

# Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



*The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital*

**Parashat Va'etchanan**

**August 20, 2016**

**פרשת ואתחנן**

**ט"ז באב תשע"ו**

Torah Reading: *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 3:23-7:11

In this *parasha*, Moshe stresses to the Bnei Yisrael the importance of keeping Hashem's commandments when they enter the land of Israel; Moshe repeats the *Aseret HaDibrot* (Ten Commandments) and utters the *Sh'ma* and *V'ahavta* passages.

Two poignant stories – one from the ancient world and one from the last century – revolve around the recitation of the *Sh'ma* prayer.

The Babylonian Talmud in *Masechet* [Tractate] *Berachot* 61b relates the following:

Our Rabbis taught: Once the wicked Government [the Romans, during the era of the Hadrian persecutions in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE] issued a decree forbidding the Jews to study and practice the Torah. Papus ben Judah came and found Rabbi Akiva publicly bringing gatherings together and occupying himself with the Torah. He said to him: Akiva, are you not afraid of the Government?

He replied: I will explain to you with a parable. A fox was once walking alongside of a river, and he saw fishes going in swarms from one place to another. He said to them: From what are you fleeing? They replied: From the nets cast for us by men. He said to them: Would you like to come up on to the dry land so that you and I can live together in the way that my ancestors lived with your ancestors? They replied: Are you the one that they call the cleverest of animals? You are not clever

but foolish. If we are afraid in the element in which we live, how much more in the element in which we would die!

So it is with us. If such is our condition when we sit and study the Torah, of which it is written, “For that is your life and the length of your days,” if we go and neglect it, how much worse off we shall be! It is related that soon afterwards Rabbi Akiva was arrested and thrown into prison, and Papus ben Judah was also arrested and imprisoned next to him. He said to him: Papus, who brought you here? He replied: Happy are you, Rabbi Akiva, that you have been seized for busying yourself with the Torah! Alas for Papus who has been seized for busying himself with idle things!

When Rabbi Akiva was taken out for execution, it was the hour for the recital of the *Sh’ma*, and while they tortured him, he was accepting upon himself the sovereignty of heaven [by reciting the *Sh’ma* prayer]. His disciples said to him: Our teacher, even to this point? He said to them: All my days I have been troubled by this verse [from the *Sh’ma*], ‘with all your soul,’ [which I interpret to mean] ‘even if Hashem takes your soul.’ I said: When shall I have the opportunity of fulfilling this? Now that I have the opportunity, shall I not fulfill it? He prolonged the word *echad* [one] until he died while saying it. A *bat kol* [heavenly voice] went forth and proclaimed: Happy are you, Akiva, that your soul has departed with the word *echad*! The ministering angels said before the Holy One: Such Torah, and such a reward? [He should have been] from them that die by Your hand, Hashem? He replied to them: Their portion is in life. A *bat kol* went forth and proclaimed, Happy are you, Rabbi Akiva, that you are destined for the life of the world to come.

The second story involves Rabbi Eliezer Silver, who was sent to Europe in 1945 to help reclaim Jewish children who had been hidden with non-Jewish families during the Holocaust. How was he able to discover who were actually Jewish children? He would go to gatherings of children and loudly call out the words “*Sh’ma Yisrael A-donai E-loheinu A-donai Echad* – Hear, Yisrael, Hashem is our God, Hashem is One.” Then he would look at the faces of the children searching for those with tears in their eyes or openly crying. Those were the children whose distant memory of being Jewish was of their parents putting them to bed each night and saying the *Sh’ma* with them. And those were the children whom Rabbi Silver brought back to the Jewish world.

The twice-daily proclamation of *Sh'ma* is one that many Jews recite or hear recited to them from the day of their birth until the very day of their death. It is our way of proclaiming our allegiance, through thick and thin, to the One True Ruler of the universe.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- What lessons can we learn from each of the stories above?
- Why did Papus say to Rabbi Akiva, “Happy are you, Rabbi Akiva, that you have been seized for busying yourself with the Torah! Alas for Papus who has been seized for busying himself with idle things!” What did he mean by this?
- What is your earliest memory? Why do you think this memory became the first one firmly planted in your mind?