

## And shittim (acacia) wood. (25:5)

*Rashi* quotes *Midrash Tanchuma* that Yaakov Avinu's foresight (through *Ruach HaKodesh*, Divine Inspiration) was the reason that *Klal Yisrael* had *shittim* wood available for the *Mishkan*. Yaakov knew that his descendants would one day erect a Sanctuary in the wilderness. This edifice would require wood. Therefore, he planted trees when he arrived in Egypt, using seeds that he had brought with him from *Eretz Yisrael*. He commanded his sons (who obviously commanded it to their sons) that, when they would finally leave Egypt, they should cut down the trees and take them along. *Horav Eliyahu Meir Bloch, zl*, derives a powerful and practical lesson from *Chazal*. Yaakov Avinu did not seem concerned about the nation's ability to put food on the people's table.

As far as material sustenance is concerned, the people should be *mishtadel*, endeavor, when necessary and trust in Hashem that He will provide for them when necessary. With regard to *ruchniyos*, spirituality, however, we do not wait for miracles to occur. One must do everything within his means to set up and provide spiritual sustenance for himself and the community. The Jewish People left Egypt with no prospects for food. They trusted in Hashem to provide for them, as He did for the next forty years. With regard to the *Mishkan*, however, which was the spiritual dimension of their journey, Yaakov made sure that they had provisions.

An obvious lesson that can be derived from here regarding spiritual needs is that we must plan, work and worry. We do not rely on miracles when it comes to building religious institutions. We do everything within our power, from raising funds to scouring for students. Nothing happens by itself. The founding fathers of Torah in America – of whom *Rav Elya Meir Bloch* was among its leadership – understood this. The religious component was their primary focus. The building, food, and day-to-day maintenance were all parts of their *bitachon*. They trusted that Hashem would provide once they established the institution.

*Horav Chaim Mordechai Katz, zl*, who was co-founder of Telshe Yeshivah – together with his brother-in-law, *Rav Elya Meir* – would comment concerning the well-known *Mishnah* at the end of *Pirkei Avos*. A man met Rabbi Yose ben Kisma and asked him, *Fun vanet kumt a Yid?* “From where do you hail?” The *Tanna* replied that he came from a city in which Torah reigned supreme, with *Roshei Yeshivah*, *rabbanim*, *sofrim* and many students of Torah. The man countered, “I will give you a sizable amount of money and jewels to relocate.” *Rav Yose* replied, that he could give him all the money in the world, but he would only live in a place of Torah. The *man* asked, “Why not take the money and build a *yeshivah* which would attract the finest mentors and students?” He explained that it does not work that way. One does not build Torah with money. Torah is built with blood, sweat and tears. An institution whose focus is money will not succeed. Its leaders require *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice.

If I were to select a paradigm of *mesiras nefesh* for building Torah, an example of what it means to negate material and physical accoutrements for the purpose of building Torah in its most pristine foundation, I would focus on the Novarodok Yeshivah movement. Every movement revolves

characteristically around its founder. Novarodok was no different. To characterize the *Alter*, *zl*, of *Novarodok*, *Horav Yosef Yoizel Horowitz*, one must delve deep into this *mussar* approach of self-abrogation, soul-searching and introspection, as the precursor for developing oneself into a Jew truly devoted to serving and glorifying Hashem. He felt that one must first conquer his character deficits before he can improve. As long as the dross which is the work of one's *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, infects a person, he cannot successfully strive for greatness in Torah. Perhaps one of the *Alter's* aphorisms might aptly describe his approach to character development, which is a primary goal of *mussar*: "Man wants to achieve greatness overnight, and he wants to sleep well that night, too." When someone is gravely ill, it is necessary to treat him with numerous medicines until one finds the key to his cure.

In many ways, the *Alter* was a loner, his approach to spiritual growth too demanding and radical for others to emulate. There were also those who opposed his approach. He succeeded, however, in training Torah giants in Torah and *mussar* whose goal it was to spread out and save as many Jewish brothers as possible. The *Alter's* first *yeshivah* was established in Novarodok, quickly reaching an enrollment of 300 students and a *kollel* of 60 married men. He single-handedly performed all the customary functions of a *Rosh Yeshivah/maggid shiur*, administrator and executive director. His family remained in Slabodka, with the *Alter* returning home twice a year – for *Succos* and *Pesach*. His wife supported the family by selling pastries. He subsisted on the barest necessities of life while in the *yeshivah*. He was a brilliant *Rosh Yeshivah*, organizing his students into groups, with older students mentoring the younger ones, while he remained involved with everyone.

If not for the failed Russian Revolution of 1905, the Novarodok *Yeshivah* would have remained on site. Young *yeshivah* students became enchanted by the anti-Czarist rhetoric, and, suddenly, the young men who had no interest in anything but Torah and *mussar* began espousing the communist manifesto. The *Haskalah*, Enlightenment, dealt a terrible blow with their campaign against Jewish observance. *Rav* Yosef Yoizel responded with intensified learning. These were turbulent times, and those associated with his *yeshivah* would have to spread out and reach the masses of Jewish young people who were quickly becoming contaminated with the diseases of Communism and atheism.

The Novarodok students were instructed to spread out throughout Russia and its environs to the far outposts, the tiny rural communities, to find the children and establish *chadorim* and *yeshivos* for them. They had no money, just the tattered clothes on their back. They had, however, a fiery drive to spread Torah and feared nothing but failure. The economic challenges were acute, especially following World War I and the Great Depression. Food and shelter were commodities that were in great demand, but were subject to severe shortages.

Living in Eastern Europe during periods of political upheaval was especially dangerous. The authorities had no love for the Jews in general, and these young men who were spreading religious rhetoric would especially undermine their plans for a godless Russia. These factors, together with

the isolation and deprivation that accompanied living in remote places far from their families and the basic conveniences of life, intensified the challenges they faced. In some instances, the students had to learn a new language and navigate the cultural changes. Despite these hardships, these young men persevered in their commitment to spreading the teachings of the Novarodok *Yeshivah* throughout Eastern Europe. Their sacrifice played a critical role in the preservation and continuation of the movement's values and educational philosophy, even in the face of overwhelming adversity.

I conclude with another of the *Alter's* aphorisms: He was wont to say, "I have never concerned myself whether I can do something, but only whether it must be done. If it must be done, with Hashem's help, one will be able to accomplish it."