

The Weekly Daf



by Rav Mendel Weinbach - Dean, Ohr Somayach Institutions

Yoma 23-29

Week of 10 - 16 Shevat 5759 / 27 January - 2 February 1999
Rav Weinbach's insights, explanations and comments for the 7 pages of Talmud
studied in the course of the worldwide Daf Yomi cycle

Running For or Against

The original system for determining which *kohen* would be privileged to perform any of the sacred services in the *Beis Hamikdash* went like this:

A call was issued asking for volunteers. If there were more than one, they were told to race up the 32-cubit ramp leading to the altar. The first to reach the top four cubits of the ramp won. In case of a tie, all the *kohanim* of the family unit on duty gathered and a lottery was conducted.

This system was eventually abandoned due to the following incidents: First there was the case of the *kohen* who became so incensed seeing his competitor reach the finish line first that he drew a knife and stabbed him to death. As terrible a tragedy as it was, this did not yet lead to an abandonment of the system since it was viewed as a one-time aberration of an individual, and not indicative of any general risk. In a later race, one of the *kohanim* accidentally pushed a competitor off the ramp, causing him to break a leg. Once the Sages saw that there was a general danger involved they abandoned the race system in favor of a lottery.

This *gemara* leaves us with an obvious difficulty in understanding how the Sages were not aware at the outset of the danger involved in a race such as this. One of the great Chassidic leaders, the Rebbe of Kotzk, is reported to have offered this explanation:

The idea of the race was that the *kohen* most enthusiastic about performing the sacred service would muster the drive to run faster than those less consumed with this holy passion. In the earlier generations this system worked perfectly because when the call came forth "who wishes to perform the service?" the *kohanim* said to themselves "Hashem wants someone to perform His service!" and they went forward with zeal. When this is the motivation, no *kohen* will be so vicious as to stab a competitor, or so careless as to push him, because his motive is that the service be performed, not that *he* be the one to perform it. As the generations degenerated, the response to the call was "I must have the honor of performing the service!" Where ego is involved and personal honor is the motivation, a race can indeed become dangerous.

Yoma 23a

Prepared by Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem, Israel

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Issue #259 - Yoma 23-29

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The Oldest Institution

From the days of our ancestors, says Rabbi Chama the son of Rabbi Chanina, the institution of a *yeshiva* has never departed from the Jewish People. As evidence, he cites passages from the Torah which use the term "*zaken*" (literally "old") in regard to the Patriarchs and in regard to the Jewish experiences in Egypt and the Wilderness.

Maharsha explains that this proof is based on our Sage's interpretation of the term "*zaken*" as sometimes being a contraction of the words "*zeh kanah*," meaning "one who has acquired Torah wisdom" (*Mesechta Kidushin 32a*). When the Torah (*Vayikra 19:32*) commands us to "honor the *zaken*," it is not referring to age, but rather to one who has studied Torah and is capable of teaching it to others.

When the Torah relates (*Bereishis 24:1*) that Avraham was a "*zaken*," it is obviously not referring to his age, because he was already characterized as old (*Bereishis 18:11-12*) when he was forty years younger. It must therefore be referring to his role as scholar and teacher, a "*zaken*" leading a *yeshiva*.

Regarding both Yitzchak and Yaakov, becoming a "*zaken*" is linked to loss of sight (*Bereishis 27:1, 48:10*). It is improbable that the Torah simply means to convey the unpleasant fact that they became sightless in their old age. Once we interpret the title "*zaken*" as a reference to their roles as scholars and teachers in a *yeshiva*, we can appreciate their loss of sight as a badge of honor, attesting to their great efforts expended in their educational activity.

In support of this approach, Maharsha calls to our attention Rabbi Chama's anachronistic order when listing the *yeshivos* of our national existence: He first mentions the *yeshivos* of the "*ziknei* (plural of '*zaken*') *Yisrael*," the elders of Israel in Egypt and in the Wilderness (*Shmos 3:16, Bamidbar 11:16*), and only afterwards mentions the Patriarchs who preceded them by so many centuries. Thus, he eliminates any doubt as to what the term "*zaken*" means when referring to these great men. While one might assume regarding the Patriarchs that it was only a description of their advanced age, this is certainly not the meaning of the term regarding those people whom Moshe formed into the first Sanhedrin, whose qualification was Torah scholarship, not age. Once we thus establish "*zaken*" as a term for *yeshiva* erudition, we apply it to the Patriarchs to form an unbroken golden chain of *Yeshiva* history.

Yoma 28b

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