**THE “FIVE-STAR” SEDER IN BNEI BRAK**

“E
ven if we were all wise... all Sages and well learned in the Torah, it would still be our duty to tell the story of the departure from Egypt. And the more one elaborates upon the story of the departure from Egypt, the more one is to be praised.”

Immediately after teaching the above imperative, the Ba’alei haHaggadah recount the narrative of the Five “Star” Sages in Bnei Brak, who fulfilled the above: “Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Tarfon were telling of the departure from Egypt all night until their disciples came and said to them: Our masters, the time for the recitation of the morning Shema has arrived.”

This was an odd phenomenon – firstly, at least three of the four Sages mentioned – Rabbi Eliezer (from Lod), Rabbi Yehoshua (from Peki’in) and Rabbi Tarfon were Rabbi Akiva’s masters and teachers! Why were they spending Seder Night with their student (from Bnei Brak)? After all, students generally visit their teachers on festivals.

Secondly, Rabbi Eliezer in particular taught1 that one is required to celebrate yom tov in one’s home, based on the pasuk, “You shall rejoice, you and your household,”2 which he contradicts through spending Pesach night in Rabbi Akiva’s home.

The Aruch HaShulchan3 suggests that the Seder in Bnei Brak took place after the destruction of the Second Beit HaMikdash, most probably during the harsh Hadrianic persecutions following the failed Bar Kochba rebellion. This was one of the most tragic and despairing eras in Jewish history as Jewish leaders were being tortured to death and a harsh Roman exile was yet to follow.

How could Pesach – the holiday of freedom and redemption – be celebrated that year in the midst of terror and persecution? Who could inspire the leaders to retain their faith and optimism? All agreed that Rabbi Akiva, who could laugh upon hearing the rejoicing of Roman officers and seeing foxes/jackals (or Roman officers) emerging from the Kodesh Kodashim, confident in the fulfillment of the prophecies of consolation,4 could offer them the inspiration they needed!

Rabbi Akiva debated with Rabbi Tarfon regarding the proper conclusion to Maggid: “Rabbi Tarfon said, ‘Blessed art Thou, O G-d... Who has redeemed us and has redeemed our forebears [past tense] from Egypt’ – and did not seal [the blessing]. Rabbi Akiva continued and concluded Rabbi Tarfon’s blessing: ‘...So shall our G-d and the G-d of our forebears [past tense] from Egypt’ – and thereby sealed the blessing. Rabbi Akiva’s beracha of thanksgiving for past and future redemptions would be recited that year (even in the presence of Rabbi Tarfon) as he hosted this monumental Seder as one of the five-“star” leaders of his generation. For though he may have been the student, that year and onward, he would teach and inspire generations to maintain faith in G-d and the destiny of Am Yisrael. He would live and die with the words Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeynu Hashem Echad on his lips – constantly engaged in Kabbalat Ol Malchut Shamayim (accepting the yoke of Heaven) however dire his circumstances.

Under quarantine and danger, Rabbi Akiva teaches us messages of redemption every Seder; the secret is not only to retain optimism and recount the redemption of the past as a prelude to the future, but simultaneously to strengthen oneself in religious commitment. It is no surprise that Rabbi Akiva’s own students had to come to announce – “Our masters, the time for the recitation of the morning Shema has arrived.” The Rabbis were well aware of the ideal time to recite Kriyat Shema; in fact they had been engaged in reciting Rabbi Akiva’s Kriyat Shema all night as they rekindled their faith in redemption, in martyrdom and in acceptance of Ol Malchut Shamayim.

The students had yet to partake in such a Seder; otherwise they would have known that the dawn heralding the redemption had already risen hours earlier, as the Pesach story was retold throughout the night in Bnei Brak.

1 Sukkah 27b.
2 Devarim 14:26.
3 Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, 1829-1908 in his commentary on the Haggadah, “Leil Shimurim.”
4 Makkot 24b.
5 Pesachim 116b.

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