

Hashem said... “I have seen this people, and behold! It is a stiff-necked people.” (9:13)

Stiff-necked, otherwise known as stubbornness, obstinacy, is usually incompatible with uprightness and righteousness, because a stubborn person makes up his mind and sticks to it – even if his conduct is less than desirable. He has made up his mind, and he will stick to his guns. Hashem informs Moshe that the nation’s stubbornness is not conducive to their spiritual growth. He will send an angel to lead them. Hashem wants no part of an obstinate people. If we look back to the original redaction of the sin in *Parashas Ki Sisa* (*Shemos* 34:9), however, Moshe beseeches Hashem, *Yeileich na Hashem b’kirbeinu, ki am k’shei oref hu*, “Let my Lord go among us – for it is a stiff-necked people.” It appears that Hashem just related to Moshe that He is transferring the reins to an angel, because the nation is stiff-necked. Moshe counters, petitioning Hashem to reconsider because, after all, they are a stiff-necked people. How could the reason for separation be the same as the reason for inclusion?

Horav Meir Rubman, zl, explains that it all depends on what function, what role, a trait plays. For example, a Jew wears a *kippah/yarmulke* to remind him that Hashem’s Presence is above him at all times: he wears eyeglasses to see; he has shoes in which to walk; he has gloves to keep his hands warm, etc. If, however, he were to put his shoes on his hands, his gloves on his feet, his glasses on top of his head – obviously, he would suffer serious issues resulting from this change.

Likewise, with regard to character traits, one must know when and how to use them. When *Am Yisrael* is stubborn against Hashem, when they refuse to listen to Him, they are using the trait of stubbornness irrationally. One does not disagree with G-d, unless he has become unhinged. On the other hand, it has been our stubborn commitment to Judaism that has kept us resolute and maintained our fortitude to stave off all those who would do us harm – physically and spiritually. We are the only nation that has been plundered, beaten, afflicted, oppressed, murdered by the millions; and, yet, we stand here today stronger than ever. All this is due to our stubbornness. Two thousand years of miserable exile, and we are stronger than ever.

This is why we never give up. We stubbornly live with hope. One of the most tragic murders that shook up the world in general – and the Jewish community in particular – occurred in 2012 in France, when an Arab terrorist, bent on murdering Jewish children, succeeded in murdering Rabbi Yonasan Sandler, his two sons and a young girl. The bodies were immediately flown to *Eretz Yisrael* for *keverah*, burial. One week later, a memorial service was held in Bayit V’Gan, attended by dignitaries and as many Jews as could fit into the area. The speakers, who spoke in French, were Rabbi Sandler’s father, father-in-law and *Rosh Yeshivah*, *Horav* Michael Toledano. They reiterated the *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice, of the deceased, how he went out of his way to reach out to Jewish children of all walks of life. The last speaker spoke of the incredible reward in store for those who perish *Al Kiddush Hashem*.

The service had ended, and a noise was heard from the rear of the room when an elderly, distinguished looking gentleman asked to address the assembled. He was the Ambassador of Cameroon and also the senior ambassador of all foreign services. He was not on the roster of speakers, but he felt that he had a message to convey to the crowd of mourners. This is a synopsis of his brief speech.

“The entire ride from Tel Aviv to Bayit V’Gan, I conjectured to myself that the speeches would be hate-filled, with a cry for revenge and continued bloodshed. Behold, I entered a room filled with 400 people – everyone calm, no screams, no clenched fists, no visible signs of bitter animus against the perpetrator and his supporters; nothing at all about the tragedy that had occurred. It is as if the act of wanton murder committed by a murderous terrorist did not happen. All of the eulogies focused on the positive character traits of the deceased, about his commitment to the Jewish People, to G-d, to the future. No one mentioned the past.

“I asked myself: ‘What is the Jew’s secret? How do they continue on, wipe themselves off and move on to the next day, the next project?’ The reason I think is that the Jewish People do not focus on the past. You always look toward the future. This is why you never give up hope. You always have a tomorrow to work for, to look forward to. This is your secret. This is why I envy you.”

Horav Yigael Braun, Shlita (who related this story) explains that this principle has precedent in the actions of two of our greatest *Tanaaim*: Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai and Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Yochanan was secretly taken out of Yerushalayim to meet with Vespasian, the general in command of the Roman Army who held Yerushalayim under siege. The general said to the sage, “Ask what you want, and it will be granted. Rabbi Yochanan asked for Yavne, the *yeshivah* and its scholars, *Rabban Gamliel’s* family, and physicians to heal Rabbi Tzadok. Why did he ask for these things?

Yerushalayim had sunk to its lowest ebb. Hunger was rampant. The most delicate women sustained themselves with the flesh of their children (one of the curses of the Rebuke). The people had given up hope. They had nothing to which to look forward. Judaism had reached its end. Rabbi Yochanan knew that he must imbue the people with a ray of hope. There would be many tomorrows. *Klal Yisrael* can and will survive, thrive and continue to grow. *Horav Braun* stressed that we need our scholars, our spiritual leadership to guide us out of the muck, to lead us to a brighter future. What happened – happened. We do not look back. We look forward with renewed hope.

Rabbi Akiva lost 24,000 students, scholars without peer. It was a national tragedy. What would a lesser person do? He would break down and give up. He would conjecture, “Hashem does not want my Torah. He took away all of my students. I am a failure. I hereby will stop learning and teaching Torah.”

Not Rabbi Akiva. He shook himself off, travelled to the south and found five new students with whom he began studying once again. Our Torah learning that we have had throughout the

millennia is derived from those five students. Had Rabbi Akiva “thrown in the towel,” we would today have nothing. Rabbi Akiva taught us that a Jew does not give up – never – ever.

The *Ponovezher Rav*, *Horav* Eliezer Yehudah Finkel, did not give up. *Horav* Eliyahu Meir Bloch, *Horav* Chaim Mordechai Katz, *Horav* Aharon Kotler and many, many others did not give up. We are their fortunate beneficiaries. We, too, may not give up. That is our legacy.