

### Parschas Vayikra 5771

## LEADERSHIP AND THE UNTOLD SAGA OF R' YOSEF IBN AVISUR

Among the many sacrifices enumerated in this week's *parshah*, we find the sin-offering of the *Nasi* (tribal leader). The Torah delineates the particulars of the offering he brings in the event he has committed a sin (*Vayikra* 4:22-26).

This section begins with a curious phrase: אָפֵֹר נָשִׂיא נִחָטָא, which loosely translated means, "If a *nasi* has sinned." To be precise, אָפֵֹר usually means "which" – a term that does not seem to fit well here. Rashi therefore understands the verse as alluding to a deeper message. אָפֵֹר is to be understood as the similar term אָפֵֹרֵי (fortunate). The verse thus conveys the following meaning: "Fortunate is the generation whose *nasi* (leader) is able to recognize, regret and correct his mistake." A leader who behaves in this manner is truly heroic.

An incident occurred many generations ago in which this dictum was fulfilled in a most dramatic way. This singular event took place at a critical juncture; had it been handled differently, the very course of Jewish history might have been altered. Due to its relevance to the aforementioned message of the *parshah* and the fact that it has remained somewhat "under-reported" until now, we present here the account of this monumental occurrence (based on *The Rishonim* [R' Hersh Goldwurm, Mesorah Publications], pp. 54-56).

### A QUESTION OF SUCCESSION

Many may be familiar with the incident of the "Four Captives," the four rabbinic figures who were captured by pirates and redeemed at various locations. This event is

generally seen as the catalyst that launched the transference of Torah supremacy from the Geonic centers of Babylon to the Middle-Eastern communities, as the latter received a tremendous infusion of spiritual growth due to the arrival of these "Four Captives" in their midst. One of these towering figures was R' Moshe ben Chanoch, who settled in Cordova, Spain (circa 1000). Through his leadership, the groundwork was laid for what would become for Jewry the "Golden Age of Spain."

R' Moshe had two disciples renowned for their erudition: R' Yosef ibn Avisur and R' Chanoch – R' Moshe's son. Upon R' Moshe's death, his son, R' Chanoch, filled his position as Rav of Cordova.

It was some time later that a tremendous controversy ensued. R' Yosef – who felt himself more suitable for the position – attracted a substantial following. Soon, two camps emerged, each vying for supremacy. One faction favored a transfer of authority to R' Yosef, while the other vociferously defended the honor of R' Chanoch, the established *rav*. As the relatively nascent community seemed threatened with complete disintegration, R' Chanoch took a drastic step to quell the strife: he placed R' Yosef into excommunication. Effectively distanced from the community, R' Yosef went abroad, seeking to gain some support from rabbinic authorities of other lands.

While this measure achieved a semblance of calm, the peace was not long-lasting. R' Yosef had attracted some powerful followers, and one of his adherents was suddenly elevated to the most powerful lay position in the land. An influential silk manufacturer named Ya'akov ibn Go was promoted by the caliph to become the head of the Jewish community. He wasted no time using his new found authority to engineer the triumph of his preferred candidate.

נדפס לזכות רפ"ש של  
יוסף בן גיטל עמו"ש  
בתוך שאר חולי ישראל  
...  
לזכר ולעלוי נשמת  
שבע קלה בת שמעון ע"ה  
Mrs. Celia Lambert

by Elaine, Judy & Boaz, Debbie, Shimon Dovid & Blima Hadassah

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of  
דוד בן אברהם ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives  
to arrange Torah study on behalf of his neshamah.

And so this Ya'akov ibn Go ordered R' Chanoch to vacate his post on the Rabbinate. Should he refuse, Ibn Go threatened, R' Chanoch would be placed on a captain-less ship, which would be set adrift to wander the seas. To complete the "coup," Ibn Go sent word to R' Yosef to return to Cordova, as the seat of the rabbinate was his for the taking. With the backing of the royal government, there was nothing that could prevent Ibn Go's plan from succeeding.

Except for one thing. With all obstacles cleared to assuming the position, R' Yosef replied that he was no longer interested; he insisted instead that R' Chanoch continue as *rav*.

### THE LITMUS TEST

What happened to effect such a turnaround? Apparently, while Ibn Go had been scheming, R' Yosef had come to a realization. His own efforts at appealing to other rabbinic authorities had failed for one simple reason: they refused to see him in light of R' Chanoch's ban. A lesser person might have reacted with indignation and then seized on the opportunity that soon presented itself. But R' Yosef was different; although he had been placed in excommunication, he was moved by the fact that the ban against him was so widely observed. This made R' Yosef appreciate how highly regarded R' Chanoch really was amongst the sages of the generation. As such, he responded with humility. When told by Ibn Go that the way had been cleared for him to take over the rabbinate, not only did R' Yosef refuse, but he heaped praises upon R' Chanoch. After declaring that his former rival was perfectly suited to the position, R' Yosef resumed a self-imposed exile, where he remained for the rest of his life.

Perhaps we can gain an even clearer understanding of R' Yosef's great turnaround from a teaching in the Mishnah in Avos, which states (2:2):

כָּל הַעוֹסְקִים עִם הַצְּבוֹר, יִהְיוּ עוֹסְקִים עִמָּהֶם לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם.

"All who toil on behalf of the community, should do so (solely) for the sake of Heaven (and not for self-aggrandizement [R' Yonah])."

As evidenced from his display of humble capitulation – despite possessing the "upper hand" – R' Yosef ibn Avisur

was an individual of great integrity. One point that might call for clarification, though, is his initial behavior. Did he originally challenge R' Chanoch from a genuine sense of duty – feeling that his own talents would better serve the community? Or was there perhaps another motive, that of a desire for glory and power?

It does appear, however, that R' Yosef had been guided by altruistic motives from the start. This seems clear from his eventual reaction to Ibn Go's proposal. Had he been merely seeking his own honor, he might not have been swayed by the refusal of the Rabbis to meet with him. Only one who had truly been acting "for the sake of Heaven" would be so humbled; when he saw that Heaven's Will was for R' Chanoch to lead, R' Yosef stood graciously to the side.

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