

One of My Last Conversations with Sender Epstein

By: AVRAHAM NESANEL ZUCKER

Introduction

It is hard to believe that Reb Sender is no longer with us. His loss is felt by me, and I am sure by many in the community. Reb Sender was someone who was an *ish esbkolos*, an *ish shekulo bo*. He was a unique blend, a professor of computer and decision sciences and a phenomenal *talmid chacham*. He was a brilliant mathematician, a gifted orator, and a sought-after lecturer at Seton Hall University. He had the unique blend of being down-to-earth, with a mind that reached great heights.

While he had a great mathematical mind and was tremendously cerebral, he was equally emotional, in touch with his feelings. Sender despised *machlokes*. He was an *obeiv es habrios u'mekarvan laTorah*. He had close relationships with the biggest *talmidei chachamim* and with the simplest people.

On the community level, he was a mainstay in his shul, Rabbi Rottenberg's shul, Bais Moshe Shmiel Kozeva, where he was the "go-to" person. If there was a discussion, an argument about anything—they went to Sender. If people had complaints, they went to Sender. If people needed advice, they went to Sender. If people just wanted to talk, they went to Sender.

But that was just his base of operations. He affected so much more than his local sphere. It branched out, far beyond the walls of the *beis midrash* in which he learned. On a personal level—on the level of my institution, Yeshiva Ohr Yisrael, we collaborated initially in 2003 to start an MBA program which at the time was a trailblazing initiative. The internet, as a mode of teaching, was not then common. For industry, perhaps, but not much in education. Sender developed it.

We had meetings in the yeshivah with the dean of students, with the dean of the Stillman School of Business. We were checking out the T1 line communications. He brought his daughter, Tova, to check how the communications were working.

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He built that program into something of note. It was an interactive teleconferencing program where the students could obtain a degree without having to travel, without having to deal with the deleterious influences on a college campus. That was our initial collaboration.

We became close friends. He helped the yeshivah gain AARTS accreditation. He was part of the hierarchy—I am not sure exactly what he was in AARTS, but he was very, very involved. He was a trusted confidant of Dr. Bernie Fryshman, its executive director. There were issues—I would not say major issues, but there were issues in gaining accreditation from AARTS. Sender was there to help us. It was a long, arduous process and he was there throughout. He was indispensable.

Sender took great pride in his many accomplishments, including being an editor of *Hakirah*.

His passing is a tremendous loss on a personal level. I considered him one of my closest friends, although he was probably 20 years my senior. He was someone I went to for advice, and we developed a very close bond. The loss is still raw. Not a day goes by—and sometimes multiple times within the same day—without my seeing something in Torah, something in the news, something in the world, something in the yeshivah, something personal—and thinking, *I have to call Sender*. And then I realize he is no longer here.

Although Sender had so much on his plate, he had time for everybody, AND he had time for his family. He was a wonderful husband to his *almanah*, Janey, for whom I am sure the loss is greatest. He was a wonderful father to Michoel, who was in our yeshivah for a while, always helping him in his quest to become a physician, and to his wife, Meitar. He was a wonderful father to Tova and Izzie and he was proud of their accomplishments. He was an all-around superb human being: a family man, successful, accomplished, and loved by all.

He was a real *talmid chacham*. He was a *musblam*, a complete person. His loss is great. The memories of him leave an indelible impression. *Yehi zichro baruch*.

One of Our Last Discussions

The following is one of my last discussions with Reb Sender, *zichrono livrachab*. The discussion centered on current events and the winds of wokeism in the world. It seems to me that wokeism and all its manifestations are an attack on truth in the world. Indeed, the Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 97a) says, “*Tanya Rabbi Yebudah omer, dor sheben David ba bo,*” the generation when ben-David (*Mashiach*) comes, “*V’ha’emes ne’ederes, shene’emar,*” a *pasuk* in *Yeshayah*, “*vatehi ha’emes ne’ederes.*” Truth will be very hard to find. The Gemara says, “*adarim adarim v’boleches lah,*” it is as if sheep are walking away; the truth is just walking away from the people.

It is a curious thing. Where does this come from? How could it be that a candidate for Supreme Court Justice could not or would not answer the question, “What is a woman?” How could it be that the reality and the stark difference between a man and a woman is questioned? How could it be that transgenderism is something that is becoming normal, or there is an attempt at normalizing it? How could it be that mutilation of children takes place without their parents’ consent, because they feel a certain way? How could it be that marriage, clearly a biblical concept of a bond between man and woman (see Rambam, *Hilchos Ishus*, chap. 1), has been distorted to define clearly prohibited abominable relationships?

How could it be that seeming bald-faced lies are reported, discussed as viable opinions, viable realities? There is clearly an attack on truth. Regarding the most barbaric attack on Jews since the Holocaust, on October 7, it could not be clearer who the aggressor—the guilty party—was, and who the victim was. Yet college campuses all around the world and major city centers are teeming with protests and demonstrations for Hamas, for Palestinians, for the right to perpetrate a genocide on the Jewish population not only in Israel, but throughout the world.

How could it be that the world condemns the Jewish nation and the Israeli army, the IDF, of genocide and wanton murder of innocent “civilians” when the factual record, even according to Hamas statistics, shows that the kill rate between combatant and civilian is the lowest in urban warfare history? How could it be that the world accepts this *sheker*, this modern-day blood libel?

The first thing we can say is, perhaps this clearly indicates that we are the *dor sheben David ba*, based on that Gemara. Where does this come from?

Rambam, in *Moreh Nevuchim*, *Perek Beis* in *Chelek Alef*, speaks about a question that a *chacham* asked him. The question is, how could it be that Adam and Chavah did not know *tov* and *ra*, and they were commanded not to eat from the *Etz haDa’as Tov v’Ra*. They were without that *da’as*.

When they transgressed the one commandment that they had from *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, they gained *da'as*. They were now *yodei tov v'ra*. Would that not be in contradiction to the concept of *lo yebei chotei niskar*, the sinner should not profit. How can the original sin ultimately cause the sinner to gain?

Rambam answers this question with a response that is as poignant today as when he penned it, or perhaps even more poignant and obvious.

Rambam says that before the *cheit*, *Adam* was *sichli*.

וזה – כי השכל אשר השפיע הבורא על האדם – והוא שלמותו האחרון – הוא אשר הגיע ל'אדם' קודם מרותו; ובשבילו נאמר בו שהוא 'בצלם אלהים ובדמותו' ובגללו דבר אתו וצוה אותו כמו שאמר ויצו יי אלקים וכו'" – ולא תהיה הצוואה לבהמות.

ולא למי שאין לו שכל. ובשכל יבדיל האדם בין האמת והשקר; וזה היה נמצא בו על שלמותו ותמותו. אמנם המגונה והנאה – הוא במפורסמות לא במושכלות; כי לא יאמר; השמים כדוריים – נאה ולא הארץ שטוחה – מגונה אבל יאמר אמת ושקר. וכן בלשונו יאמר על הקושט ועל הבטל – 'אמת ושקר' ועל הנאה והמגונה – 'טוב ורע'; ובשכל ידע האדם ה'אמת' מן ה'שקר' וזה יהיה בענינים המושכלים כולם.

The main focus would be,

בה והגיעה לו השגת המפורסמות ונשקע בהתגנות ובהתנאות; ואז ידע שיעור מה שאבד לו ומה שהופשט ממנו ובאיזה ענין שב.

What Rambam is saying—loosely translated—is that before the *cheit* man's *ma'aleh* and the reason *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* commanded man and not animals is because man is an intellectual being. He is a cerebral being. When one is unemotional about things, about what is true and what is false, it is called *emes* and *sheker*. Then there is something called *tov v'ra*. Rambam uses the words *meguneh* and *na'eh*, something that is ugly or disgusting, as opposed to something that is nice and pretty, something that's beautiful. There is beauty and there is disgusting, that is *טוב ורע*.

Those things are not an intellectual grasp of what is being observed, of what is being described. Those are what is called *mefursamos*, not *sichlus*. *Mefursamos* is how I feel about something. Rambam is saying that not only did man not gain from his *cheit*, but rather man was thrown into confusion. The confusion between what is true and what is false and how he feels about those same things. That is the antithesis of *emes* and *sheker*. If man allows his feelings to cloud his view, if emotion is allowed to cloud the cerebral grasp of things, man has been diminished to his nadir. He is no longer a *muskal*. He is no longer the *ish sichli*, a cerebral being.

This is perhaps the great diminution of man. That is what Rambam is explaining. The truth is that the attack on *sheker* and *emes* is the attack on

Torah. I would like to discuss, perhaps, why this is so at the time when *ben David ba*. On a simple level we can understand that what is happening today is people's inability to accept absolute truth if it is an uncomfortable truth.

There is an *emes*. A person can have an X and Y combination or a double X; one is either a male or a female. But then there is something about how I feel. I feel, and if one allows one's feelings to dictate, one goes down a slippery slope. One can feel anything and deny the truth. Is there a greater oxymoron than my truth? That is such a stark reality. The original *cheit* is the source of this confusion that exists in this final *dor*, the *dor sheben David ba*.

The *siman* is quite clear and I would like to talk about it a little more relating to Torah. There is a very interesting Ramban tucked away in the *parashah* of "*vayavo Amalek*" where, in *Parashas Beshalach* (*Shemos* 17:9), Ramban does not understand why the war against Amalek has to be fought with *Moshe b'rosh hagivah* and *Yehoshua lematah* fighting the war. Not only that, but Moshe Rabbeinu has to stretch out his *matteh* above the battlefield. Why go through all these machinations to fight this war specifically, something we do not find in any subsequent war? Why did Moshe Rabbeinu need all of this to fight Amalek?

"*V'itachein*," says Ramban,

ויתכן שפחד משה פן יתגבר בחרבו מפני היותו עם נוחל החרב מברכת הזקן שאמר לו ועל חרבך תחיה (בראשית כז מ), כי המלחמה מן המשפחה הזאת היא הראשונה והאחרונה לישראל. כי עמלק מזרע עשו, וממנו באה אלינו המלחמה בראשית הגוים, ומזרעו של עשו היה לנו הגלות והחרבן האחרון כאשר יאמרו רבותינו שאנחנו היום בגלות אדום.

"והנה כל אשר עשו משה ויהושע עמהם, בראשונה יעשו אליה ומשיח בן יוסף עם זרעם, על כן התאמץ משה בדבר" Moshe had to do this because Amalek is a nation that is a *nochal bacheren*. Since Amalek descends from Eisav, who had the *berachah* of *al charbecha tichyeh*, Moshe was afraid that this *berachah* would be *chal*, that it would be able to be victorious over the seven *berachos* that Yitzchak conferred upon Yaakov. Although Yaakov got six more *berachos* than Eisav, Eisav received *al charbecha tichyeh*. Therefore, Moshe had to go through all these machinations to ensure that *Klal Yisrael* was victorious.

He says such an interesting thing. "וממנו באה אלינו המלחמה בראשית הגוים, ומזרעו של עשו היה לנו הגלות והחרבן האחרון". It is "*ki ... barishonah v'ha'acharonah leYisrael*," the first and the last. I want to understand why Ramban is telling us that it seems to be a causal relationship; "*Ki* — because," it is an explanation. Since it is the first war and it is going to be the last, Moshe had to wage the war in this fashion. Why is that a reason?

Ramban does not explain why if it is the first and the last that Moshe must wage the war in this fashion.

I would like to preface my words by saying a *teitch* on this Ramban. It does not speak to the last question I asked, but Rav Hutner, *zichrono livrachah*, said the following words:¹ Moshe Rabbeinu understood that Amalek is the *zera* of Eisav, and Eisav and Yaakov have the same *zechus Avos* of Avraham and Yitzchak. Since they come from the same lineage, *zechus Avos* is no longer sufficient for *Klal Yisrael* to emerge victorious. *Zechus avos* is a standoff. The battle had to be waged with something new, and the *lashon* he used was, *naier ta'alumos haleiv*. There had to be a new depth of heart, or a hidden aspect in the heart of *Klal Yisrael* to be able to wage war against Amalek. That is the *ta'alumos haleiv*, not of *av* and *ben*, which was not sufficient, but rather with Rav and *talmid*.

Therefore, Moshe Rabbeinu had to be the *rebbe* on top of the mountain, and the *talmid* on the bottom, waging the war. One can add, *milchamah ba'Amalek midor ledor*, the *milchamah* with Amalek is from *dor* to *dor*—the *dor* of *rebbe* to the *dor* of *talmid*. That is the way to fight against Amalek. But this does not explain why Ramban says, “*ki hamilchamah min hamishpachah hazos hi harishonah v'ba'acharonah leYisrael.*” Ramban says that this is reason why it needed a *ta'alumos haleiv*.

I would like to explain—this is something I discussed with Reb Sender—this in the following way. Amalek is called *reishis goyim Amalek*. Bilam calls them *reishis goyim Amalek v'achriso adei oved*. Amalek is called *reishis*. Ramban is certainly referencing that here, “*ki hamilchamah min hamishpachah hazos hi harishonah,*” the *reishis*. There is another nation that is called *reishis* and that is *Mitzrayim*. “*Reishis onim b'ohalei cham,*” the *pasuk* says in *Tehillim*.

Rav Hutner, *Pachad Yitzchak (Purim)*, discusses the difference between the *reishisim*, but I would like to posit the following. The world was thrown into a tailspin with the *cheit* of Adam Harishon, and Adam was no longer the center of the universe. The Gemara tells us, “*Atem keru'im adam v'lo umos ha'olam keru'im adam,*” man was no longer the center of the universe. *Klal Yisrael* was going to be the center of the universe.

Reishis, “*bereishis bara Elokim, bishvil Yisrael shenikere'u reishis.*” So we have *Klal Yisrael* as a *reishis*. *U'bishvil HaTorah shenikera reishis*, and the Torah is called *reishis*. *Klal Yisrael* is now—I am not going to get into *yedi'a* and *bechirah* and what was before the *cheit* and after the *cheit*—my point is that there is a shift, certainly chronologically, in the history of the world where the focus of the world became *Klal Yisrael* and they are called *reishis*. “*Beni bechori Yisrael,*” my firstborn.

¹ I do not know whether this is printed; I heard it on a recording.

There are two stages in the development of *Klal Yisrael*. Stage 1 is their birth as a nation, their birth as a people. Stage 2 is receiving the Torah, getting their mandate, receiving their mission, which itself is בשביל התורה שנקרא ראשית. There are two nations that tried to create a wedge, who tried to stop and kill the baby in its infancy—or actually before it was even born. The birth of *Klal Yisrael* is *Yetzi'as Mitzrayim*. *Reishis onim b'obalei cham*. The *Mitzri'im*, *Par'oh*, *Mitzrayim*, tried their hardest to stop the birth of *Klal Yisrael*. That is one *reishis*.

After *Klal Yisrael* is born, they are on the road, בדרך, to a rendezvous with destiny. The destiny of the Jewish people is to receive the Torah. As the Ran points out at the end of *Maseches Pesachim*, that when *Bnei Yisrael* left *Mitzrayim* they came to Moshe and they said, you told us, תעבדון את האלהים על ההר הזה. When will that be? Moshe said, in 50 days. *Bnei Yisrael* started counting *sefirah*. The first *sefirah* was before there was the mitzvah of *sefirah*. They started counting until 50, until they would receive the Torah.

On their way, *baderech*, it says Amalek came when *Klal Yisrael* was *baderech b'tzeitchem miMitzrayim*. They were on a *derech*, on the road to that date with destiny to receive the Torah. The Torah is the antidote to *yodei'a tov mi'ra* because the Torah is, in and of itself, absolute truth. It defines very clearly what is *emes* and what is *sheker*. Amalek comes and tries to drive a wedge and stop them. Better said, Amalek attempts to abort the emergence of absolute truth in the world. They come *baderech*, at the end of *Beshalach*, before *Yisro*, to stop *Klal Yisrael* from getting the Torah.

That is why they are *reishis goyim Amalek*. *Mitzrayim* is the *reishis* in trying to obstruct the birth, or to abort the birth, of *Klal Yisrael*. Then Amalek comes to try to abort *Klal Yisrael*, to obstruct *Klal Yisrael* from gaining its mission, from accepting its mission and its life's mission. *Emes* and *sheker*. Amalek comes as an attack against Torah.

Perhaps this is why Ramban says, “*ki hamilchamah min hamishpachah hazos hi barishonah*,” referencing *reishis goyim Amalek*. It is the first—the first battle against *Klal Yisrael* as a nation. *Mitzrayim* was before it was a nation. *Amalek* comes to drive a wedge between the birth of *Am hanivchar* and becoming the *Am* that has the Torah. Since he is the first, Ramban tells us, that is why there had to be the war waged by *rebbe* and *talmid*. That is how they won. Moshe understood that victory over Amalek had to be achieved by *rebbe* and *talmid*.

Perhaps that is the *p'shat* in Ramban; now we can return to our discussion. *Reishis* is the first, Ramban says, and also the last. The last battle is the battle against Torah, it is against the truth of Torah, the immutable moral compass that is Torah. It is the battle against truth, the

battle against facts. There is an expression in the world, “Facts do not care about your feelings.” But in the world today, woke-ism says that feelings cannot be confused by the facts.

This is the battle against absolute truth. This is what we are seeing, *reishis*, it is the first sin, it is the result of the first sin, and the *tikkun* on that sin is holding onto the Torah. Torah is under attack precisely because it is the absolute truth. Truth, by definition, cannot be relative. It is eternal and immutable. May we be *zocheh* to see when *emes* and *sheker* are very starkly recognized by the whole world. ❧