

It happened at the end of two years to the day: Pharaoh was dreaming that behold! He was standing over the River. (41:1)

We all know the rest of the story. Seven healthy cows were swallowed up by seven meager cows. Seven healthy ears of grain sprouting on a single stalk were swallowed up by seven ears of parched, thin, weather-beaten grain. These were strange dreams which disturbed the Egyptian king. Clearly, these dreams had to have a profound meaning. Finally, Yosef interpreted the dreams, referring to two sets of seven years – years of plenty swallowed up by years of hunger, a hunger that would be so overwhelming that the years of plenty would be totally forgotten. The Torah does not write fictional stories. Pharaoh's dreams had a purpose. Yosef told Pharaoh what to do to circumvent the disaster that loomed over Egypt. What about us, those who study the Torah, to whom the dreams have Providential meaning? What does the story teach us?

Horav Moshe Mordechai Shulsinger, zl, writes that the episode of the dreams and their interpretation was not meant only for Pharaoh. It is included in the Torah to teach us how to act: to listen, to learn, to take heed. When one is young and healthy, in the prime of his life, vigorous and filled with enthusiasm, he is in the midst of his years of plenty. Arise from bed in the morning, go to *shul* with energy, *daven*, learn, take in as much as possible, because one never knows when the years of hunger will begin. Pharaoh knew; we do not.

We traverse this world as if we will never leave. We stake our claim to life and all the good that it offers, never realizing how quickly and irrevocably it can all be taken from us. One can have great wealth stored away in his bank vault; he can have serious investments that total large sums of money, but if he does not have the “years” to spend it, what value is it worth to him? We have time for everything, except that which is really important. When the years of hunger arrive, we had better have stored away the necessary sustenance or we will starve.

There is a classic story which the **Steipler Gaon, zl**, would relate. We could easily change the dates, places and subject matter, and this would be meaningful to any period of time. The lesson, however, remains unchanged. The *Steipler* was a student in the *Novardoker Yeshivah*. He visited home for a *Shabbos* shortly before the outbreak of World War I. As he prepared to return to the *yeshivah*, the father of one of his friends asked if he would be so kind as to take back a letter for his son. The *Steipler* acquiesced with pleasure. The father of the boy said he would bring the letter later that day. The *Steipler* left with the letter safely in his pocket. Regrettably, he did not make it to the *Yeshivah*, because World War I had broken out and traveling between countries was suspended. The *Steipler* was stuck somewhere between his hometown and the *yeshivah*, with nowhere to go. True to his word, he kept the sealed letter in his bag for the duration of the war.

Eight years later, the *Steipler* met the student to whom he was to deliver the letter. The student's father had already passed away, so it was understandable that reading his father's letter at this point was a very emotional experience. The young man opened the envelope, removed the letter,

and, with tears streaming down his eyes, read his father's last communication to him: "My dear son, How are you? How are your studies? I hope that you are doing well in the *yeshivah*. I am writing to ask a favor of you. When you return home from the *yeshivah*, can you please bring along a few salty herrings? As you know, in our town, they are hard to come by and quite expensive. Thank you. With utmost love, Your Father."

This is what the young man had left from his youth. It was a simple, innocuous letter. No one had any idea that: a war would break out; time would stand still; eight years would go by without any communication; parents would die; life would change; and all that would remain would be – the salty herrings. Hashem has sent us down to this world to amass Torah and *mitzvos*. Imagine, if we return with not much more than the equivalent of some salty herrings!

How does one motivate himself to save every minute of the years of plenty, not to waste, to make the most of every opportunity. To further illustrate this point, we view another "letter," written by a different father, also to his son in *yeshivah*. I once quoted this letter, but it is so precious that a repeat performance will only enhance its desired inspiration.

Horav Aizik Sher, zl, was *Rosh Yeshivah* in Halusk, Poland. This was the beginning of his career as a *mechanech*, educator, par excellence. He related that this *yeshivah* consisted of a group of young men who were totally devoted to learning. Nothing else but Torah crossed their minds. The world around them played no role in their lives. It was all about *Abaye* and *Rava*, the *Shach* and *Taz*. There was a student who, in designated intervals, would receive a short letter from his father. The letter would invariably always end with the same last sentence, "My dear son, In every subject/issue, every question/situation in life that confronts you, think to yourself how would you respond if this was the last day of your life." The letter was signed, "Nosson Tzvi." Yes, this letter was written by the venerable **Alter m'Slobadka, Horav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, zl**, to his son, *Horav* Eliezer Yehudah Finkel, founder and *Rosh Yeshivah* of Mir in *Eretz Yisrael*. This was the way the future *Rosh Yeshivah* was raised, to never lose sight of the value of time; to never lose sight of the larger issues. When one thinks about salty herrings, he is left with nothing of value to remember, and nothing of value to bring to the "table" when he suddenly realizes that the years of plenty have gone by and he now confronts the years of hunger. If his thoughts are of a loftier nature, if he realizes that the decision that he is now about to make could quite possibly be his last mortal resolution, he will take great care in expressing his conclusion.

In *Chayei HaMussar*, **Horav Yisrael Yaakov Lubchenski, zl**, explains the urgency of Yosef's "suggestion" that Pharaoh immediately appoint a wise and discerning man to oversee the distribution of food during the seven years of plenty. Only a wise man, one who has powerful insight and imagination, a visionary who can see and even sense the images of ravaging hunger overtaking the country – only such a person can be entrusted with preparing the country for the worst. We go through life without thinking, dreaming all of the time, conjuring up images of greatness and success. We think that the dream will last forever, until we wake up and realize that, while we have been dreaming, our dreams have turned into a nightmare.