Minds and Stones

IS ANYONE POORER THAN ME?

Rachel, the daughter of Kalba Sabua, married Aqiba, one of her father's herdsmen, because she saw in him an enormous intellectual potential, and since he committed himself to study Tora. At first, the couple suffered from extreme poverty: they had to sleep outdoors and covered themselves with straw to protect themselves from the cold. The Sages tell us that to comfort Ribbi Aqiba, HaShem sent them a visitor (Eliyahu haNabi). A very poor individual who said to Rabbi Aqiba: "Sir, I need help. My wife just gave birth and she needs straws to make the baby comfortable. Can you please give me some straw?". Aqiba immediately gave him the straw and told his wife. "You see my dear Rachel: our situation is not so desperate, at least we have plenty of straw to cover ourselves."

NO ADULTS ALLOWED….

After a short time, Rachel told Rabbi Aqiba, "It's time for you to start learning Tora." True to his commitment Rabbi Aqiba headed to the Talmud Torah to learn the first Hebrew letters: the "aleph, bet" (hence the word: "alphabet"). But he ran into a problem he hadn't foreseen: at his age, 40 years old, he was sharing the class with 5 and 6-year-olds kids. The children teased him, laughed at him, and said, "What is an old man like you doing here?" Rabbi Aqiba was so embarrassed that he ran away from the class. When he arrived home, disconsolate, he told his dear wife that the children made fun of him and he begged her not to insist on going to the Talmud Tora again. It seemed that the project of educating this "potential genius" had come to an end before it began…

THE WISDOM OF RACHEL

The Midrash haGadol recounts that Rachel, with her great wisdom, said to her husband, “Okay. Don’t go to the Talmud Tora tomorrow. But I have a task for you.” Very relieved, Ribbi Aqiba told her that she could ask him to do anything except going to school. Rachel borrowed a donkey from one of her neighbors and decorated it, putting a little mud and flowers on the animal’s back: a donkey with flowers was a rarity, something never seen before. The next morning, Rachel asked her husband to take the donkey for a ride through the market, where there were dozens of people. Rabbi Aqiba accepted and took the donkey for a ride. When he arrived at the market, people saw the donkey and laughed: “Look! A donkey with flowers! Haha!” The next day Rachel asked him to take the donkey to the market again. And this time, only half the people made fun of the donkey. The next day, Rachel asked her husband to go out a third and last time. This time, when Aqiba arrived at the market, no one was surprised. In fact, the donkey with flowers was old news.…

When Ribbi Aqiba told his wife what happened, she told him: “You see, my dear husband, when something unusual happens –adults and children and adults alike–, respond with laughter and mockery. But after a few days, the new situation is normalized, people get used to it and no one makes fun of it anymore. And so it will be with you. The children who make fun of you will get used to seeing you as just another student tomorrow and the day after.” Rachel’s experiment worked. Her words convinced Rabbi Aqiba and the next day he returned to the Talmud Tora.

MENTAL BLOCK

But the learning difficulties were not over. As much as he wanted to memorize the letters of the alphabet, or the biblical verses that the teacher was teaching he couldn’t focus or retain anything in his memory. Rabbi Aqiba thought that perhaps his wife had made a tragic mistake, leaving everything behind, believing that he is a genius… Perhaps he

wasn’t smart at all… With great embarrassment, he approached her dear wife and told her what was happening: that no matter how hard he tried, he was not able to learn anything. The Tora did not enter his mind! Rachel did not give up. She knew her husband was a genius, and that it was only a matter of time until his full potential was realized. And she was not wrong.

THE MAGIC MOMENT

One day Ribbi Aqiba entered a cave and on the top of the cave saw a stalactite that was dripping non-stop. The drops of water fell on a stone, and the water, over time, pierced the stone. This vision was a revelation: “If water, that is so soft and delicate, can penetrate the hard stone, there is no reason why the Tora should not penetrate my mind”. The water piercing the stone became the moment of change in the life of Rabbi Aqiba. Suddenly, he felt liberated from his fears and from his insecurities. His mind opened up and the mental block was somehow removed! And once this happened, Rabbi Aquiba’s genius was awakened, and he began to absorb the Tora at an unusual, incredible speed. In a short period of time, as Rachel had foreseen, he learned and memorized the entire written Tora and the Tanakh. And in record time he graduated and entered the Academy of Higher Education in Lod, where he met his first great teacher: Ribbí Eliezer haGadol.