

Vayeilech

Bring the Kids Along!

Gather the nation – men, women and children and strangers among you – to listen and learn to fear Hashem, your God, so that they will carefully keep the words of this Torah.

Dvarim 31:12

Hakbel is a ceremony once in seven years, when all Jews would gather to hear the king read the Torah. Everyone, including the tiniest of children, is required to be present.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Broka and R. Elazar Chasma were traveling to greet Rabbi Yehoshua. When they saw him, he asked them, “What novel idea was introduced in your Beis Midrash today?” His students responded, “Rabbi, we are your students, and we drink of your waters.” To that, he replied, “Nevertheless, there is no such thing as a Torah study session in the Beis Midrash that does not have some original idea.” They went on to tell him what they had learned that day from Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah. The Torah tells us to “Gather the nation – men, women and children.” But what use can there be to bring infants and small children to *hakbel*, if they will not understand what is going on, anyhow? Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah taught that the men and women come to learn and listen, and the children come to in order allow the people bringing those children to receive reward for bringing them along.¹⁶⁸ To this, Rabbi Yehoshua responded, “You had a precious pearl, and you almost withheld it from me!”¹⁶⁹

It sounds a bit funny to bring someone along for no reason. Why did these parents need to bring children to *hakbel*? What reward could there be for doing something that, in and of itself, is completely pointless, and is all about the reward?

R. Nosson Adler¹⁷⁰ explains that there was an important lesson that needed to be taught at

168 See *Maharsha*, s.v. *nashim*, that these are children who are not yet old enough to be educated. See, however, Maharal in his *Gur Aryeh* to Dvarim 31:12. See *Taavah Lieinayim*, which explains this gemara differently. Since all men and women had to be at the Temple, there were no babysitters available. Thus, everyone had to bring their children along, since there was really no other choice. So, Hashem commanded them to do so, in order to give them reward for something that they would have had to do anyhow. Also worth noting is the approach of Kaftor Vaferach cited in *Likkutei Basar* Likkutei (to Chagiga 3a), who explains that Hashem knew that if mothers would have to leave their children at home, they would worry about them periodically and be distracted from their studying at *hakbel*. Thus, Hashem said to bring them so that those who brought them along would get more reward; not reward for transporting the children, but rather, reward for more focused and distraction-free Torah study.

169 *Meshech Chochmah* to Dvarim 31:12 suggests that this teaching was especially beloved to R. Yehoshua, since we know about him (Yerushalmi, Yevamos 1:6) that his mother used to bring him in his baby bassinet to the place of study so that from his infancy, he could be exposed to Torah study.

170 *Shaar Naftali* citing R. Nosson Adler, also quoted in *Mleiah Ketores*, *drush* 15, *Toras Emes* (collection of

bakbel. When children are there in the room, they disturb and distract from serious Torah study. It is far wiser to leave children in the care of others if one wants to concentrate. But the Torah wants to teach us that it is worthwhile to suffer distractions, and limit oneself at times, in order to help others. He explains that this is what Avraham did when he taught others Torah. He did not seclude himself, although had he done so, he surely could have accomplished much more in his personal study and in his own private prayers. Our perfection comes not from being perfect, but rather from knowing when to limit our achievements and instead assist another person. When a person was offered a most unique learning experience from the King of Israel, only happening a few times in a lifetime, Hashem arranged that there would be distractions: crying children to attend to, demanding treats and toys. This is what life is about, learning to balance our own growth with simultaneous devotion to the growth of those whom we can help.

If fact, it seems that this is precisely why this teaching is one that the Rabbi learned from his students, in a reversal of roles that surprised the students. The student normally drinks from the waters of his teacher. But the lesson that they taught was that even the teacher can only really reach his perfection if there is someone to distract him, slow him down and force him to worry about the growth of another human being. The greatest learning experience was only complete when there were distractions, thereby making us aware that greatness is a product not only of personal growth, but also of concern for the growth of those beneath us as well.

“If one’s teacher appears to a person to be like an angel of God, then one should seek Torah from his mouth; otherwise, he should not seek Torah from his mouth,” teaches the Talmud.¹⁷¹ R. Pinchas Halevi Horowitz, in his *Panim Yafos*,¹⁷² explains that the difference between humans and angels is that humans are created imperfect and must grow, while angels have no growth to do. Humans are to always be striving, and bettering themselves. If one’s teacher seems to always be growing, and never slows down for his students, one should not seek Torah from him, for he will not get much from it. But if his teacher is like an angel, and he stops his own growth, like the stationary angels, who do not have any growth on their agenda, so that he can help his student, then one should seek out Torah from that person.

Chasam Sofer, a student of both R. Nosson Adler, and the *Panim Yafos*, took this all a step farther.¹⁷³ The Talmud¹⁷⁴ records a dispute between Ben Peturah and Rabbi Akiva. When two people are walking through the desert and there is only enough water to allow one person to survive, Ben Peturah is of the opinion that the person who has the water should share the water with his friend, causing them both to die, rather than save his own life at his friend’s expense.¹⁷⁵ But Rabbi Akiva proved from the Torah that “your life comes first.” He explained

teachings of R. Nosson Adler) to Vayelech.

171 Chagiga 15b

172 Parshas Vayera

173 *Toras Moshe* to Kedoshim, s.v. *viobavta*

174 Bava Metziah 62a

175 Though I have not seen it asserted in any Torah work, I have heard people say that Ben Peturah might be a code name for *Yeshu*; see *Keser David*, *Tinyana* 19, where R. Kasriel Kaplan was asked this and wrote “that

that you are only meant to save the life of another person after you have saved your own life, and therefore, the person who is in possession of the water should drink it himself and save his own life, even at the expense of his friend. But if that is the case, what does “love your neighbor as yourself”¹⁷⁶ mean? If one is always expected to save himself first, then what application does that principle have?

Chasam Sofer explains that this is what Rabbi Akiva means when he taught elsewhere,¹⁷⁷ “Love your neighbor as yourself; this is a major principle in Torah.” Rabbi Akiva wanted us to know that though loving your neighbor just as yourself and caring for his well-being does not apply to quite that extent in the physical world, it does in matters of the spirit. When it comes to Torah, one is expected to sacrifice his own growth for another person, and one’s life does not come first.

R. Moshe Feinstein¹⁷⁸ disagrees with the Chasam Sofer, for he contends that if in matters of the physical, one must put himself before his friend, certainly when it come to spiritual matters, which are far more important, one must care for himself first.

R. Moshe Feinstein would seem to be right. But elsewhere, the Chasam Sofer introduces another variable. In his *Pitchei Chosam*,¹⁷⁹ he teaches that one does not lose any spiritual achievements when he limits himself in order to teach others, for Hashem makes up any lost accomplishments for him, and he grows spiritually just as he would have had he not paused and limited himself. If that is so, then we no longer need to be bothered by the question of R. Moshe Feinstein. Only when it comes to physical matters can one lose out from helping another person, and so, one is obligated to protect himself before anyone else. In spiritual pursuits, however, sacrificing for others never comes with any loss of spiritual gain at all, and so one must be even more giving and generous.

Fascinatingly, R. Itamar Schwartz, in his *Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh*,¹⁸⁰ asserts that after *Moshiach* comes, we will rule like Ben Peturah, and no longer will one’s own life come before anyone else’s. Perhaps this is because at that time, everything will be elevated to a level of spirituality, and in spirituality, you are to love your neighbor exactly as yourself, according to Chasam Sofer.¹⁸¹

which you asked about Ben Peturah, I know that there is a notion that he was the Nazarene, and that this is from his own invented Torah, but I have seen in the “*Toldos Tannaim Viamoraim*” that his name was Yehuda ben Peturah, and he is mentioned elsewhere by *chazal*. It is therefore impossible that he is the Nazarene, for his name was not Yehuda. Yehuda ben Peturah was undoubtedly a great scholar from the times of the early Rabbis of the Mishnah.”

176 Vayikra 19:18

177 Yerushalmi, Nedarim 9:4

178 *Igros Moshe*, vol. 7; *Even Haezer* 4, 26:4.

179 Another name for the introduction to *Shaalos Uteshuvos Chasam Sofer, Yoreh Deah*.

180 Vol. 10, p. 273.

181 See also *Michtav Sofer al Hatorah* (2nd ed., 5765, p. 37 from a student’s notes) of R. Shimon Sofer, who also addresses this idea and elaborates on Avraham, and one’s obligation to be prepared to limit his personal growth in order to help others. Interestingly, he does not cite his father, the Chasam Sofer there.

When it comes to spiritual accomplishments, never think that those around you who slow you down, and distract you when you are trying to grow, are hurting you. After all, *hakhel* was only the amazing experience that it was when there were children with runny noses underfoot who kept forgetting to whisper during the king's Torah reading.