

Rav Kook Torah



by Rabbi Chanan Morrison -
www.ravkooktorah.com

Rabbi Abba Arrives in Babylonia

Summary: Rav experienced the paradox of being the vehicle for the Torah's exile from the Land of Israel, even as that departure caused him great pain.

Babylonia did not become the center of world Jewry overnight. But a defining moment in the gradual relocation of Jewish leadership from Eretz Yisrael to Babylonia may be pinpointed to a particular event: the arrival of Rabbi Abba Aricha on the shores of Babylonia in 219CE.

Rabbi Abba was the preeminent scholar of his generation. He was known to all by the simple appellation "Rav" – the Rabbi. With Rav's arrival and the establishment of his famed yeshiva in Sura, Babylonia emerged as the true center of Torah scholarship (see Gittin 6a, Ketubot 111a).

The Talmud in Shabbat 108a offers an intriguing account of this historic event. The great Babylonia scholar, Shmuel of Nehardea, and his student Karna were sitting by the banks of the Malka River. Suddenly they saw the river waters rising and becoming muddied. Shmuel told his student

Karna: "A great man has arrived from the West [the Land of Israel]. He has a stomach ailment and the waters are rising in his honor. Go and 'test his wine'."

Karna then greeted Rav and presented him with three questions:

How do we know that Tefillin may only be written on parchment taken from a ritually-pure animal?

How do we know that blood is red?

How do we know which part of the body should be circumcised?

Rav successfully passed this unusual test. He then gave Karna a caustic "blessing": "May a horn (karna) sprout from your eye."

What is the meaning of this bizarre exchange?

Uplifting, Yet Murky

The waters in Babylonia did not rise just in Rav's honor. This phenomenon was a sign of Babylonia's rising fortunes and its emergence as the leading center of Torah learning.

At the same time, the waters were murky – a sign that this pivotal event was a source of profound sadness to the Jewish people. The scholar's move to Babylonia was yet another indication of the decline of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel. Rav's physical illness mirrored his inner pain and distress at the

necessity to further deepen the exile of the Jewish people.

What was the meaning of the peculiar test that the Babylonian scholars set for Rav?

They realized that Rav was pained by the exile of Torah from Eretz Yisrael. And yet Rav was the very vehicle by which this was taking place! Rav's life was the fulfillment of this great, yet bitter vision, a historic event both uplifting and disturbing, containing elements of national aspiration and collective suffering. Only a great soul could unite such terrible contradictions. Therefore Shmuel commanded his disciple: Go test this scholar.

Three Questions

All three of Karna's questions hinted at the centrality of the Land of Israel for the Jewish people. It is interesting to note that it is precisely in the Talmudic sayings of the Babylonian scholars that we find statements praising the sanctity of the Land of Israel and the importance of living there. The ideology of the Babylonian rabbis was to negate and belittle the Diaspora, despite whatever advantages, material or spiritual, it held.

The first question posed to the scholar forced to leave Eretz Yisrael was like a stab to the heart. How do we know that Tefillin may only be written on parchment from a kosher animal? Parchment from other

animals may be just as suitable for writing; but the holiness of the Tefillin cannot bind with impure material. So too, the holiness of the Torah cannot properly rest in a Jewish community residing in an impure land. Perhaps some great need forced Rav to leave Israel, but there should be no doubt as to the Holy Land's spiritual advantage over the impure land of exile.

What about Karna's second question – from where do we know that blood is red? This question was meant to evaluate Rav's love and dedication to the Land of Israel. Besides the Land's spiritual qualities and intrinsic holiness, one must also consider the nation's devotion to its homeland. These are ties of blood, built up over generations of self-sacrifice, as the nation defended the land against enemies attempting to steal it. Blood is a metaphor of our natural connection to the land – deep, national ties which cannot be broken by deliberate calculations and rationalizations.

Connected to the Physical

Karna's final question dealt with the mitzva of Brit Mila. We find that the Torah speaks of removing the ORLA of the heart (D'varim 10:16) and the ORLA of the ears (Yirmiyahu 6:10). So where should circumcision be performed?

Rav replied that the Torah refers to the fruit of a tree's first three years

as ORLA (Vayikra 19:23). Just as that ORLA refers to that which produces fruit, so, too, circumcision is performed in a place that produces fruit.

This question also concerns our ties to the Land of Israel. One might think that Brit Mila is a spiritual undertaking, such as removing the heart's ORLA to deepen one's ethical sensitivity, or removing the ear's ORLA so it can hear and absorb elevated messages.

True spiritual growth, however, requires a foundation of Brit Mila in the physical flesh, influencing future generations – “in a place producing fruit”.

So too, the special aspirations of the Jewish people are not only in the spheres of the abstract and metaphysical. They must be based on the physical realm – the Land of Israel. Our foundations of holiness must be connected to the material, just as the soul can only function in this world while bound to a physical body. Only after the Brit is established in the physical realm is it possible to overcome other types of spiritual impediments, as we remove the ORLA from our hearts and ears.

With regard to the heart and the ear, the Torah uses the word ORLA. But regarding trees, the Torah uses the same exact phrase as it uses with circumcision – ORLATO – “its ORLA”.

This, Rav explained, is the full expression of ORLA, referring to one's most basic level of obstruction to the spiritual and the holy.

Two Types of Keren

At the end of this test, Rav had a sharp retort for his interviewer. ‘Your name is Karna? Then may a horn (karna) sprout from your eye.’ What did Rav mean by this?

The Hebrew word KEREN has two meanings. It may refer to a ray of light; or it may refer to the horn of an animal. Thus a KEREN can enable the eye to see, or conversely, it can blind it.

Rav rejected Karna's implied criticism that, by leaving the Land of Israel, he was weakening the connection of the Jewish people to their Land. His true intention was to enlighten the Jews living in exile and elevate them with the Torah's holiness. Then they would be worthy of returning to the Land of their fathers, to build it and be built through it with dignity and holiness.

By way of analogy, Rav noted that while a KEREN should be a source of light, it can also be a sharp horn, blinding instead of enlightening. So too, our love for the Land of Israel should be a source of inspiration and holiness. However, this love can be debased into greed for material gain and physical pleasure. Exile was necessary in order to elevate the

nation's love for the land to a noble holiness. Then they will be ready for their national redemption, to leave the land of darkness to the place of light.

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