

## If you will follow My decrees. (26:3)

*Rashi* interprets *Im bechukosai teilechu, shetiheyu ameilim baTorah*, “That you engage in intensive Torah study.” *Ameilus* means toil, labor. Success in Torah study is not determined by acumen, but by application. Given the spiritual nature of Torah as a result of its Divine origin, it is not who one is, but how he applies himself to studying and reviewing the Torah. Indeed, the greatest *gedolim*, Torah leaders, achieved their plateau not simply because of their brilliance, but due to their extreme *ameilus*. The *Raavad* writes (*Teshuvos* 39), “I have relinquished much sleep from my eyes; much food became spoiled because I had no time to eat. I applied my entire physical body to Torah” (free translation).

There is no dearth of stories which describe the extraordinary *ameilus* evinced by our *gedolim*. I have selected two stories that perhaps are not as well-known. They are about great people – in the sense that these individuals were unusual in their dedication to Torah. They neither had large *yeshivos*, nor were they *rabbanim* with large followings. They were G-d-fearing, Torah observant Jews who viewed Torah as their reason for living.

*Horav Daniel Ochayon (Ohr Daniel)* relates that he once spent *Shabbos* in Antwerp, Belgium. He went into one of the *batei medrash* to *daven*. Arriving a few moments early, he began to peruse the *sefarim* in the large bookcase at the back of the *shul*. Suddenly, he came across a *sefer* that he had never seen before, which was written by an author with whose name he was unacquainted. The thick *sefer*, which was comprised of a question on a *Mishnah* in *Meseches Keilim* (one of the most difficult *mesechtos* to master) had one hundred thirty-seven answers rendered by the author. Clearly, this author was an outstanding *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar.

As *Rav Ochayon* was standing by the bookcase, perusing the *sefer* in amazement (he had mastered the question and was able to read one answer), he was approached by a man who was a resident of the community. “I want to introduce myself,” the man began. “I am the nephew of the author of the *sefer* which you are reading. The author perished in the Holocaust. He was a businessman, a *Koźnitzer chasid*, who was one of Krakow’s (Poland) wealthiest Jews. I was able to salvage some of his manuscripts. This is one of them.”

The idea that such a volume of brilliant Torah dialectic was authored by a businessman who did not spend his entire day immersed in Torah, but only salvaged a few hours in the early morning and late evening, was in and of itself an incredible feat. It was the rest of the man’s story that was truly awakening.

“Regardless of how it occurred, I had the sad occasion to meet up with my uncle in the Auschwitz concentration camp. We were together for three years. One night, he woke me from a deep, exhausted sleep and said to me, ‘You should know that (because of your youth and good health) you will probably be the only one to live through this purgatory. I have a feeling that tomorrow is my last day on this world. My time has come, and I sense that I will meet my fate in the gas chamber. I

ask one favor of you; this will be my final testament, my will, which I ask you to execute. I have been blessed with a prolific memory. As a result, I remember the entire *Shas Bavli* and *Yerushalmi* by heart. From the very moment that I entered the accursed gates of Auschwitz, I have not stopped learning. I have a daily (and nightly) *seder*, routine, during which I review the *mesechtos*. I figure that by the time they take me in the morning, I will have reached *Moed Katan daf zayin*. I want you to promise me that you (when Hashem frees you from here) will be *mesayeim*, complete the *meseches* for me!”

*Rav Ochayon* concludes with a profound, almost frightening thought. Six million lives were brutally snuffed out by the accursed Nazis. They, too, have a dying request from us – the living: “Please, we beg you, complete the *mesechtos*, the myriad *sefarim ha’kedoshim* that were destined to be completed – but could not. Do it for us!”

*Ameilus ba’Torah* translates itself into many facets. It is our inseparable bond with the Torah that motivates and nurtures our ability to maintain intense diligence in Torah study. Interestingly, it does not require that one be an extraordinary Torah scholar in order to appreciate this bond. The ordinary Jew, who senses his attachment to Hashem via the Torah, has demonstrated throughout the generations that this bond is indestructible. *Rav Chaim Shapiro, zl*, relates the following story in portraying the unusual bond the simple Jew in Europe had with the Torah.

In the city of Lomza, there was a group of stevedores, observant Jews who were very physically fit, thus able to carry large, heavy commodities and materials as part of their daily work. All of these men were unique specimens of brute strength and physical stature. Yet, one of them stood out in his size (well over six feet) and muscular build. He was nicknamed *Moshiach* due to his unusual physical prowess. *Moshiach* had eight children – six sons and two daughters. When his youngest son was born, *Moshiach* told his wife, “This child will become a *Rav*.”

“*Yehudele*,” as he was called, was a bright, sweet child. His parents hired a special *rebbe* to tutor him in Torah, because, after all, he was to become a *rav*. *Yehudele* was study partners with *Rav Chaim Shapiro*’s brother, and, as a result, the two youngsters became very close, like brothers. The *cheder* years flew by quickly, and the two teenagers were accepted into the *yeshivah gedolah* of Lomza. *Moshiach* was ecstatic. He shared his good news with everyone. Imagine, his son would become a *rav*.

One summer day, the wonderful future that *Moshiach* saw for his son came to a sudden, tragic end. The two fifteen-year-old study partners went canoeing on the river. A sudden wave caused their boat to overturn. They were caught in the strong current. *Chaim Shapiro*’s brother survived; *Yehudele* did not. Word of the tragedy spread throughout the small community. People were shell shocked; there were no words to describe the calamity that had struck *Moshiach*’s family and, by extension, the entire Jewish community.

*Yehudele*’s *chavrusa*, study partner, remembered that his late friend had a notebook in which he

redacted his *rebbe's* lectures. In addition, he included his own novellae which he felt were worthy of recording. He found the notebook, still in its place in Yehudele's *shtender*, study lectern, but lacked the courage to bring it to the home of the deceased. He felt that Yehudele's parents should have this unique memento of their son's devotion Torah. He personally could not do it. He asked his brother, Chaim, to serve as his messenger.

*Rav* Chaim walked into the room where the family members were sitting *Shiva*. He walked over to Moshiach and handed him the notebook, "This is your late son's *chiddushei Torah*, novellae." Moshiach took the notebook in his hands, as one lifts a *Sefer Torah* scroll, raised it up into the air and exclaimed, "This is our son's Torah! These are his *chiddushei Torah!*" He was so excited, holding the notes recorded by his son's own hand.

At that moment, the Lomza *Rosh Yeshivah*, *Horav Yehoshua Zelig Roch, zl*, entered the room. Moshiach looked at the venerable *Rosh Yeshivah*, and he fell to the floor at his feet. He began to weep; at first, it was quiet weeping accompanied with moaning; then it progressed, becoming more intense, the moaning becoming a wail. In between his wailing, Moshiach cried out to the *Rosh Yeshivah*, "*Rebbe*. I am an observant Jew. All my life I have been devoted to serving Hashem to the best of my ability. Why did I not merit to have a son that would become a *Rav*? Why? Why did Hashem take from me the opportunity to have such *nachas?*"

Every Jew – regardless of his background, level of scholarship, and personal level of religious adherence – has one hope: that his son become a Torah scholar; that he devote himself to studying Torah; that he become a *rav*. It was this aspiration that burned passionately within the hearts of these Jews, who worked tirelessly to earn the few pennies, so that they could hire the best *rebbeim* for their sons. Why? Because *Yisrael v'Oraisa v'Kudsha Brich Hu chad hu*, the Jewish People and the Torah and Hashem are one – that is why!