

What is your *Olam Haba* Moment? A Lesson from Shavuot

In our home we like to talk about “*Olam Haba* moments” — moments when one merits the World to Come. On the surface, one might think we would be alluding to those larger-than-life events described in the Gemara. Who has not been touched by the story of Rabbi Akiva, who exalted at the opportunity to love God with all of his being as he died at the hands of his Roman torturers?

כל ימי הייתי מצטער על פסוק זה בכל נפשך -
אפילו נוטל את נשמתך אמרת: מתי יבא לידי
ואקיימנו, ועכשיו שבא לידי לא אקיימנו?
ברכות סא:

Rabbi Akiva said to his students: All my days I have been troubled by this verse, ‘with all your soul,’ which I interpret to mean even giving up your soul. I wondered, when will I have the opportunity to fulfill this? Now that I have the opportunity shall I not fulfill it?

Brachos 61b

And then there is the example of Rabbi Eliezer ben Dordaya who mustered nearly super-human strength to repent from a life of utter sin and in dying, merited the honorific title of Rebbe (*Avoda Zara* 17a).

In both of these astounding examples of heroism, the Gemara describes that a *bas kol* (Heavenly voice) rang out and proclaimed: *mezuman l’chayei Haolam Haba*, the protagonist had earned a place in *Olam Haba*. These



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powerful stories are an essential part of our tradition, but they are not the daily, routine occurrences that we call *Olam Haba* moments when speaking to our children. We refer to a very different type of story.

In *The Maggid Speaks* (p. 78) Rabbi Paysach Krohn tells of Reb Naftali, the gabbai tzeddaka (charity collector) in a small town in Poland around the turn of the 20th century. Late one night, after Reb Naftali had returned home from an exhausting day collecting tzeddaka for a local emergency, a beggar arrived at his door asking for 20 rubles. The money Reb Naftali had already collected was spoken for, and he felt unable to go back to the townsfolk once again for additional funds. But in the face of the beggar’s pitiful entreaties, Reb Naftali relented and prepared to ask the one man he thought might be in a position to help. Unfortunately, this individual was young, irreverent and wild, someone who wasted his time drinking, gambling and carousing, and Reb Naftali dreaded the expected encounter. Coming upon the young man in the local tavern and in an

agreeable mood, Reb Naftali made his request. The young man acquiesced, but only on the condition that Reb Naftali dress in priest’s clothes, compliments of the young man, and lead the young man and his cronies around town with loud singing, dancing and merrymaking. Though mortified by the prospect of being humiliated in this way, Reb Naftali agreed and endured the jeers of the shocked townsfolk, who had always respected Reb Naftali but who were now pelting him with eggs as the entourage sang and danced through the streets. When the ordeal was over, Reb Naftali gave the money to the beggar, ripped off the priest’s clothes, threw them in the closet and crawled into bed a depressed and humiliated man. Some months later, the *Divrei Chaim*, the Sanzer Rebbe (1793–1876), came to town and told his entourage that he smelled *Gan Eden* emanating from Reb Naftali’s house. The Rebbe entered the house and discovered that the smell was coming from the priest’s clothes. After pressing him for the story behind the clothes, the Rebbe instructed Reb

Naftali to be buried in those very clothes and that, as a result of his self-sacrifice, he would go straight up to *Gan Eden*. What had seemed to Reb Naftali as the worst moment in his life, a moment to be buried and forgotten, was actually an *Olam Haba* moment.

Although the ending of this story is uplifting, there is misfortune here as well. Reb Naftali's selflessness did indeed earn him a special place in *Olam Haba*. But he needed someone else to interpret the events for him. He did not understand that his ordeal could be an *Olam Haba* moment. Instead of focusing on the task he had set for himself, to successfully help the beggar, he had focused only on his ordeal and let the humiliation overwhelm him. How many times in our own lives do we miss the significance of our accomplishments? As in the case of Reb Naftali, do our stressful experiences sometimes leave us so emotionally drained that we miss the big picture? Or do our daily challenges sometimes seem so ordinary to us that we do not endow them with significance? How often do we fail to recognize our *Olam Haba* moments because they do not stand out as clearly as Rabbi Akiva's martyrdom? And herein lies the danger. If we fail to recognize and ultimately seize upon the myriad of opportunities for greatness that come our way, we will not necessarily rise

to the challenge. Our *Olam Haba* moments will be squandered.

The Gemara warns us about having a myopic view of greatness:

תנו רבנן: כשחלה רבי יוסי בן קיסמא, הלך רבי חנינא בן תרדיון לבקר. אמר לו: חנינא אחי, אי אתה יודע שאומה זו מן השמים המליכה? שהחריבה את ביתו ושרפה את היכלו, והרגה את חסידיו ואבדה את טוביו, ועדיין היא קיימת, ואני שמעתי עליך שאתה יושב ועוסק בתורה [ומקהיל קהלות ברבים] וספר מונח לך בחיקך! אמר לו: מן השמים ירחמו. אמר לו: אני אומר לך דברים של טעם, ואתה אומר לי מן השמים ירחמו, תמה אני אם לא ישרפו אותך ואת ספר תורה באש! אמר לו: רבי, מה אני לחיי העולם הבא? אמר לו: כלום מעשה בא לידך? אמר לו: מעות של פורים נתחלפו לי במעות של צדקה וחלקתים לעניים, אמר לי: אם כן, מחלקך יהי חלקי ומגורלך יהי גורלי. עבודה זרה דף יח.

Our Rabbis taught: When R. Yossi ben Kisma was ill, R. Chanina ben Tradyon went to visit him. He said to him: "My brother Chanina, do you not know that it is Heaven that has ordained this [Roman] nation to reign? For even though she has destroyed His House, burnt His Temple, killed His pious ones and caused His best ones to perish, still Rome is firmly established! Yet I have heard about you that you are sitting and occupying yourself with the Torah, publicly gathering assemblies, and cradling a Torah scroll in your bosom." Rabbi Chanina replied, "Heaven will

show mercy." Rabbi Yossi exclaimed, "I am telling you substance and you are responding 'Heaven will show mercy'! It will surprise me if they do not burn both you and the Torah scroll in fire." "Rebbe," said the other, "How do I stand with regard to the World to Come?" Rabbi Yossi asked, "Is there any particular act that you have done?" He replied: "I once mistook Purim money for ordinary charity money, and I distributed [of my own] to the poor. "In that case," he replied, "then I should be so fortunate to share in your portion." Avoda Zara 18a

The Gemara describes that after the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash by the Romans, Rabbi Chanina gathered groups of scholars together to teach Torah in public so as to ensure the continuity of Torah and the *Mesorah*. Despite the great risk to his life, Rabbi Chanina persevered in this effort. This was certainly a heroic act. Yet despite this awesome accomplishment, Rabbi Yossi casted doubts as to whether Rabbi Chanina had acted correctly. Then Rabbi Yossi proceeds to ask Rabbi Chanina if he had ever done a meritorious act worthy of *Olam Haba*. At this point, the Gemara focuses our attention on something in Rabbi Chanina's life that seems incredibly trivial in comparison to his risking his life for Torah. Rabbi Chanina relates that he once confused Purim tzedaka money with regular tzedaka money. To make up for the confusion, Rabbi Chanina added money from his own pocket. Upon hearing this, Rabbi Yossi exclaimed that he hopes he himself shares in Rabbi Chanina's portion of *Olam Haba*. What was so significant about Rabbi Chanina's giving tzedaka, a seemingly minor act? The truth is, Rabbi Chanina could have easily justified not paying the tzedaka from him his own funds. His confusion was

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an honest error, and no poor person lost out as a result of the mistake. In addition, since this all occurred in the privacy of his own home, no one would have known whether he did or did not give of his own money to tzedaka. Yet Rabbi Chanina did not invoke excuses and justifications. He wanted to be above board in every respect. This is an *Olam Haba* moment, a moment in which a person overcomes his natural inclinations to make excuses and rationalize his behavior. These small moments don't make headlines, but this Gemara demonstrates the power of the small moment even over dramatic events.

The Rambam provides us with an opportunity to sharpen our understanding of this Gemara and shed additional light on our concept of true *Olam Haba* moments. We may be familiar with the statement of R. Chananya ben Akashya:

ר' חנניא בן עקשיא אומר רצה הקב"ה לזכות את ישראל לפיכך הרבה להם תורה ומצות שנאמר ה' חפץ למען צדקו יגדיל תורה ויאדיר.
מכות כג:

Rabbi Chananya ben Akashya said, "Hashem wanted to create merits for the Jewish people so he gave them much Torah (to learn) and a multitude of mitzvos (to accomplish) as the verse states: Hashem desired for the sake of Israel's righteousness, that the Torah be made great and glorious."

Makkos 23b

The Rambam seems to be bothered by Rabbi Chananya's statement. One might think that if Hashem wanted to help Bnei Yisrael, He should have given them just a few mitzvos upon which they could focus their efforts and accomplish with distinction. Instead, Bnei Yisrael were tasked with a large number of mitzvos making

their job much more difficult. The Rambam explains:

מיסודות האמונה בתורה שאם קיים האדם מצוה משלש עשרה ושש מאות מצות כראוי וכהוגן ולא שתף עמה מטרה ממטרות העולם הזה כלל, אלא עשאה לשמה מאהבה כמו שביארתי לך, הרי הוא זוכה בה לחיי העולם הבא, לכן אמר ר' חנניה כי מחמת רבוי המצות אי אפשר שלא יעשה האדם אחת בכל ימי חייו בשלימות וזכה להשארות הנפש באותו המעשה. וממה שהמורה על היסוד הזה שאלת ר' חנניה בן תרדיון מה אני לחיי העולם הבא, וענהו העונה כלום בא לידך מעשה, כלומר האם נזדמן לך עשיית מצוה ראוי, ענה לו שנזדמנה לו מצות צדקה בתכלית השלמות האפשרית, וזכה בה לחיי העולם הבא.
רמב"ם פירוש המשנה, שם

One of the foundations of belief in our Torah is that if someone fulfills one of the 613 mitzvos properly and justly without any ulterior motive from this world, rather out of total altruism, one merits the World to Come. For this reason, Rabbi Chananya said that because there are so many mitzvos, it is impossible that a person will not perform one of them properly during his lifetime and merit eternity through that act. The proof to this idea is that in response to Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon's question "Will I merit the World to Come" he was answered "Did you perform an action [that's worthy]," meaning did you perform one mitzvah properly. To this Rabbi Chanina responded that he performed the mitzvah of tzedaka out of total altruism and through that, he merited the World to Come.

Rambam, Commentary on the Mishna to Makkos 23b

For someone to earn a true portion in *Olam Haba*, he has to do a mitzvah with his whole heart, with pure *kavana*, absent of any ulterior motives other than for the sake of love of Hashem. Therefore, Rabbi Chananya states that Hashem gave many mitzvos so

that everyone can find at least one mitzvah to which he can connect and perform wholeheartedly. As proof to his interpretation of Rabbi Chananya's statement, Rambam cites our Gemara in *Avoda Zara*. Accordingly, the Gemara means that when Rabbi Chanina convened large crowds to teach Torah, there was potential for an element of pride and honor to act as a motivator. However, Rabbi Chanina's simple act of tzedaka, done privately with no fanfare, was clearly a pure mitzvah done with perfect intention and therefore worthy of a true portion in *Olam Haba*. [See Rav Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav Me'Eliyahu*, Vol. III pp 107-109 for a full discussion of this Gemara and Rambam.]

With this comment of Rambam, we now have a clearer picture of what constitutes an *Olam Haba* moment. The size of the challenge or difficulty of the mitzvah is less significant than the *kavana*, intention, that goes into overcoming the challenge or performance of the mitzvah. In our lives, we are presented with many mitzvos and many little moments. If only we could overcome our natural instinct and desire to be self-serving, to make excuses, to rationalize, and instead, seize the moment, rise above our ego-centered tendencies, and do what is right, for Hashem's sake, then we will have truly actualized ourselves and attained a share in *Olam Haba*.

With this approach to mitzvos, we may understand a perplexing comment of Rashi in *Parshas Emor*.

The verse reads:

וּבְקַצְרְכֶם אֶת־קִצִיר אֲרֻצְכֶם לֹא־תִכְלֶה פֶּאת שְׂדֵךְ בְּקַצְרֶךָ וְלִקַּט קִצִירָה לֹא תִלְקַט לְעֵנִי וְלִגֵּר תִּעֲזֹב אֹתָם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:
אמור כג:כב

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not remove completely the corner

of your field as you reap and you shall not gather the gleanings of your harvest; for the poor and the proselyte shall you leave them; I am Hashem your God.

Emor 23:22

This verse is seemingly out of place. It interrupts the Torah's narrative of the holidays and resides between descriptions of Shavuot and Rosh Hashana.

Rashi on that verse comments:

אמר רבי אבדימי ברבי יוסף מה ראה הכתוב ליתנה באמצע הרגלים, פסח ועצרת מכאן וראש השנה ויום הכפורים והחג מכאן, ללמדך שכל הנותן לקט שכחה ופאה לעני כראוי, מעלין עליו כאילו בנה בית המקדש והקריב קרבנותיו בתוכו.

Rabbi Avdimi ben Rabbi Yosef says: "What did the verse see to put these commandments among the festivals, Pesach and Shavuot on one side and Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Succos on the other side?" To teach you that whoever gives gleanings, forgotten produce, and the corner (portions of the field left for the poor) to a poor person properly is considered as if he built the Beis HaMikdash and brought his offerings inside it.

What does the mitzvah of tzedaka have to do with building the Beis HaMikdash and bringing korbanos? Perhaps we can suggest that whomever sincerely (hence the emphasis in Rashi on the word *properly*) performs an ostensibly minor act of giving tzedaka, in actuality has done something with the same import as two grand mitzvos, that of building the Beis HaMikdash and bringing korbanos. Furthermore, just like the building

of the Beis HaMikdash and bringing korbanos obviously has to be done *l'sheim Shamayim*, for the sake of heaven, otherwise the entire endeavor is undermined, so too any small act done *l'sheim Shamayim*, has big spiritual ramifications.

The message of recognizing that daily challenges, when properly navigated *l'sheim Shamayim*, are true *Olam Haba* moments, is no more evident in the Torah than during the holiday of Shavuot. No mention is made in the Torah that Shavuot is a celebration of receiving the Torah (See *Klei Yakar*, VaYikra 23:16). And yet we know from tradition that Shavuot is characterized as *zman matan Toraseinu*. Perhaps the Torah doesn't describe Shavuot as the day of *matan Torah* because the Torah does not want us to overly focus on the overtly awesome spiritual moments in life. The giving of the Torah at Har Sinai was a singular experience. The Jewish people were completely united; they heard G-d speak directly to them, and for a short period of time were elevated to the status that mankind once held before the sin of Adam Harishon (see Gemara, *Shabbos* 146a). However, that awesome moment of *Matan Torah* is not representative of our daily lives. Yes, we all aspire to and hopefully experience moments of spiritual highs and feelings of greatness, but the message to us is that we must not evaluate our spiritual successes based solely on those moments. We do not celebrate just one day as *matan Torah*. Every day should be a *matan Torah* day. Every day represents

opportunities for growth, for newness, for spiritual accomplishments.

With this in mind, we should be forever alert to opportunities for spiritual growth. We are not required to give up our lives or to change the world for that *Olam Haba* moment. Indeed we should live our lives, with every moment fully experienced and evaluated.

Just this past Pesach, my wife spent tremendous time and effort making a wonderfully scrumptious dish whose difficulty was compounded by not having her usual chametz kitchenware with which to work. Unfortunately, as mishaps are wont to happen, on the second day of Pesach when we had 23 mouths to feed, the entire dish slid off the stove and landed upside down on the floor, smashed and ruined. No doubt my wife's gut reaction could have been to be upset, annoyed, and angry, you name it. Just imagine yourself in that situation. But instead, she overcame that emotional reaction and expressed gratitude that no one got hurt, *gam zu letova*. She consciously decided that she had an opportunity at that moment to continue to experience the mitzvah of simchas Yom Tov and not let her mood be marred by this setback, and she moved on. We proceeded to have a lovely meal filled with ruach and simcha, just the way Hashem had wanted it. That was an *Olam Haba* moment for our family: so simple and thus easily overlooked, and yet so monumental. May we all merit to be mindful, to seize all the moments in our lives, to act *l'sheim Shamayim*, and turn our challenges, big and small, into *Olam Haba* moments.

