**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas Vayigash 5771**

**Volume 2, Issue #14**

**Chassidic Story of the Week #680**

**The Tailor's Investment**

**From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles**

 Rabbi Yechezkel Shraga Halberstam of Shinova was standing in the train station when suddenly he heard the sound of someone crying. “Who is crying?” he asked Berel, the tailor, who was also waiting for the train.

 “It’s a little girl,” answered Berel.

 “Why is she crying?” the tzadik wondered.

 “I don't know,”said Berel. “I’ll go ask her.”

 After a few minutes he came back and said, “The little girl's purse is lost. She has no money to buy a ticket to get home.”

**The Tzadik’s Strange Look**

 The tzadik looked at him strangely. “Perhaps you can help her out, Berel,” he suggested. “One day it might stand you in good stead.”

 Berel paid for a train ticket for the girl with his money and gave it to her. She thanked him profusely as she wiped away her tears. Soon after that the train arrived and they both had to board. When they reached the station of his tailor shop, Berel got off.

 A short time later a general came into the shop and ordered new uniforms for all the soldiers under his command. Berel was very happy because the large job would ensure him a good income.

**Berel Made the Uniforms**

**Shorter than Usual**

 As soon as the general left, Berel set to work. He brought the material, measured it, and cut it. Then he sewed the pieces together to make uniforms. He made them shorter than the usual uniforms to save money and increase his profit. He hoped the general would not notice.

 But the general did notice. When he received the uniforms and saw that they were short, he became very angry and sent a squad of soldiers to arrest the Jewish tailor.

 Berel saw the soldiers coming. Frightened, he sneaked out through the back door, running as fast as his legs could carry him. The Shinover rav will surely help me, he thought desperately. I'll go to him.

**Runs Desperately to**

**The Home of His Rebbe**

 He ran and ran. Finally, he reached the home of the rebbe. “I am in terrible trouble,” Berel cried out. “Rebbe, please help me!”

 “What is it, my son?” the Shinover asked, concerned.

 Berel told the rebbe his whole story. The tzadik promptly advised him to go to Vienna and speak to the officer who was in charge of his case.

 Berel took the train to Vienna. It turned out to be difficult to find out who was the officer he needed to see and how and where to locate him. Finally he met someone who said he knew which official it was and where he lived, and would write down the information for him.

 But then, when the friendly man handed Berel the slip of paper with the name and address, he warned him, This officer is mean. And he does not like Jewish people. Berel was scared, but he knew he must follow the rebbe's instructions. He went to the officer's house and knocked on the door. The door opened.

**The Same Little Girl**

 A little girl stood there the same little girl who had cried at the train station. She ran inside excitedly calling, “Father! Father! Come quickly! It is the man who was nice to me when I lost my purse!”

 Berel was amazed. This is a miracle from G-d. he thought.

 The girl's father appeared. “So you are the man who saved my precious daughter,” the officer exclaimed, taking Berel's hand in his. “I have wanted to thank you all this time, but I did not know your name or where you lived. How can I ever thank you and show you my gratitude?”

 “I am in danger of being arrested and you are the officer in charge of my case,” Berel said. “You can help me by pardoning me for making the uniforms short.”

 “Of course I will pardon you,” the officer promised. “I always thought the old uniforms were too long, anyway. The soldiers used to trip on them when they ran. And I will make sure you are paid in full for the work, as well.”

 Berel left Vienna with a light heart and pockets full of money. Sitting on the train on the way home, Berel thought about how he had been saved because he had been kind to a little girl in need.

 Suddenly he remembered the odd look that the Shinover Rav had given him at the train station when he told him to help the little girl. The rebbe must have known from the beginning what was going to happen, thought Berel in wonder. And then later, when I was running away, he knew just where I should go. Praised be G-d. What a great rebbe I have!

 Source: Adapted from Why the Baal Shem Tov Laughed by Sterna Citron (Jason Aronson Inc.)

**112th Yahrzeit of the Shinover Rebbe**

 Connection: Seasonal 112th yahrzeit of the Shinover Rebbe. Rabbi Yechezkel Shraga Halberstam of Shinova, (1813- 5 Tevet 1899), was the eldest son of the Divrei Chaim, Rabbi Chaim Halberstam of Sanz. As an emissary of his father, he founded the Sanzer synagogue in Tzefat. He served as the rabbi of Shinova from 1855 till 1868, and then again from 1881 till his passing. Many of his Torah insights into Scripture, Law and Kabbalah are collected in Divrei Yechezkel.

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**RABBIS' MESSAGES**

**The Importance About**

**How We Talk to Others**

**By Rabbi Reuven Semah**

“*Then the spirit of their father Ya’akob was revived*.” (Beresheet 45:27)

 After discovering that Yosef was still alive, Yosef’s brothers began their journey to Canaan, where their father Ya’akob resided. They realized that if they would reveal the news too suddenly, it might be harmful to their father. As they approached him, Serah, the daughter of Asher, met them. She knew how to play the harp and they told her to play music to Ya’akob while revealing to him that Yosef was alive.

 Serah agreed and played her harp and informed him, in her pleasing voice, the wonderful news. She repeated it a number of times and Ya’akob began to feel joy in his heart. A Divine spirit came over him and he then knew that it was true. Then Ya’akob gave Serah a berachah that she should not experience death because she had caused his spirit to come alive. (Based on Midrash Sefer Hayashar.)

**The Way We Speak Can Actually**

**Give Life to Another Person**

 We can learn a very important lesson from this. Rabbi David Rosman explains that sometimes the way we speak or act can actually give life to another person. This is illustrated in a short true story told by Rabbi Hanoch Teller.

 Once, Jamie, a new ba’al teshubah, was at the local men’s mikveh on Ereb Yom Kippur. He still had a ponytail and earrings. He had a little problem; he had a number of tattoos on his biceps that he was trying to cover up with his hands. Suddenly Jamie slipped on the wet floor. He lunged for the railing to avoid a hard fall, revealing his biceps.

**The Intervention**

**Of an Elderly Men**

 Silence enveloped the room as the men saw what Jamie was trying to hide, and he was totally humiliated. Suddenly an elderly man approached Jamie and placed his hand on his shoulder. In heavy Yiddish-accented English, the elderly man said:

 “Look here my boy, I also have a tattoo” and he pointed to the row of numbers etched into his skin, “in case I should forget what those monsters [German Nazi concentration camp staff] had planned for me. It seems we’ve both come a long way.”

 With just one short sentence, this man restored life to a fellow Jew, and this is why Serah merited to live forever.

**The Incredible Value**

**Of Torah Study**

**By Rabbi Shmuel Choueka**

"*And Ya'akob saw the wagons that Yosef sent him*." (Beresheet 45:27)

 Rashi tells us that Yosef sent his father, Ya'akob, a sign that he still remembers the Torah that he was taught, and he reminded Ya'akob of the last subject they had learned together. When Ya'akob saw that, he knew that his son was truly alive in a spiritual sense, and he rejoiced! S

 Similarly, when Ya'akob sent his son, Yehudah, to Egypt before the whole family, he instructed him to establish a Torah academy so that they could study Torah in Egypt.

How Pivotal the Study of Torah

 Was to Our Forefathers

 We see from here how important the Torah was to our forefathers. Although we only read of their deeds and their character in the perashah, the Midrash is teaching us how pivotal the study of Torah was to them. They were engaged in it constantly, and this is what kept them alive.

 Ya'akob mourned very deeply for his son for twenty-two years, yet the only thing that kept him strong was Torah study. Yosef was in a very difficult position for many years in Egypt, spending twelve years in jail, yet his faith and trust never wavered because he was constantly reviewing the Torah he learned.

 This should be an inspiration for us to strengthen our Torah learning, especially when the going gets tough. The more we are connected to Hashem through Torah study, the more we can endure all of life's challenges.

**A Moment with Rabbi Avigdor Miller, Zt”l**

**Can Old Women in Nursing**

**Homes Watch Television?**

|  |
| --- |
| **QUESTION:** |

 Would watching television be permitted for old women in nursing homes who have no other interests?

|  |
| --- |
| **ANSWER:** |

|  |
| --- |
| Television |

And the answer is, old women in nursing homes, would it be right for them to drink poison if they have nothing else to do?

 You have to realize that drinking poison is much more beneficial than watching television, especially for old people.

**Still Hope for a Young Person**

 A young person who watches television ruins his mind, it ruins his Neshama, but still there’s some hope left, maybe before he dies he'll repent and maybe he'll learn a lot of Mesilas Yeshorim and erase from his mind part of what he listened to, what he saw.

 But old people just before they die, they have to purify themselves most, and when they pollute their minds in their last days, that's what they take with them to the Next World. They take all the Arayos, all the wickedness with them in the Next World. Not because they'll practice it, they’re too old to practice immorality, but they have it in their heads. Immorality in the head of an old man is the very worst thing.

**Taking All That Garbage with**

**Him to the Next World**

 Here's an old man, he can't go out in the street, you go to visit him in his house, he's sitting and looking at the television. Gevald! Gevald! His children are murdering him. He should say Tehillim in his last days, he should speak to Hashem in his last days, he should prepare himself. He's reading something that's dirty, or looking at dirty magazines, that the children brought up for the old folks to enjoy before they die. He's taking all that garbage with him in the Next World.

 Old people especially have to prepare, and that's why television for old women in the nursing homes, is the very worst thing you can do to them. *Good Shabbos To All.*

*Reprinted from this week’s email of “A Moment with Rabbi Avigdor Miller, Zt”l” that is based on a transcription of an answer by Rabbi Miller to a question from a member of the audience that attended his classic Thursday night hashkafah lectures at his Flatbush shul circa early 1970’s until his petirah in 2001.*

**Superheroes**

 Everybody wants to be a superhero. And why not? In a way it's a wonderful fantasy. To have the power to save lives, to help people in distress, to stop villains and evil-doers, simply and effectively.

 And how much fun it would be to be different, to have a super-power. Everyone has his or her favorite super-power. Super-strength. Super-speed. Super-senses: X-ray vision or super-hearing. Super-magnetism. Flight - soaring like a bird, but without wings.

**An Enhancement of Natural Traits**

 Not every superhero has a super-power, an enhancement of a natural trait (strong becomes super-strong) or some ability people don't normally possess (the ability to become invisible, to alter the mass of an object - making it heavier or lighter, to transform one's appearance like a chameleon). Some superheroes have a device - a mystical ring, a rod of power, that sort of thing.

 Other superheroes are "just" super-skilled. A martial arts expert to the nth degree. A brilliant detective who's also a superb athlete.

**Nice to Be a Superhero**

 Yes, it would be nice to be a superhero, to have a special power and help save the world.

 But in one sense we already are superheroes. All of us. We have a special power. More than one, actually. And when we use that super-power, we are literally helping hundreds and thousands and millions of people we’re also saving the world.

 Our super-powers are the mitzvot (commandments) we do. Every time we do a mitzva, we help save worlds. Literally. To paraphrase Maimonides, the world hangs in the balance, and the next good deed can tip the scales to the meritorious, bringing redemption not only to the individual, but to the whole world.

**The Effect of a Mitzva**

 Indeed, the effect of a mitzva reverberates through all the worlds and all the planes of existence, elevating them - and all of the creation within each world - to a higher awareness of G-dliness. It's a spiritual rescue.

 Each mitzva has the power - the super-power - to affect a different aspect of existence - the existence of the individual and the existence of worlds.

 Nor is the impact of a mitzva limited to the specific spiritual source, or even to the individual exercising his or her spiritual super power. Assistants and aides - sidekicks - get rescued along with you, the spiritual superhero. That is, anyone - Jew or non-Jew - who helps you do a mitzva, however indirect that help, is carried along. The grocer who sells you the kosher food; the delivery guy who brings the food to the grocer; the warehouse manager who assigns the shift to the delivery guy.

**The Power to Transform Ourselves**

 But if each of us emphasizes a particular mitzva - super-power - one that we do with extra effort - super-strength, we also all share one super-power, regardless. That's the power to transform selves into someone completely new. Through teshuva, repentance, we all have that transformative ability.

 So the next time you feel inspired by a superhero or dream about having a super-power and saving the world - remember you already are a superhero, you already have a super-power, and you do in fact save not just one world, but many worlds - every time you do a mitzva.

Reprinted from this week’s issue of “L’Chaim,” a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization in Brooklyn, NY.

As Heard from Rabbi Avigdor Miller, Zt”l

**Why Yosef Wept**

**By Sam Gindi**

“And he raised his voice in weeping”   (Bereishit 45:2)

 Why did Yosef weep?  His brothers did not weep.

 In the Midrash Raba it states: Just as Yosef wept, so also will we weep when we return to Hashem after the galut. He wept not out of remorse/teshuba but because of lost opportunity.  All the years he lost by not being in his father’s house and learning from Yaacob Abinu.

**A Lost Opportunity**

**That Cannot Be Made Up**

 When we lose an opportunity to learn Torah or perform mitzvot, it can never be made up.  Whereas, should a person commit a sin (which is terrible) there are prescribed remedies such as Teshuba and Yom Kippur or imposed ones such as affliction and Gehinom.

 The worst type of sin is a ‘chet’. The word ‘chet’ means ‘to miss’. As it states: “Each one could sling a stone and not miss - “velo yachate” (Shoftim 20:16). The sin of not accomplishing in this lifetime is the most terrible since one cannot make up for miztvot which they did not perform when they had the opportunity. The reward for doing a mitzvah is forever while the punishment for most sins is limited and they will be removed.

**Our Great Purpose in Life**

 Therefore, our great purpose in life is to thank Hashem for the opportunities He gives us by bestowing on us the gift of life each day.  To take full advantage by picking up the many diamonds/Mitzvot which are available only at this time. Each one is our ticket to unlimited and eternal reward and pleasure which Hashem has guaranteed.

 Yosef Hatzadeek, our great hero and model, had learned this fundamental principle from Yaacob while he was still in his home. For the past 22 years Yosef could not learn from his Great father. Therefore he ‘missed out’ eternally and hence he wept.

*Reprinted from this week’s email of “As Heard from Rabbi Avigdor Miller, Zt”l.”*

**It Once Happened**

**The Rebbe’s Grandson and**

**The Simple Innkeeper**

 Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad Chasidism, expected all members of his household to be sparing when it came to the way they spent money. "Since my household is supported by the public, and our Sages teach that the Torah looks askance at wasting Jewish money, it is only proper that we live frugally," he would explain.

 One time, when one of his grandchildren came to him wearing an expensive belt, Rabbi Shneur Zalman questioned him, "Are you such a rich man that you should be wearing such an expensive belt?"

**How Much Did You Receive as a Dowry?**

 The grandson was silent so Rabbi Shneur Zalman continued interrogating him concerning money matters. "Tell me, how much money did you receive as a dowry?

 "Two thousand rubles," answered the grandson.

 "What are your plans for the money?" questioned Rabbi Shneur Zalman.

 "I am planning on giving it to a successful merchant. In this way I will be able to earn something on it."

 "Perhaps," countered Rabbi Shneur Zalman, "he will neither return you your capital nor any interest?"

**Faith in the Abilities of the Merchant**

 "That is impossible," argued the grandson. "This merchant is very wealthy and reliable."

 "What difference does it make if he is wealthy now?" argued Rabbi Shneur Zalman. "The wheel of fortune turns. He could become poor."

 "What do you suggest I do with my money?" asked the grandson.

 "My advice to you is to put the entire sum into this box," said Rabbi Shneur Zalman, pointing to a charity box.

 The grandson was certain that the Rebbe was joking, though he didn't think his grandfather was one to joke about such things.

 "I really mean what I said. I suggest that you give the entire sum to charity. In this way, the 'capital' and the 'interest' will remain intact. I am afraid that if you invest with some wealthy merchant, you might lose both."

**Ignores the Advices of His Grandfather**

 The grandson heard what the Rebbe said and nevertheless, decided to invest his money with a merchant who was not only trustworthy and wealthy, but a scholar, too. Several months later, however, a fire destroyed everything the merchant owned and he was reduced to poverty.

 Later, when the Rebbe asked his grandson how his investment had fared, the young man related the catastrophe which had befallen the merchant.

 "Why didn't you listen to my advice and put the money in this charity box?" admonished the Rebbe. "Had you done that, then the capital and the interest would have remained intact. Why do my chasidim not trust the advice of their Rebbe? Let me tell you a story about the simple faith of the people of Volhynia."

**In the Bitter Cold of Winter**

 "Once, in the midst of the bitter cold of winter, I was on my way home from visiting my Rebbe, the Maggid of Mezritch. I was nearly frostbitten by the time we reached a Jewish inn.

 "'How long have you been living here?' I asked the elderly innkeeper.

 "'For nearly fifty years,' he answered me.

 "'And are there other Jews nearby? Do you have a minyan to pray with, people with whom to celebrate the holidays?'

 "'Only on the High Holidays do I go to a nearby village to pray together with a congregation.'

 "'Why don't you live in that village so that you can be together with other Jews?' I asked.

**A Question of Making a Living**

 "'How would I make a living?' he questioned me.

 "'If G-d can find a livelihood for a hundred families, don't you think He can do the same for one more?" I asked him.

 "I also mentioned to him that I am a disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch.

 "He left the room immediately. Not more than one half hour later, I saw a few wagons parked in front of the inn, loaded with all kinds of household items and furniture. I saw the innkeeper near the wagons and asked him, `What is going on here?'

 "'I am moving to the other town, as you told me,' he answered simply.

 "You see what strong faith that old man had in my Rebbe?" Rabbi Shneur Zalman challenged his grandson. "I only had to mention that I was a disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch and he dropped everything immediately, including his home and livelihood for fifty years. He was not even a Chasid. And you heard from me twice that you should place the money in the charity box and yet you did not listen.

Reprinted from this week’s issue of “L’Chaim,” a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization in Brooklyn, NY.

**Good Shabbos Everyone** .

**Shabbat Shalom Dave**

 In our weekly portion Vayigash, the Torah tells us that "All the people of the house of Yakov who came to Mitzraim - Egypt were seventy." (Bereishis - Genesis 46:27) The Torah then goes on to list the people who came down to Mitzraim - Egypt. However, the Torah only lists 69 people. Why then does the verse say that 70 members of the house of Yakov Avinu (our patriarch) descended into Mitzraim?

 Some commentators count Yocheved, who was born at the entrance of Mitzraim, as the 70th descendant.(Rashi and the Midrash cited by Stone Chumash, p.261) Other commentators tell us that Yakov Avinu himself is counted among the 70.

**A Most Inspiring Interpretation**

 A third interpretation is perhaps the most inspiring: The 70th member of the house of Yakov Avinu was the Shechina - the Divine Presence of Hashem. When the Bnai Yisroel - the children of Yisroel went down into Mitzraim, the holy Shechina descended with them. (Ibid)

 The lessons of the Torah are eternal. The Egyptian Exile was the first of a series of Exiles which the Jews have experienced over the millennium. It is possible to say that the Egyptian Exile is the paradigm of all other Exiles. Therefore the Torah is teaching us that just as the Shechina accompanied the Bnai Yisroel in the Egyptian exile, so too does the Shechina - the divine presence of Hashem accompany us in our current exile.

 Even though Jews may go through difficult times in exile, Hashem is always with us, as the Prophet tells us: "But fear not, O Yakov My servant, neither be dismayed, O Yisroel, because I shall redeem you from afar, and your children from the land of their captivity; and Yakov will again be quiet and at ease and none shall make him afraid." (Jeremiah 46:27:28)

 The following is truly one of the most amazing stories ever told. It shows that wherever a Jew is in exile, and no matter how far a Jew is away from Torah, the Shechina - the Divine Presence of Hashem is always with a Jew.

**Growing Up in a Totally Secular**

**American Jewish Family**

 David (his real name) grew up in a totally secular American Jewish family. As a young boy and later a teenager, Dave had little idea of what it meant to be a Jew. All of this changed however, when Dave decided to take a tour of Europe and Israel with some friends.

 When the group eventually made their way to the Eretz Yisroel, Dave was immediately struck by the strong emotional pull that he had for the Holy Land, even though Dave had never had any real connection with Judaism or the Torah. Dave found his way to the holy city of Jerusalem, where the spiritual draw is the most powerful.

**Taking Upon Himself**

**More and More Mitzvahs**

 While in Jerusalem, Dave was inspired to sit in on some classes at a Yeshiva - a school of Torah learning for Jewish men. Dave enjoyed his learning very much and decided to stay in Eretz Yisroel after his friends returned home to the states. Little by little, Dave took upon himself more and more mitzvahs such as tefillin, kosher eating, and Shabbos.

 By the end of a year, Dave's parents in Florida were begging for Dave to return home. Dave wanted to honor his parents, but he was concerned about keeping up with his observance in a secular environment. In the end, Dave's parents were adamant that Dave return home. Finally, against his better judgment, Dave gave-in and returned home.

 At first, Dave was able to keep up with his mitzvah observance in Florida. It was difficult, but he was still able to manage with kosher food and Shabbos. He was forced to pray alone, however, because in his town, there were not ten for a minyan (traditional quorum required for communal prayers.)

 Unfortunately though, the strain became very difficult on Dave. He was the only one who kept kosher in the home; this made it hard to keep separate dishes. He was the only one who kept Shabbos at home; this made it hard to feel the Shabbos spirit with televisions and phone calls blaring. Prayer also became difficult, praying alone was arduous on Dave.

 Little by little, Dave lost the vestiges of his Torah observance. Kosher went out the window along with Tefillin and the yarmulke. One mitzvah that Dave did hold onto was Shabbos. Eventually, however, even Shabbos was to fall...

**Just About to Give Up on Shabbos**

**And Torah Observance**

 One Friday night, Dave was sitting at home trying desperately to feel the light of the holy Shabbos. There were no Shabbos candles, kiddush wine, chalah, songs or words of Torah. Dave felt alone in the spiritual backwaters of his parents' Florida home. Dave was about to give up on Shabbos and Torah observance altogether.

 Thinking for a while, Dave turned his eyes upwards towards heaven and said "G-d, Show me a sign that You are there." Dave waited and waited, but he did not see a sign. That was it, he was giving up. He was finished with G-d and with Torah.

**Turning on the Television**

 He reached over and turned on the television. Just as the tube turned on, there was a view of a person's mouth saying "Shabbat Shalom Dave!" Dave sat in front of the television and was flabbergasted. He could not believe his ears. He nearly fainted. He stepped back away from the television set.

 Needless to say, this was his sign. Dave immediately began his return to mitzvah observance and Boruch Hashem (Thank G-d) today he is leading a Torah true lifestyle!

 Now, for the rest of the story... When Dave turned on the television, he joined the "David Letterman Show" (a variety show with guest stars) already in progress. On that particular night, there was a guest on the show who told the story of her travels around the world.

 The host of the show David "Dave" Letterman asked his guest what the best part of the trip was. The guest said that her trip to Jerusalem was most impressive. The guest said that it was amazing how everyone in Jerusalem on Friday afternoon wished each other "Shabbat Shalom." "These people did not even know me, yet they were so warm, you would have loved it... Shabbat Shalom Dave.

Reprinted from this week’s email of “Good Shabbos Everyone.”

**Reflecting on Pharoah’s Lifestyle Choice**

**By David Bibi**

 I hope you all had a great Chanukah. This really was an enlightening week. We have been speaking of a special spiritual light that comes with Chanukah and I was thinking about something Rabbi Abittan once told me about tuning in.

 He explained that technology helps us to understand how things work. Floating through the airwaves at any given moment are thousands if not millions of sounds. We use our radios or our computers or even our phones to tune into the words we wish to hear. In the same fashion, we can spiritually tune in to WGOD on our dial.

**Some Weeks the Signal Seem Much Stronger**

 Some weeks the signal is so much stronger and its so much easier to lock into the right station. This week it seemed so much easier to connect with others and wherever I went and whoever came to see me seemed to be flowing with Torah.

 I wondered was it really different than other times or was I simply putting more effort into connecting? The Rabbi would say that when we connect with Torah, we connect with the blue print of creation and through the Torah connect with the entire world, both the physical one and the spiritual one.

 Connections are crucial. When Yaakov sent Yehudah down before the rest of the family to establish a Yeshiva, he was teaching us that when we put the Torah first, every other door is open to us.

 Although much of what we learned this week, based on the Zohar, the writings of the Ari and the Ramchal are beyond the scope of this newsletter, I did hear an innovative idea from Rabbi Joey Haber which I discussed with my cousin Marilyn and my friend Aaron in the office today.

 Rabbi Haber suggested that Pharaoh was aware of the prophecy given to Abraham at Brit Ben HaBetarim where Hashem states: "You shall surely know that your seed will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and they will enslave them and oppress them, for four hundred years. And also the nation that they will serve will I judge, and afterwards they will go forth with great possessions.”

**A Very Strange Discourse**

**Between Pharaoh and Yaakov**

 When Yaakov comes down to Egypt, Pharaoh wonders if in fact his is the nation and if so when the actual servitude will begin. We learn this from the strange discourse that takes place. A single question and a single answer followed by a blessing.

 Pharaoh said to Jacob, "How many are the days of the years of your life?" And Jacob said to Pharaoh, "The days of the years of my sojourning’s are one hundred thirty years. The days of the years of my life have been few and miserable, and they have not reached the days of the years of the lives of my forefathers in the days of their sojourning’s." So Jacob blessed Pharaoh and left Pharaoh's presence.

**Pharaoh Willing Accepts the Consequences**

 Jacob is stating that he is already old and will soon die. The slavery can soon begin if Pharaoh wants to accept the responsibility and the consequences. After the blessing of having the Israelites, will come almost complete annihilation. Pharaoh accepts. Pharaoh is willing to suffer the consequences. The deal is struck and Yaakov leaves.

 Contemporary literature might refer to this as a Faustian bargain, or a deal with the Devil! Might and power today at the price of destruction tomorrow. Would any of us take it? We usually think not, but too many of us live above our means, live an unhealthy lifestyle, and decide to ignore the consequences.

 One message in this week’s portion is to reject Pharaoh’s lifestyle. The sages teach - "Aizehu chacham - haroeh et hanolad - Who is a wise person - he who sees into the future.

 When we pay attention to the future, when we consider the consequences, we’ll be bettered prepared to resist. Every kid loves candy, until he hears the dentist’s drill!

*Reprinted from this week’s email of “Shabbat Shalom from Cyberspace.”*

**The Silent (Mis)Treatment**

**By Rabbi Mendel Weinbach**

 **Question:** I have a next-door neighbor who causes me great discomfort. The smoke coming into my yard when he burns his leaves and the volume of the music he plays when I am trying to take an afternoon nap are examples of his inconsiderate behavior. Rather than get into a quarrel with him I have just stopped talking to him. Is this the proper approach?

 **Answer:** Definitely not. While your desire to avoid quarreling with your neighbor is highly commendable, your giving him the "silent treatment" is not a commendable or effective way of dealing with someone who you feel has hurt you.

**One Must Not Hate Another in Silence**

 In his Mishneh Torah (Hilchot Dayot 6:6) Rambam has the following to say on this subject: "When one man sins against another, the victim should not hate him and maintain silence. This is the way of the wicked, as it is written about Avshalom that "he did not speak with Amnon neither good nor bad, for Avshalom hated Amnon" (Shmuel II13:22).

 On the contrary, he is obligated to confront him and to say to him, ‘Why did you do this to me and why did you sin against me in this way?’ This is what the Torah instructs us to do in the command of ‘You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you must surely rebuke your neighbor’." (Vayikra 19:17).

**Offering the Opportunity to**

**The Other to Explain Himself**

 The purpose of such confrontation is to give the other fellow an opportunity to explain himself. He may be completely unaware that his smoke or his noise is actually reaching and disturbing you. In the worst-case scenario that he was truly inconsiderate, your rebuke may well elicit from him an apology for his behavior.

 This is not merely good advice for neighbors. Many of the strained relations between husband and wife, parents and children and business associates could be averted if the injured party summoned up the courage to confront rather than let silence prolong the hatred.

*Reprinted from this week’s Ohr.edu, the website of Ohr Somayach International in Yerushalayim.*

**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas Vayigash 5770**

**Story #630**

**The Rebbe that Banged**

**On the Table**

**From the Desk of Yerachmiel Tilles**

 **Rabbi Yechezkel of Shinova** once stayed in a small town for several days during the week. On Thursday, the townspeople came to ask him whether he planned to stay with them over Shabbat, so that they might make suitable preparations.

 "What difference does it make whether I am here for Shabbat or not? What sort of preparations do you have to make for me?" And he would not add another word.

 The townspeople did not know whether or not the Rebbe was planning to stay for Shabbat. But when Friday morning came and he showed no sign of traveling on, they understood that he meant to stay and they made preparations in his honor.

**Asking for the Tailor’s House**

 On Shabbat morning, before *davening*, Rabbi Yechezkel asked, "Where does the tailor live -- the one whose son is about to be married, and who is being called up to the Torah today?"

 Surprised at this question, they pointed out the tailor's home to the Rebbe. He went there together with enough men to complete a *minyan* and a Torah scroll, to hold Shabbat morning services in the tailor's home. (Like most small villages, this one had an *eruv* that allowed carrying on Shabbat.) When the reading of the Torah portion was concluded and the *chatan* was called up to the Torah for *maftir*, the Rebbe began to bang on the table with his hand. He kept up this noise until the *chatan* had finished reading the *haftorah* and its concluding blessings.

**The Reason Behind the Rebbe’s Actions**

 The people did not understand the meaning of all this. They assumed that the Rebbe had his reasons.

 As, indeed, he had. Before Shabbat, the tailor's son had come to see him.

 "I never formally studied in my life," he said, "and I don’t know how to read the *haftorah* properly. I'm terrified about getting up in front of the whole congregation to read. Please, Rebbe, what shall I do?"

 "I'll give you my advice on Shabbat," the Rebbe had answered.

 And what Rabbi Yechezkel did had been his "advice" -- to remain in town for Shabbat for the sake of that young *chatan*, to bring a *minyan* to pray in the *chatan*'s own home, and to bang on the table as the young man read, in order to save him from the others' possible mockery and laughter.

*[Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from* **"Stories my Grandfather told me"** *(Mesorah) by Zev Greenwald]*

*Connection*: 110th Yartzeit

Rabbi **Yechezkel Shraga Halberstam**, (1813– 5 Tevet 1899), was the eldest son of the *Divrei Chaim*, Rabbi Chaim Halberstam of Sanz. As an emissary of his father, he founded the Sanzer synagogue in Tzefat. He served as the rabbi of Shinova from 1855 till1868, and then again from 1881 till his passing. Many of his Torah insights into Scripture, Law and Kabbalah are collected in *Divrei Yechezkel*.

*Reprinted from this week’s email of KabbalaOnline.org, a project of Ascent of Safed* [*www.ascentofsafed.com*](http://www.ascentofsafed.com)[*ascent@ascentofsafed.com*](http://webmailb.juno.com/webmail/new/21?folder=Inbox&msgNum=0000nF00:001F0iDk000029s3&count=1325611907&randid=1833757664&attachId=0&isUnDisplayableMail=yes&blockImages=0&randid=1833757664##)

**Parshat Vayigash**

**Jewish Heroism in the**

**Stalinist Soviet Union**

**By Rabbi Tuvia Bolton**

 This week's Torah portion begins as Yehuda approaches (Yigash) Yosef, the viceroy of Egypt, to beg for the life of Binyamin, his youngest brother, who had been accused and arrested for supposedly stealing Yosef's divining cup.

 The Midrash (Raba 93:6) explains (see Rashi end 44:18) that although Yehuda was begging Yosef for mercy he was also prepared, if need be, for war against him.

 This, at first glance, makes no sense. Yehuda was a clever man, what would drive him to such a pointless thought? He, even together with his brothers, was outnumbered thousands to one and had no chance to win! Why would he even consider fighting?

 To answer this, here is a story. (Hadshot HaP'ilut, Kfar Chabad #25)

 There is no where that Jews suffered so constantly as in Russia. Even in Germany and Poland where millions of Jews were murdered there were occasional eras peace and prosperity for the Jews. Not so in Russia; the Czar, the Church, and the peasant population saw to it that they never had a moment of respite. But worst of all was Communism.

 The Communists opposed G-d, destroyed Torah education and with it paralyzed the minds and souls of almost the entire Jewish population.

 So it was no wonder that observant Jews tried everything and almost anything to get out. But Stalin made it impossible to do so.

**A Brief Split in the Iron Curtain**

 However, briefly after WWII a brief split in the Iron Curtain opened. It seems that in the course of the terrible war hundreds of thousands of Polish Jews fled from the Nazis over the border into Russia. Now, as soon as the war ended, the Russian and Polish Governments were allowing them to return; anyone carrying a Polish passport could leave Russia! Of course when the Jews heard this they immediately set to work.

 But it wasn't easy.

 Once one 'obtained' (i.e. bought a forged) passport, it was necessary to reach the border city of Lvov (Lemburg), buy train tickets to Poland, pass a special immigration board of Russians and Poles and finally take a train across the border to freedom during the course of which were also several 'checks'.

 And there were even more problems; First of all, the passports cost astronomic prices, secondly, the secret police (N.K.V.D) were always on the lookout for forgeries and if caught the punishment was beating, imprisonment...or worse! Third, it was forbidden to remain in the city of Lvov over night without a special permit and finally, not everyone passed the 'special board'.

**Eliezer from Tashkent, Buchara**

 Eliezer (the story did not give a family name) was a young religious Jew from Buchara (Tashkent) who decided that he had to leave Russia. He acquired a Polish passport, got permission from his parents and began the long journey to Lvov. On the way he met other young men his age with the same goal and they decided to work together and help each other to get out. They rented a room with a back alley entrance where they intended to stay until they engineered their escape and began preparations.

 But the very next day terrible news hit the thousands of Jews secretly hiding in Lvov; the board of Russian-Polish immigration had been eliminated! No one could leave Russia to Poland anymore! The border was closed!

**A Rumor About a High Ranking NKVD Officer**

 Jews began streaming out of Lvov while they still had time. There was no reason to stay and if they got caught they would lose their homes, jobs and possibly more and be cut off from all sides.

 But the group of young men decided they would not give up so easily. They sat up the entire night trying to figure out what to do until one of them suddenly remembered something he had heard from someone; there was a rumor that a high official in the NKVD, perhaps a colonel, by the name of Boris Spokoyni dealt with exit visas and not only was he Jewish (although he denied it), but he had a warm spot for helping his fellow Jews!

 Now, this was only a rumor and possibly it was a totally untrue one which meant it could be fatal. But they talked about it and decided it was worth the gamble. They first would try to acquire the forms necessary to request permission to leave (when the board ceased to exist so did the requesting forms), fill them out and pray to G-d.

 Eliezer and another young man were chosen to carry out the mission.

 In the middle of the night they furtively made their way to the NKVD building on Lenina 3 street, approached the guard, slipped a fairly large bribe into his hand and asked him for two things; ten request forms (which were, of course, outdated) and the address of Spokoyni.

**The Bribe Works**

 The guard rubbed the ruble bills in his hand, briefly looked down at them and when convinced that they were of sufficiently large denominations, told the Jews to wait off to the side in the shadows, entered the building and returned with an envelope. They took it, walked for a half hour down the street and, when they were sure they weren't being followed, opened it. It contained ten blank forms and a small paper with an address scribbled on it.

 They hurried back to the room, everyone filled out a form and, just before dawn Eliezer and friend ran off to what they hoped and prayed was the right address.

 They waited outside the house near some bushes until the door opened and out came a polished, immaculately dressed NKVD officer who lit a cigarette and began walking in their direction.

**A Plea for Mercy**

 The sidewalk was empty. Now is the time. As soon as he got close enough they approached him and, almost weeping, pled for their lives, "We represent ten young Jews, please have mercy! Help us! We must leave Russia or we will die! Please help or we will commit suicide!" A warm sweat covered their bodies although it was a cold fall morning.

 But Spokoyni just acted as though they didn't exist and kept walking. "Oh no!" Eliezer thought to himself. "We were wrong! If he calls the police on us we're finished!"

 Then, after a few more steps he stopped, turned to them, narrowed his eyes and said, almost as though he got pleasure from their helplessness; "You missed the deadline! There are no more exit permits! How did you get my name anyway? Who gave it to you!? And my address!?" He angrily threw his cigarette to the pavement, crushed it out with his boot heel and suddenly looked deeply into Eliezer's eyes as though searching for something familiar.

 He asked quietly, "Do you have the request forms?" Eliezer took them out of his coat pocket, the officer took them and stuck them into his pocket and whispered to Eliezer, "You know where my office is? Be there at eleven tonight. Come alone." And he waked into the distance.

 "It could be a trap!" one of the group said when they returned. "Now he has all our names! It's evidence! What do you think? Maybe we should get out while we can." But when they took a vote everyone agreed they would stay and leave the rest up to G-d.

**A Knock on the Door**

 That night at eleven Eliezer was let in to the NKVD building, found Spokoyni's room and knocked on the door.  He entered the room and Spokoyni locked it behind him.

 He told Eliezer to be seated and again looked deeply into his eyes until two tears ran down Spokoyni's cheeks. He almost broke out weeping as he told his entire story.

 Spokoyni said that essentially everything said about him was true despite his efforts to hide the facts. He even circulated rumors to the opposite so he wouldn't be flooded with requests that would draw attention. But he admitted that through his efforts thousands of Jews left Russia.

When he finished his short speech and dried his eyes Eliezer announced quietly that he too has good news; that night was the first night of Chanukah!

 Spokoyni's eyes widened as though he had heard a message from another world and it was obvious that he was very emotional.

**The Light of Chanukah**

 He looked around him to make sure that all the shades were down, went to the corner where there stood a candle stuck into a bottle in the event of a power shortage. He fumbled in his pocket, took out a match and Eliezer quietly said the three blessings as the officer repeated after him word for word and lit the candle.

 As he gazed longingly into the flame the tune 'HaNairos HaLalu' quietly came through his lips.

 After two days Eliezer and his friends got their permits to leave Russia and arrived in Poland. Several months later he even made it to Israel and today lives in one of the Chabad communities here, surrounded by children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

**A Martyr for His People**

 According to him he heard from reliable sources that Boris Spokoyni eventually was caught, tried and killed by firing squad. But he succeeded in saving thousands of Jews, or to be more accurate; thousands of families!

 This answers our questions. The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that the reason Yehuda was willing to wage a hopelessly lopsided war was that he took total responsibility for a Jewish child (in this case, Benyamin) and therefore acted totally above logic.

 Something like the colonel in our story. He waged a single handed war against the entire Communist system because his responsibility for others elevated him to a reality which was above selfish considerations.

 This is a very deep lesson to us. The goal of life is not freedom but rather responsibility to help others to live the truth.

 As in our story; Spokoyni sensed that despite the power, pleasure and satisfaction that Communism offered, nevertheless it was a lie; and despite the weakness, difficulties and disappointments accompanying Judaism: it contains the whole truth.

 So too in our weekly Torah portion:

 It is known that Moshiach will come from the tribe of Yehuda and not from Yosef; although Yosef represents holiness and elevation (Yesod). This is because Yehuda represents humility (Malchus) and only through the humility of accepting responsibility for others will Moshiach come.

 It all depends on us to do all we can, even one more good deed… it is our responsibility to rise above normal and for sure we will succeed in bringing…..**Moshiach NOW!**

**Good Shabbos Everyone.**

**Smoke out**

 The Torah in this week’s portion Vayigash tells us about the emotional reunion between Yosef and his brothers. During his opening remarks to his brothers, Yosef refers to the divine intervention which brought about the unusual set of circumstances of the reunion, namely, that Yakov’s sons had come to Egypt to ask for food from their long-last brother whom they had sold into slavery many years earlier.

 The verse quotes Yosef as saying, “Thus Hashem has sent me ahead of you to insure your survival in the land and to sustain you for a momentous deliverance.” (Bereishis 45:7) We see from here Yosef’s recognition of the concept of Hashgacha Pratis – divine intervention, which is one of the foundations of Jewish belief. As the Rambam teaches us in the first of his 13 Principles of Faith: “I believe in perfect faith that the Creator blessed is His Name, is the Creator and the Guider of all creations…”

**Believing in Hashgacha Pratis**

 Believing in Hashgacha Pratis – divine intervention means believing that Hashem guides even the minutest details of the universe. From this belief stems the belief that life is not random. Rather, everything that happens in life is for a purpose.

 Once, one of the Baal Shem Tov’s students noticed that a leaf had fallen from a tree in the distance. The student asked the Baal Shem Tov about the significance of this occurrence; why did Hashem cause the leaf to fall? The Baal Shem Tov instructed his student to lift up the leaf, which the student did. Under the leaf was a caterpillar. Now the student understood the reason why the leaf had fallen; the leaf fell in order to provide shade for the caterpillar.

 Another outgrowth of our belief in Hashgacha Pratis – divine intervention, is that everything that Hashem does is ultimately for the best. Although this belief may at times seem hard to internalize, it is a belief that is basic to Judaism. Because, if everything that happens in life is not for the best, then what is the purpose of Hashem creating this world? Hashem could have saved us the anguish and not created the world in the first place.

 Let us now tell a moving story which illustrates the exact calculations with which Hashem guides the world.

**A Young Man Named Lazlo or Ezra**

 The young man's name was Lazlo, or as his father called him, Ezra. His father was one of the most famous maggidim (Jewish inspirational speakers) in Budapest and traveled throughout Hungary holding drashos (inspirational speeches) in every Jewish community.

 One day, in the maggid's home town, the tailor died. He had been a simple but deeply religious man, yet his son Moshe, who worked alongside him, had no religious convictions at all. Nevertheless, out of respect for his father, Moshe sat shivah (the mourning period of seven days).

 During the week of shivah, Ezra's father, the maggid, went to pay a condolence call on Moshe. Little nine-year-old Ezra tagged along. When the maggid walked into the room where Moshe was sitting alone, Moshe was stunned. Everyone knew that Moshe was a rebellious lad and few in the community had much to do with him. That the esteemed maggid came and consoled him during his time of mourning, and then spent time chatting with him, was truly remarkable.

**A Request to Recite Kaddish**

 A day later the maggid came again. Moshe sat and listened attentively as the maggid said softly, "I think, for your father's honor, it would be nice if you would come to shul to say Kaddish." To everyone's surprise, Moshe agreed.

 Throughout the months, as Moshe continued coming to shul, the maggid slowly began having a calming influence on the young man. At first they discussed Jewish concepts and attitudes and then they began to study together.

 By year's end Moshe had become a religious man. With a rekindled spirit that burned enthusiastically, Moshe began performing mitzvos with a fervor that left very little tolerance for those less committed than himself. In shul it was he who would demand that others refrain from talking during the services, unlike past years, when people had silenced him constantly on the few occasions that he came to shul with his father. Eventually everyone got to know Moshe the schneider (tailor) as a man in whose presence one would dare not violate a mitzvah.

**The Germans Overun the Hungarian Town**

 Two years later, the German barbarians overran their Hungarian town, and the Jews were taken to forced-labor camps. Moshe the tailor was swept off the streets as were the maggid and his son Ezra.

 Together with multitudes of other frightened Jews they were crammed into the tightest quarters imaginable. With calculated cruelty, the Nazis tore children from parents — and that was the last time little Ezra, now twelve years old, ever saw his father. Ezra was placed in bunks together with other children his age, and soon began to pick up their bad habits and corrupt behavior, in the daily struggle for survival. Any religious commitment that he had before the war slowly began to ebb away as he battled to stay alive in any way he could, even if it meant cheating, lying, or stealing. Like everyone else he suffered from malnutrition and indecent living conditions, but together with a tight group of friends, managed to persist and survive.

**A Period in Rehabilitation Areas**

 When the horror finally ended, the feeble remnants of the Holocaust had to be taken to rehabilitation areas where they were slowly re-acclimated to normal foods and regular living conditions. Many could not eat solid meat, and it had to be ground so that their bodies could slowly relearn the process of digesting heavy foods.

 The facility in which Ezra found himself was located high on a hill overlooking the city. The only way to get to the downtown area was to take a trolley down the long hill.

 One Friday night, Tomas, a friend from another camp, suggested to Ezra (now called Lazlo) that they go downtown to enjoy themselves. They had begun to feel like human beings once again and Tomas said it would be interesting to see nightlife in the city. Ezra was in a dilemma, for in the rehabilitation camp he had begun to think about going back to the religious practices of his father.

**Going Back to Civilization**

 In the labor camps it had been an insurmountable challenge for Lazlo to be observant, but now that he was back in civilization, perhaps it was time to return. He knew that the trolley was the only feasible way to town but that was an open violation of Shabbos. True he had been very lax these last years, but now that he was on his own, he was trying to become observant again.

 "Have a cigarette," Tomas said, offering one to Lazlo. In an automatic reflex Lazlo stuck out his hand to accept it. The cigarette trembled in his hand. He wondered if Tomas noticed it. He wanted to throw it away because it was Shabbos, but he could not do so, not in front of his good friend Tomas. He thought that if he inhaled his first puff, he would surely choke on it. He was going to have to make a decision: would he make the return to a religious lifestyle now, or never?

 Before he could organize his thoughts, Tomas lit a match and held it to Lazlo's cigarette. Lazlo put the cigarette in his mouth, bent forward, squinted as the flame caught on the tip, and inhaled slowly. It felt good. He was going downtown. Laughing nervously, they both got onto the trolley and began planning their night out.

 The trolley rolled into the brightly lit town, while Ezra stood away from the window, hoping that no one he knew would see him. And then he saw him. It couldn't be! But it was, Moshe the Schneider - tailor, walking alone!

**Fear of Moshe the Schneider**

 Ezra's stomach tightened. He recalled the first visit he and his late father, the maggid, had made to Moshe's home on a shivah call. Then he remembered Moshe reprimanding people in shul to be more respectful during prayers, and he said to himself firmly, "I will never allow the man whom my father made religious to see that his son has become a irreligious." And with that newly formed resolution, he got off the trolley at the next stop, walked all the way back up the hill to the rehabilitation camp and has remained an observant Jew to this very day. (The Maggid Speaks, p.114 Rabbi Paysach Krohn)

 Hashem created this world for our benefit. Therefore, Hashem guides this world with an exact calculation. By recognizing these eternal truths, we will all live happier lives. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**

*Reprinted from this week’s Good Shabbos email*

**TEVET 10**

**Jerusalem Under Siege**

 On the 10th of Tevet of the year 3336 from Creation (425 BCE), the armies of the Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem. Thirty months later -- on Tammuz 9, 3338 -- the city walls were breached, and on Av 9th of that year, the Holy Temple was destroyed. The Jewish people were exiled to Babylonia for 70 years.

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| --- |
| The walls of Jerusalem at night |

 Tevet 10 (this year December 27, 2009) is observed as a day of fasting, mourning and repentance. We refrain from food and drink from daybreak to nightfall, and add the *Selichot* and other special supplements to our prayers. More recently, Tevet 10 was chosen to also serve as a "general *kaddish* day" for the victims of the Holocaust, many of whom the day of their martyrdom is unknown.

 An ancient Jewish custom, which has been revived by many, is to deliver words of inspiration and arousal to repentance on fast days. Presented here is our modest contribution to our duty as Jews to reflect on the significance of the tragic events of our history and come away motivated, encouraged, and -- yes -- even inspired:

*Reprinted from the current issue of Chabad Magazine*

**The Human Side of the Story**

**A Graveside Wish**

**By Rabbi Mendel Weinbach**

 A touching story circulated in Jerusalem soon after the recent passing of Rabbi Shlomo Lorincz, of blessed memory. This distinguished activist, who served for many years as the representative of the Torah community in the Israeli Knesset, was an accomplished Torah scholar who studied in his later years together with a neighbor in the Kiryat Mattersdorf neighborhood of Jerusalem.

 This neighbor was Rabbi Simcha Wasserman, of blessed memory, a highly respected Torah educator. When Rabbi Wasserman passed away more than a decade ago Rabbi Lorincz instructed his family to purchase a burial plot next to that of his beloved learning partner. Since Rabbi Wasserman left behind no children, the Lorincz family was instructed that whenever psalms would be recited at his graveside, a psalm should also be recited at the neighboring grave even if it was not on the yahrzeit anniversary of Rabbi Wasserman's death when such psalms are traditionally recited by his survivors.

 The family of the deceased traditionally comes to his grave at the end of their *shiva* mourning period. But that day was Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan when such a visit is not made. The first opportunity to do so was on the second day of Cheshvan which turned out to be the yahrzeit of Rabbi Wasserman.

 A graveside wish that Heaven fulfilled in such a touching way.

**When Jews Run for Congress**

 When it was announced that the special election in Florida to fill the seat of a prominent Jewish congressman was scheduled for April 6th, a Jewish organization called to the attention of Governor Charlie Crist that this date coincided with the last day of Pesach. In response to the charge that such scheduling was "an attack on the religious Jewish community" the governor ordered the election date moved up a week.

 Two of the Democratic candidates running to replace Congressman Wexler in a primary to be held in early February are also Jewish.

*Reprinted from the Ohr Somayach website Ohr.edu*

**The Torah in Our Church**

**By Yosef Juarez**

***The amazing story of our church that en masse decided to convert to Judaism.***

 I was born in Honduras, 23 years ago, the oldest of four children. I lived in a neighborhood with all my cousins, on a street named after my mother's ancestors. We attended a church that is non-denominational, but with a strong evangelical bent.

 When I was three years old, I fell from the second story of my house and dropped head-first onto the concrete, fracturing my skull. I was rushed to the hospital and wasn't moving at all, just gazing off into the distance. The situation was very grave. But then something strange happened. The next day, it was as if nothing had happened. The doctor ordered new x-rays, and there was no sign of any damage -- no fracture, not even a scratch.

 Due to this, our family grew as religious Christians, and throughout my life I was focused on the service of G-d.

**Moving to America for Better Financial Opportunities**

 When I was eight years old, we moved to America, which offered better financial opportunities. We settled in a suburb of Houston and looked around for a good church to attend, but nothing seemed as good as what we had back in Honduras.

 Along with one other family, we requested that the church send us a minister.

 Our old church was based in Honduras, but has branches in U.S. cities that have a sizable Central American and Hispanic population. So together with one other family, we requested that the church send us a minister. They sent us a man named Hector Flores, who at the time was still training to be a minister. And that's how our Houston church started -- in one room in a house.

**A Fascination with the Holy Temple**

 Minister Flores was fascinated with the Holy Temple, and its predecessor the Tabernacle (Mishkan). He had access to books and resources, and he started teaching Torah ideas that were unique in a Christian setting. We would spend months and months delving into aspects of the Torah.

 The church membership grew steadily, as we were very outreach-oriented. The city was divided up into districts and groups, and we would literally go out into the streets and preach to people. During high school, I studied in my church's discipleship program, where they train young people in leadership skills and how to preach. We'd bring people into the church and provide them with family counseling and programs for all ages. It functioned very much like a family. And we would train the new members to reach out and bring more people to church.

**A Split in the Congregation**

 Of course, people who came to our church for the first time would wonder why we were discussing Jewish topics, and not preaching so much about the typical teachings of Jesus. But Minister Flores continued on his unique path, and the church eventually split into two congregations. We got our own building and bought land to expand.

**Hebrew Songs**

 One of the unique customs of our church was something Minister Flores called "festivals of consecration." These were patterned after the festivals in the Torah, where people would bring large donations to fund the church activities. From there it was constant small steps toward Torah: the obligation to tithe, where we'd give 10 percent of our income to church activities. After a while our festivals got assigned Jewish names, like Purim and Shavuot, corresponding to the Jewish holiday they fell close to.

 This was definitely not consistent with mainstream Christianity. And the closer we got to Torah, the more some congregants became uncomfortable and started to drop out. It was a filtering process.

**The Need for an Alternative**

 The minister didn't want to tear down Christianity without offering us an alternative.

 Unbeknownst to us, behind the scenes, Minister Flores was going through an intense personal transition. After much research, he discovered many inconsistencies and contradictions in the New Testament, making the tenets of Christianity untenable.

Minister Flores started secretly going to a rabbi, to pester him with questions. Then he'd come back and teach us, slowly getting us closer and closer to Judaism.

**The Minister Decides to Convert to Judaism**

 Soon after, Minister Flores made the decision to convert to Judaism. But he struggled to find a way to tell us, as he didn't want to tear down Christianity without being able to offer us an alternative. So he kept teaching Torah, but in a way that was as subtle as possible. He gradually peeled away the things that were wrong and got us closer to Torah. Our church started replacing Jesus' name with Jewish, Hebrew names of God, and the songs became Hebrew songs. We began to incorporate real Jewish traditions into our festivals, and we even got a Torah scroll for the church.

**Moving Towards Authentic Judaism**

 At that point we resembled more of a Jews for Jesus group, in the sense that we were Christians with a lot of Jewish traditions. The difference, of course, was that we were moving in the direction toward authentic Judaism, not the other way around.

 "How far are you going with all this?" As far as the Torah takes us.

 During this process, our biggest resource for information was Aish.com, and its Spanish sister site. At one point the church printed out reams of Aish.com articles on all the holidays, and gave a binder of these articles to each family.

 Some of the church members became resistant to all these changes, and a number of people dropped out. There were occasional confrontations where people would question the minister, "How far are you going with all this?" And he would simply answer, "As far as the Torah takes us."

**Revelation**

 About six months after Minister Flores made the private decision to convert, my mother had been at a Jewish bookstore and bought the book, "The Real Messiah" by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan. This book lays out all the evidence for why Jews don't believe in Jesus, in a very scholarly and convincing way. We found that a lot of Christian teachings were based on mistranslations or taking biblical verses out of context.

 So my mother suspected there was more to this "Torah teaching" than the minister had been letting on.

 Every Sunday after services, the entire congregation would go together to the park. One Sunday, my mother confronted the minister: "You know more than you're telling us, don't you." He would never lie or deny such a direct question, so he saw this was the right time to reveal his plan to convert. That Sunday, we all stayed at the park for hours and hours, discussing and explaining, until long after dark.

 At that point, about 100 people wanted to keep studying with the possibility of conversion. But many others took the choice of becoming Bnei Noach, following the seven pillars of human civilization that the Torah presents for non-Jews to observe. Minister Flores explained that any human being who faithfully observes these laws earns a proper place in heaven, and this was an appealing alternative for many church members.

 My mother, however, wanted to stick with the group who was interested in conversion. So we kept on learning, and eventually our group decided to attend Shabbat services. So one Saturday morning our entire congregation showed up at the United Orthodox Synagogues. It was a bit of a shock to the community, because such a huge influx upset the social balance. But the leader of the synagogue, Rabbi Joseph Radinsky, was like an angel to us; his kindness and sincerity is clear to anyone who knows him.

 When they saw things were serious, the Houston community sent a Spanish-speaking rabbi, Jose Gomez, to help each family clarify the right path. (He himself had converted 10 years earlier in Houston along with his entire family -- parents, siblings, aunts and uncles.) As expected, all of this caused a real stir in the Christian community in Houston.

**First in the Family**

 Minister Flores was amongst the first to convert, and since then many of our church members have converted, while others are in the process. My own conversion was finalized a year ago, and my mother and siblings are still in the process. I chose the name "Yosef" because in the Bible, Joseph was the first of his family to go down to Egypt. He established himself and was able to help bring the rest of his family along. My mother says that in our path to conversion, I have been sent ahead as our family's "Yosef."

 After my conversion, I came to Israel and was really amazed. I saw a variety of Jews, and a whole different side of Judaism. There was something special about everything. I even found myself taking pictures of grass and rocks! I felt truly Jewish for the first time.

 I cannot wait to share the learning with friends and family back home.

**Researching His Family Roots**

 I started doing research into my roots, because I knew that this awakening to Judaism comes from a very deep place. I found out that on a voyage to the New World in 1502, Christopher Columbus reached the Bay Islands on the coast of Honduras, which became part of the Spanish empire. Jews undoubtedly came to Honduras at this time, on the heels of the Spanish Inquisition when many Jews "converted to Christianity" but secretly remained Jewish. I'm anxious to find out more about my ancestors, but it's very hard to track.

 So where am I today? I am studying at the Aish HaTorah yeshiva in the Old City of Jerusalem and I love it. I'm so enthusiastic about everything that I learn, and cannot wait to share it with all my friends and family back home. At this point, my plans for the future are pretty open. I want to continue to study Torah, finish my undergraduate degree, and see what opportunities develop.

**A Commitment to Reaching out to My Fellow Jews**

 But one thing I know for sure: I am committed to reaching out to my fellow Jews. If I was fortunate enough to discover this gold mine of spiritual wealth and fulfillment, then those who were born Jewish surely must be given that opportunity. And who knows -- just as Aish.com spurred my Jewish growth, maybe this article will be the spark that someone else has been waiting for.

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