwent a metamorphosis. As he passed a well, he discovered that the drip ... drip .... drip of tiny water droplets had, over many years, eroded the rock and created the well. There and then, the thought hit him; if mere water particles can breach the harsh and rigid barrier of rock, then surely the iron of Torah can slice through the layer of soft malleable flesh that envelops his heart. (Avos D'Rabbi Nosson 6:2)

Just one problem, though. How long does it take for the water to really have any significant effect? Even if we discard the hypotheses of those who believe the age of the world goes into the billions, we are still talking of far more than a life-time. It is true that iron is more potent than water and it is correct that flesh will put up less of a fight than rock, but there is a rule known as דיו; namely, one cannot deduce from the logic of a קל וחומר more than the source information. If it was news to Rabbi Akiva that, with patience, the accumulative effect would be significant, he could deduce only that he would need the time it would take the water to make its inroads into the rock.

This past Shabbos, we, or perhaps I should say, our downstairs neighbour, discovered the answer. When bulges began to appear on her wall and ceiling and then the electricity fused, she suspected that our water system was the culprit. Her diagnosis was confirmed on תוצאי שבת when the plumber uncovered the source of the problem. Apparently, a joint in the pipes leading from the boiler had not been completely sealed. Over the course of the last three years or so, the ever so slow and virtually unperceivable drops of water had been eroding away at a hot water copper pipe beneath it. Finally, a small hole had formed and ... need we say no more.

How could water, such a slow trickle of drops of water erode a hole in a piece of copper piping? The detectives may have spotted the answer; the water coming out of the boiler is very slightly acidic. It is true that the bombardment of bland water on copper piping will not have much of an effect, but when the water is not so plain, all that changes.

It is true that every person counts, but the more power one invests into his part, the greater the overall effect. If one tries to ignite the dormant flame of Yiddishkeit inside the cynical youth or the unaffiliated adult Jew, years of sermons will do nothing to change his outlook. One must add something to that water, something that can melt away the obstinate casing that is staunchly deflecting any attempts to infiltrate. The Torah is compared to honey; sweeten it for him. But, perhaps, more potent than anything else is the fire of Torah. This refers to the excitement and love that the teacher exudes. Let the emotions bubble over and fill all the empty cups who don't even have an inkling of just how empty and devoid their lives are.

Harav Osher Zelig Rubinstein זצוק"ל, former Rosh Yeshiva of תורת שמחה, was truly the embodiment of this trait. His infectious zest for life affected all those he came into contact with. He told of the time that he was attending the wedding of a תלמיד of his. As he stood on, taking in the joy of the moment, as the בחורים danced for hours on end, he was approached by a less religious relative of one of the sides.

"Rabbi," he began, in an excited undertone. "Are your students on drugs?"

"Yes, yes!" the Rosh Yeshiva responded.

"Really!? Which one? What is it called? Where do they all get the money for it?"

The Rosh Yeshiva looked the man in the eye and got ready to share the secret drug. "It's called ... Torah, my dear friend. And it's free for all who want it!"

Did Rabbi Akiva succeed in his lifetime? His exultant moment of death provides everlasting testimony that he did. It was with iron that they combed his flesh. (Brachos 61b) As pointed out by the בן איש חי, the תסרק that they used suggests an emptying out of their arsenals. The Romans envisaged the defeat of Rabbi Akiva, but what they failed to realise was that they were actually putting the finishing touches onto his life's achievements.

The story of Hadrian's Wall and Gateshead Yeshiva, told by Harav Mattisyahu Salomon שליט"א, former חשגיח of the ישיבה, bears testimony to this. A Jewish reporter had accompanied a group of tourists on a visit to the historical site; Hadrian's Wall, that is. At some point, the reporter suddenly remembered that he had Yartzheit for one of his parents. Upon the advice of someone else, he undertook the short drive to Gateshead Yeshiva.

As he entered the study hall, the thunderous voice of Torah drew him closer. Listening carefully to the debate of two students as to what Rabbi Akiva meant, he was awestruck. Here he had just been visiting the few moss-filled stones, ending with a pub, the remnant of the once was powerful Roman leader and now, the very man he had sought to silence, was, some two thousand years later, live and kicking. Truly the waters of Rabbi Akiva's Torah had eroded a huge well for future generations to draw water and satisfy the thirst of their souls.