

## **Bnei Yisrael shall encamp, each man by his banner, according to the insignias of their fathers' household, at a distance surrounding the Ohel Moed shall they encamp. (2:2)**

The words *mineged*, which is usually defined as “opposite,” and *saviv*, which means “surrounding,” contrast one another. Were the Jews opposite the *Ohel Moed*, or were they camped surrounding it? Veritably, these terms complement one another, as explained by *Horav Chaim Toyto, Shlita*, with the following story. An observant physician from Germany decided that he wanted to visit the blossoming Torah world of Lithuanian Jewry. After all, he was a *frum*, observant, doctor who meticulously adhered to all the *mitzvos*. He wanted to see what about Lithuanian *yeshivah* life differed from his lifestyle.

One can imagine the culture shock when this refined Western European Jew visited the great *yeshivos* of Lithuania. One had simply to open the door of the *bais ha'medrash* and listen to the cacophony of sound that emanated from there to be in a total state of spiritual euphoria. Understandably, the man was reasonably impressed, but the impression took its toll on his emotions. Suddenly, he no longer felt worthy of the title “observant.” I must emphasize that even we who have tasted the sweet taste of Torah in America and imbibed of its true flavor have no idea concerning the devotion and utter *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice, that characterized the Torah study of a mere seventy years ago in Europe. It was a different world, a different era, and a different mindset. This in no way minimizes the incredible plateau of Torah study achieved in America – but it is not Europe.

This doctor was beside himself, anxious about the fact that perhaps he was off base in his *frumkeit*. He traveled to Radin to speak with the saintly **Chofetz Chaim**. Perhaps the sage could enlighten him. Entering the *Chafetz Chaim's* “study” and gazing at his countenance was in itself an unparalleled experience. Gathering up his courage, he asked, “*Rebbe*, until now I was at peace with myself and happy with my lot. I felt that I was an observant Jew, adhering to all of Hashem's *mitzvos*, performing acts of *tzedakah v'chesed*, charity and kindness. I go to *shul* and pray with a *minyán*, quorum, three times daily. I do my part in healing the sick and reaching out to those in need. I have saved many lives and feel that I have been *mekadesh Shem Shomayim*, sanctified the Name of Heaven. Until I visited Lithuania, I was sure that I was destined for *Olam Habba*, a place in the World to Come, but now, I no longer know if I will make it. The Torah giants of Lithuania with their outstanding *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, steeped in Torah and *Mussar*, ethical character refinement, are beyond anything I have ever experienced. What should I do?”

The *Chafetz Chaim* calmed the man and said, “Let me explain to you the Torah's perspective concerning a Jew's obligation to serve Hashem. The Torah in *Parashas Bereishis* writes: *V'Eitz HaChaim b'soch ha'Gan*, ‘The Tree of Life was (situated) in middle of the Garden.’ *Rashi* confirms the meaning of *b'soch ha'Gan* as reference to the Tree's position in the center of the Garden. We wonder what difference it makes whether the Tree was in the middle of the Garden or at the side.

The important message is that the Tree grew within the Garden of Eden.

“Obviously, the Tree has unique significance in that it alludes to true life, eternal life, the only life that really counts. The Torah teaches us that *chaim nitzchiyim*, eternal life, is available to everyone equally, regardless of his individual approach to serving the Almighty. What matters is not the ‘how’ but for what purpose and to whom. *Shevet Yissachar*, the Tribe of Yissachar, has its unique approach through the vehicle of Torah study, while Zevulun is an observant businessman, engaged in commerce, while himself finding time to learn Torah and sustain others who make Torah study their full-time vocation. Some spend a good portion of their waking hours performing countless acts of *chesed*, kindness; others spend hours in devotional prayer to Hashem. I was ‘placed’ in Lithuania, a major Torah center, for the purpose of Torah pursuit. I was given the opportunity to study and disseminate Torah, which I have attempted to execute to the best of my ability. You were placed in Germany and enabled a secular education, so that you could minister to the sick and thereby sanctify Hashem’s Name. You set aside time for Torah study on a regular basis, thereby fulfilling your predestined goal in life. Each of us has his individual function which is our vehicle for reaching the *Eitz HaChaim*, eternal life. As long as we are all focused on that ‘center’ – the *Eitz HaChaim*.”

Utilizing the above story, we can understand that there is actually no dichotomy between *saviv* and *mineged*. There are Jews who seem to encamp “opposite,” whose approach to serving the Divine differs from the one we have either chosen for ourselves or was chosen for us. We should clearly understand that we are all on the same side, as long as we are *misaviv*, encircled around the *Mishkan*, Tabernacle, Tree of Life. Thus, the Torah writes *mineged* and *saviv*, for although they appear to contrast one another, they actually complement each other.

If I may add, much has been written concerning the definition of the “centrist” Jew and centrist Judaism, with each side claiming the other is either to the “right” or to the “left,” but certainly not in the “center.” Perhaps the *Chafetz Chaim* was teaching us the true meaning of centrism: One who focuses on the Tree which grows in the center of the Garden, the *Eitz HaChaim*, the only road to eternal life. Clearly, reducing our commitment, so that we enable a greater sense of inclusiveness to those who want to have their cake and eat it, will not increase our chances for a seat in the center of the Garden.