

Parshas Vayeitzei 5772

THE INVINCIBILITY – AND INVISIBILITY – OF TORAH

This week's *parshah* finds Ya'akov embarking on a path of flight. Having wrested the blessings from his brother, Esav, Ya'akov feared his murderous rage. Ya'akov thus treks to Charan, where he is to stay for two decades at the home of his uncle, Lavan.

HIDEOUT

First, however, Ya'akov makes a detour. As Rashi tells us (at the end of *parshas* Toldos), immediately after receiving the blessings Ya'akov made a stop in the study hall. For a period of fourteen years, Ya'akov was ensconced in the Yeshivah of Shem and Ever (Noach's progeny).

While no doubt a worthy endeavor, Ya'akov's behavior in this regard seems puzzling. At the same time as he fears for his life from a vengeful brother, what does he do but go to learn in a famous yeshivah! Yeshivas Shem V'Ever was a well-known institution, and its location was no secret; what was to stop Esav from merely walking in and settling his score?

The precise term used by Rashi to describe Ya'akov's stay is that he was *סָמַן* in the yeshivah – literally, concealed. But this description itself seems only to add to the perplexity; how is a high-profile yeshivah considered a good hiding place (especially when staying put for years!)?

According to R' Yeruchem Olshin, Ya'akov's strategy had nothing to do with concealing his location; rather, he was utilizing a remarkable aspect of the power of Torah. This unique attribute of Torah's protective shield is mentioned in a most illuminating section of the Medrash. The Medrash records a dialogue, as it were, between Hashem and the

descendants of Ya'akov, as they discuss the threat posed by the descendants of Esav:

HASHEM: If you see him (Esav) trying to antagonize you, do not stand up against him; rather, hide yourselves from his presence...

YISRAEL: Master of the Universe! He has... the power of the sword... To where shall we flee?

HASHEM: Flee to the Torah (and you shall be hidden therein) (*Devarim Rabbah 1:19*).

The Medrash provides a truly wondrous revelation, which has contributed to the survival of our people throughout the ages. Apparently, the proper study of Torah can make its adherents invisible to their enemies.

OFF THE RADAR

For the Jews who dwelled in many of the European lands in days gone by, a draft notice was tantamount to a spiritual and physical death sentence. Jews conscripted into the notoriously anti-Semitic armies of Eastern Europe faced an almost insurmountable ordeal, where their fellow soldiers posed almost as much of a threat as the enemy on the battlefield. Needless to say, then, almost every Jewish parent would scramble for some way to help their child avoid these indescribable hardships. Whether through bribery, self-mutilation, or other means, no one could bear to lose their child to the dreaded conscription (known as the "*prizov*").

The great sage R' Shach, whose early years coincided with this drastic period, was once asked about his experience; how did he avoid the "*prizov*"? R' Shach supplied a cryptic answer: "I did nothing. I merely sat and learned in the *beis medrash* (study hall)." Apparently, R' Shach was following in the path laid down by our forefather Ya'akov. He immersed himself in learning – to the extent that he was

לזכר נשמת חנה מירא בת שלמה ע"ה

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
שלמה בן דוד ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to
arrange Torah study on behalf of her neshamah.

rendered hidden and invisible to his pursuers.

The Steipler Gaon told of a similar incident involving his renowned brother-in-law, the Chazon Ish. In his days, the Cossacks would intermittently “collect” draftees into their army. They accomplished this by roaming the streets and grabbing anyone they found. Generally speaking, anyone taken in one of these forays was sent away and never heard from again.

It so happened that the Chazon Ish was on the street one time during a raid. This time, there was a particularly heavy presence of Cossacks, with an officer stationed on almost every corner. Nonetheless, the Chazon Ish was able to simply walk by, seemingly undetected by the normally sharp-eyed officers.

The Chazon Ish was later asked how he managed this phenomenal escape. He replied simply that at the time he had been engaged in the study of a particularly complex area

of Talmudic law. “*In mein kup ich hub ge’hat gantz Eruvin* (I had the entire tractate of Eruvin stored in my head),” he explained.

RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP

To be sure, the level of learning necessary to achieve this state is quite supreme. In order to be “hidden” in the Torah, one must be completely immersed, and his devotion must be total. After all, when hiding from the enemy, every fiber of one’s being must be hidden from view; the exposure of even a single hair can be enough to betray one’s presence. In the same vein, these spiritual giants had committed every ounce of their time and strength to the goal of excelling in Torah; and it is of such a degree of total immersion to which the aforementioned Medrash refers.

A similar sentiment was expressed by the Chofetz Chaim, who commented on the following Mishnah (*Avos 3:5*):

כָּל הַמְקַבֵּל עָלָיו עַל תּוֹרָה, מַעֲבִירִין מִמֶּנּוּ עַל מַלְכוּת וְעַל דָּרֶךְ אֲרָץ.

“When one accepts the yoke of Torah upon himself, the yoke of government and worldly affairs is removed from him.”

In light of the Mishnah, one may have expected that a student of Torah would not have to contend with the draft; yet we find many instances where yeshivah students were, in fact, impressed into service. Shouldn’t their Torah learning have protected them from such tribulation?

The Chofetz Chaim explained that a careful reading is in order. The Mishnah does not state: “Anyone who *studies* Torah” is protected; rather, “Anyone who *accepts upon himself the yoke* of Torah.” The Mishnah speaks of a much greater level and a system of proportionality. Freedom from disturbance is dependent on the strength of one’s acceptance of the Torah’s yoke. The more sincere is one’s commitment, the more freedom will he merit to engage in its study (*HaChafetz Chaim, Chayav U’Pa’alav, p. 179*).

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