

The Weekly Daf



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Berachos 58-64

Week of 24 Cheshvan - 1 Kislev 5758 / 24-30 November 1997
Rav Weinbach's insights, explanations and comments for the 7 pages of Talmud
studied in the course of the worldwide Daf Yomi cycle

Thunder and Dreams

There are events in life whose purpose is to alarm a person into a fear of Hashem. One of them is the frightening sound of thunder. Science can supply explanations for the cause of this sound, but we have no understanding why the Creator so ordered His universe that this natural phenomenon be one of such volume that it strikes terror in the heart of man.

The reason, says Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, is to straighten out the distorted ideas in the heart of man. Maharsha calls our attention to an earlier *perek* (*Berachos 28b*) where Rabbi Hillel explains that the eighteen blessings of our *Shmoneh Esrei* prayer correspond to the eighteen times Hashem's Name is mentioned in chapter 29 of *Tehillim*. The nineteenth blessing which was added when the heretics began to make trouble corresponds to the Divine Attribute found in 29:3 — "the G-d of glory thunders." This thunder is a Divine message to straighten out the heretic's thinking by shocking him into an awareness of Heavenly power.

The source for this approach is the passage in *Koheles* (2:14) about Hashem doing things "so that people should fear Him." Back in our own *perek* (55a) Rabbi Chisda applies this same passage to the purpose of a bad dream which, he says, is more effective than lashes in arousing a sinner to mend his ways. The fear aroused by a dream which may foretell an unpleasant future has a longer lasting impact on the dreamer than the pain suffered in corporal punishment. According to our Sages a bad dream is therefore related to thunder which likewise instills a fear which will hopefully inspire us to return to the Creator.

Berachos 59a

The Dangerous Fox

When Rabbi Akiva defied the Roman ban on Torah study by publicly teaching Torah he was challenged by Popus ben Yehuda who exhorted him to exercise caution.

"Let me draw you a parable," answered Rabbi Akiva. "A fox once passed a river where he observed the fish frantically swimming to and fro. To his query about their rushing from place to place the fish replied that they were fleeing the nets which men were spreading in the water to catch them. When the fox suggested that they could find safety by coming out of the water to live alongside him on dry land the fish scorned his advice.

'You are supposed to be the cleverest of animals,' they said, 'but you speak like a fool. If we have so much to fear in our natural habitat — the water — how much more will we be in danger in a surrounding where we cannot survive!'"

"To us Jews," concluded Rabbi Akiva, "Torah is our life, just as water is for the fish. If we are in danger while in our natural habitat, how much greater will our danger be if we abandon it!"

Rabbi Akiva's view of the fox as the symbol of all the compromisers in Jewish history who preached abandonment of Torah study and observance as a way of gaining acceptance by non-Jews is echoed in the famous story recorded at the end of *Mesechta Makkos*. When the leading sages of the generation following the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash* saw a fox coming out of the place where the Holy of Holies once stood all of them wept while Rabbi Akiva laughed. His explanation was that the Prophet Yishayahu links the prophecy of destruction about the Temple Mount turning into a jungle with the prophecy of redemption. Seeing the fox was proof that destruction had reached its climax and redemption was beginning.

But why did he alone see this in the appearance of the fox? One approach is that the other sages assumed that the appearance of lions and bears would constitute a jungle, not the tiny fox. Rabbi Akiva, however, saw the fox as a more formidable threat to his people because of his preaching assimilation, and he therefore laughed with joy that destruction would now give way to redemption.

Berachos 61b

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