

Go for yourself, from your land. (12:1)

The purpose of the life of Avraham *Avinu* was to set the tenor for how a Jew should live. His life story begins with *Lech lecha*, “Go for yourself.” He was instructed to separate himself from the society at large and forge a new approach to living – the Jewish/Torah way of life. What best characterizes this way of life? *Horav Moshe Eismann, Shlita*, relates a short vignette which, by extrapolation, can serve as the guiding principle by which we are to live in the context of a society that is totally foreign (or should be) to our standard of living.

A young boy returned home one day from *cheder*. His father asked him, “*Nu*, Naftali, what did you learn in *cheder* today?” Naftali replied that the day’s lesson focused on a *pasuk* which was directly related to *Matan Torah*, the Giving of the Torah. In fact, as the commentators teach, it was a prerequisite to receiving the Torah. *Vayichan sham Yisrael neged ha’har*, “And Yisrael camped facing the mountain” (*Shemos* 19:2). Naftali asked, “Would you like to hear how the *rebbe* translated the *pasuk*, or how I translated it?” His father replied, “First, let me hear what the *rebbe* taught. Then I will listen to your *p’shat*, exposition.” “The *rebbe* said, ‘And the *Yidden* camped facing the mountain’ (which happens to be the correct translation). “And what was your translation?” his father asked. “And the *Yidden* camped with their backs to the world.”

What an insightful, powerful interpretation! Is it any wonder that young Naftali grew up to be the great *Horav* Naftali Ropshitzer, one of the giants of *chassidus*. His *p’shat* perfectly synopsis Avraham *Avinu*’s mission: Do your own thing. Serve Hashem with the necessary fervor and passion. Follow all His *mitzvos*. Do not allow the outside world to dictate how you will live, how you will serve Hashem. Your Jewish identity, and your moral/ethical standards are not to be defined by world opinion. While we certainly must be cognizant of – and sensitive to – the sensibilities of the various cultures and lifestyles of those around us, we should not permit them to dictate to us how to live and serve Hashem.

Avraham *Halvri*, one who lived as an *lvri*, with the world standing on one side, *eiver*, and he on the other *eiver*. His path of life was that of *Lech lecha* – he was to go – to separate from the outside world – and even family, so that he could start again on his own, with no one to rely on but Hashem. This is how he laid the foundation for his descendants; this is how he founded our people.

Unfortunately, some will take the concept of “our backs to the outside world” too far, to the point of antagonism. Such people are insecure and using *frumkeit*, their religious observance, as an excuse to garner attention and send a flawed message: “We are better than you. We do not care about you. Your opinion and feelings mean nothing to us.” We are truly different. We take great pride in our religious distinction and the way of life it has spawned. We are not here to rub it in your face, just to live our lives as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

The renaissance of the *yeshivah* world in *Eretz Yisrael* post World War II was made possible through the herculean efforts of a handful of *Roshei Yeshivah*, of which the Mirror *Rosh Yeshivah*,

Horav Eliezer Yehudah Finkel, zl, was one of the greatest powers. His devotion to his *talmidim*, and those of other *yeshivos*, was remarkable. He saw to their *ruchniyos*, spirituality, and also to their *gashmiyus*, mundane, physical needs. Shortly after the *Brisker Rav, zl*, and his sons arrived in *Eretz Yisrael*, *Rav Lazer Yudel* (as he was called) went to greet them and attend to their immediate needs. He was surprised to see that the young men were dressed in the garments they had worn in Europe, old fashioned caps and suits that had been in vogue in the European *shtetl*. He felt badly for them, thinking that they had no funds to purchase new suits and hats which were in tune with the *yeshivah* man of *Eretz Yisrael*.

When he saw the *Brisker Rav*, he remarked that he would be honored to pay for new, up-to-date clothing for his sons, since they now looked different than the other *bnei Torah* in the city. The *Brisker Rav* replied, "Yes, they do look different, they are *takeh* different." We are all different and should be proud of our distinction.

A Jew's distinction is demonstrated in the manner in which he acts under challenging conditions – circumstances in which one who had not been inculcated with Torah will act differently. We all know how our people acted during the tragic war years when the Nazis murdered six million of our brothers and sisters in the most cruel, heinous manner. The strengthening of character, the devotion to Torah and *mitzvos*, even the observance of *minhagim*, customs – all at the risk of their lives – should demonstrate how different we are. Yet, these were adults who had spent their lives in devotion to Hashem. They had a solid foundation upon which to build. What about Jewish children? Did their actions bespeak commitment? Did they show that they were different, raised by loving parents who had infused them with a love of and belief in Hashem? The following story underscores this idea.

Breslau Camp, Germany, 1944. A young boy was walking around the camp mumbling to himself. This went on for days until he became part of the ghetto landscape, and no one noticed him. He was just one other lonely child, who talked to himself. One day, he suddenly burst out crying bitter tears. The saintly *Kaliver Rebbe, zl*, happened to notice and he immediately ran over to comfort the child. He asked him his name, and, when the boy realized that he was speaking to another Jew, he opened up with his sad tale, "My name is Yitzchak Vinig from the Warsaw Ghetto. I am all alone, my entire family was taken to the death camps." The *Rebbe* asked him why he talked to himself. He explained, "I was separated from my mother and taken to be with a group of children. My mother ran after me crying uncontrollably. She called out amid her tears, 'Yitzchak, my precious child, look at me! Due to the troubled times we were unable to provide you with a proper Jewish education. But remember this always: Wherever you are, when times become bad for you, say, '*Shema Yisrael!* The *Eibishter* will protect you!' I was not mumbling. I was following my mother's instructions. I was saying *Shema Yisrael.*"