

LETTUCE, CUCUMBERS, AND RADISHES

The Torah tells us that when Rivka was pregnant with Yaakov and Esav, she was told: “Two nations [goyim] are in your womb.”

The Gemara in Avoda Zara interprets:

“Rav Yehuda says in the name of Rav: Do not read it as goyim, [nations]; rather read it as geyim, [proud ones]. This was fulfilled [in two prominent individuals who descended from Rivka], Antoninus and Rebbi Yehuda HaNasi, whose tables never lacked for lettuce, nor cucumbers, nor radish, neither in the summer nor in the rainy season, [due to their great wealth—despite the fact that these foods do not grow year round]. It was said: A radish breaks up food, lettuce stirs up food, and cucumbers expand the intestines...””

Taking this piece of Gemara at face value—this seems rather puzzling:

Was this the only way to describe the great wealth of these two individuals? We are talking about Rebbi Yehuda Hanasi, the leader of all the Jewish people of his time! And Antoninus, the emperor of Rome—the superpower of its day, who stood in command of a vast army. Is this really the greatest thing we can say about these two personalities?

More so, were Rebbi and Antoninus really the only two people in the world who had access to these foods throughout all four seasons? One would think that given the great health benefits of these foods described in the Gemara, many others managed to procure these things as well!

The answer is that these three vegetables tell the story behind the relationship of these two men.

Harav Levi Yizchok explains that Rebbi, who was a descendent of Yaakov Avinu, represents the world of *Tikkun* and Antoninus, a descendant of Eisav, represents the world of *Tohu*.

The Rebbe elaborates:



**A LOOK AT THE TORAH OF
HARAV LEVI YITZCHOK
THROUGH THE REBBE'S SICHOS**

Tohu is a world that received more light than it could handle, and thus its containers shattered. The world of *Tikkun* works with *Tohu* so that it can repair itself and eventually be able to handle the immense light.

For this reason, Rebbi was in constant contact with Antoninus and had a tremendous influence on his life, to the extent that after many years he chose to convert and become a Yid. This was a result of *Tikkun's* influence on *Tohu*.

Now we'll understand why these three foods are an important part of the relationship of these two men.

The three vegetables mentioned in the Gemara are symbolic of the three stages of the relationship between a teacher and his student; the process of *Tikkun* working with *Tohu*.

The first step is how the Rebbe/teacher decides that he wants to give over something or that he wants to work with a particular person. Turning his attention to this person is the first step towards making him into the student; acknowledging him and his needs.

However, this plan of working with the student is all in the mind of the teacher; the student is still unaware of it at this point. In order for the student to be receptive to the idea and agree to become a student, the teacher needs to present the idea properly.

This is where the “radish” comes in. Just like the radish that “breaks up” the food, the teacher must break up the idea into small pieces, presenting it bit-by-bit.

The next step is “lettuce”: Just like lettuce stirs the food, the teacher must “stir” the idea, turning it over and over. This is the process of turning around the teacher’s *approach*; instead of thinking about the idea in his own terms, he takes the vantage point of the student. While the teacher has the clarity of the entire idea in his mind, the student needs to first be exposed to the smaller parts, one bit at a time, until the entire idea is comprehensible.

The third step is the “cucumber”: Just like a cucumber expands the intestines, it is now the job of the teacher to work with the student, giving him the tools so that he is

properly prepared to handle the depth of the idea being taught.

This is the process of all of our *avoda* in this world:

It is our job to find and elevate all the sparks of *kedusha* that fell from *Tohu*, refining the physical world and revealing *Elokus*.

The task of influencing and refining the great Roman emperor is something only Rebbi could do, however, this does not exempt us from this type of work. We are all tasked with repairing the part of the world that we have influence over; in our sphere of influence we are all like Rebbi, and must do the work of *Tikkun* with the world. When there are things that seem extremely “distant” and “out of reach,” they are really powerful sparks of *kedusha* that have fallen so far. The higher the spark, the harder the fall. With the right approach and the correct effort, as elaborated above, we can reach and elevate even the most remote sparks of *kedusha* and ultimately perfect the entire world. **T**

(Adapted from *Sichas Shabbos Parshas Re'eh*, 5732)

1. Avoda Zara 11a.

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