

For He is your life and length of your days. (30:20)

Torah is our life, without which we are unable to survive. In a famous dialogue between Papus *ben* Yehudah and Rabbi Akiva (*Berachos* 61a), the *Tanna* expressed this idea. It was during the period when the ruling pagan government forbade Torah study. Their decree, which – if ignored – was punishable by death, did not seem to matter to Rabbi Akiva, who maintained his normal routine of studying and teaching Torah. When Papus *ben* Yehudah questioned his actions, Rabbi Akiva compared it to the wily fox who saw fish swimming quickly from place to place. He asked them from whom they were fleeing. They replied from the fisherman's nets. He suggested that they leave the water and live with him. Apparently, the water was not safe for them. They replied, "You are certainly not living up to your reputation of being astute. If, in the water, which is our source of life, we are unsafe, what chances do we have out of the water, where we are unable to live?" "Likewise," Rabbi Akiva explained, "Torah is our life. If we leave it, we have no life source."

Horav Yitzchak Aizik Chaver, zl, explains their dialogue in the following manner: Papus *ben* Yehudah felt that it is forbidden to risk one's life for the purpose of studying Torah (just like any other *mitzvah* which does not supersede one's life). Rabbi Akiva explained that Torah is life. Thus, there is no dispensation to abandon it for one's life. If he were to stop studying Torah – he would have no life. This is certain. On the other hand, if he were to continue learning, it is not for sure that he would be killed by the government. Without Torah, there is no life.

Shortly before the passing of the holy *Sefas Emes*, the government issued the terrible decree to conscript *yeshivah* students into their army. This decree meant almost certain spiritual demise and physical persecution that most often resulted in death. Parents pleaded with the *Rebbe* to storm the Heavens to have the decree rescinded. Sadly, the Gates of Heaven were closed to them (and his) prayers. Prior to leaving for the army, thousands of *yeshivah* students bid a tearful farewell to their beloved *Rebbe*. He strengthened each one of them, encouraging them to guard over their *Yiddishkeit* under all circumstances – regardless of the difficulty.

One day, during the war, the *Rebbe* received a letter containing original Torah thoughts, penned by a *yeshivah* student while he was in a bunker during a heavy battle. He asked questions, gave answers, and was able to present an excellent *halachic* discourse. When the *Rebbe* read this, he burst into tears. He raised his hands Heavenward and cried out, "*Ribono Shel Olam*, look at Your children. They go out to war, surrounded by the lowest, most vile, spiteful and cruel gentiles, and fight in battles under the harshest conditions; yet, they maintain their diligence in studying Your Torah. They not only learn – they are *mechadesh*, offer original Torah thoughts!"

The *Rebbe* turned to his *chassidim*, who stood there transfixed by the scene and said, "The Torah writes: *Ha'idosi bachem ha'yom es ha'Shomayim v'es ha'aretz*, 'I call Heaven and earth today to bear witness against you' (Ibid 30:19). The word *hi'idosi*, to testify, is also connected to *adai*, My ornaments. Hashem takes these *chiddushei Torah*, novella, those unique Torah thoughts written with *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice, and with them He decorates Heaven and earth, so that they

(Heaven and earth which are decorated with these Torah thoughts) shall attest to *Klal Yisrael's* total commitment to Torah under all circumstances.”