

## Hashem did not lead them by way of the land of Plishtim, because it was near. (13:17)

Our lives are filled with miracles. Yet, we do not take the time or make the effort to study them and to employ them as a pathway for deepening our *bitachon*, trust, in Hashem. When *Klal Yisrael* left Egypt, two paths were before them: the short and easy route through the land of Plishtim; the long circuitous route through the wilderness. *Rabbeinu Chananel* (quoted by *Rabbeinu Bachya*) explains that Hashem chose the long way which, albeit took them through the wilderness, provided the opportunity for exposure to additional miracles. A trip straight through Plishtim would not have availed them the opportunity to experience the miracle of the daily *manna*, the Heavenly-sent *slav*, quail, and water from a rock. The farther one distances himself from the *yishuv* -- rural, inhabited places -- and is forced to live without conveniences, the deeper are his insights into seeing Hashem's constant miracles -- which we often take for granted.

*Rabbeinu Chananel* adds that Hashem orchestrates life in a manner that increases the opportunity for miracles to be used as the vehicle of salvation. When Chananyah, Misha'el and Azaryah were flung into the fiery cauldron, Hashem could have easily saved them by extinguishing the fire. Instead, He allowed it to burn with extreme intensity, allowing for a different and more compelling miracle to save them. When Daniel was put into a cage with ravenous lions, Hashem could have killed the lions. Instead, they lived and, ferocious as they were, they did not harm Daniel. Thus, concludes *Rabbeinu Chananel*, one should know that every step of *Klal Yisrael's* journey through the wilderness was filled with *nisyanos*, challenges/tests, all for the purpose of imbuing the Jewish psyche with *emunah* and *bitachon* in Hashem.

We derive from here, explains *Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, shlita*, that in order for one to grow successfully in Torah, he must live his life as if he were in the wilderness, away from the conveniences of life. One must self-abnegate in order to "make room" for Torah. When one transforms himself into a *midbar*, Hashem grants him Torah as a Divine gift. Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his son, Rabbi Eliezer, secluded themselves in a cave for twelve years, sustained by carob fruit and water from a spring. As a result, their spiritual ascendance was such that they could not understand how people could waste their time working, when they have had the opportunity to study Torah. Everywhere that Rabbi Eliezer gazed immediately burst into flames. After living in a *midbar* for twelve years, his tolerance level for anything less than wholly spiritual was nonexistent.

*Horav Shimshon Pincus, zl*, cites *Chazal* (*Yoma* 53A) that relates that, when *Rava* left the home of his *Rebbe*, *Rav Yosef*, he walked backwards, despite the fact that *Rav Yosef* was blind and would not notice the respect his student accorded him. As a result of *Rava's* walking backwards, he would trip on the threshold and injure his foot to the point that it bled. When this was told to *Rav Yosef*, the sage responded, *Yehi ratzon*, may it be the will of Hashem that *Rava* should become a *Rosh Yeshiva* because he sacrificed himself for the *kavod*, honor, of the Torah. A man who sacrifices for *kavod haTorah* to the point that he bleeds is an entirely different person. Such a

person understands the depth of Torah and, in effect, is recreated by it.

The following vignettes are about our *gedolei Yisrael* of the past generation and what they went through – without complaint – to achieve their greatness.

*Horav Aharon Leib Shteinman, zl*, was a young *bochur* learning in Switzerland after the war, living in extreme poverty. His room was unheated during the freezing European winters. To keep warm, he had only a thin blanket – so thin that, when snow would fall through the cracks of the roof and land on his bed, he would be covered in snow. However, he refused to leave, saying, “If I move to a warmer place, I might lose the *hasmadah*, diligence, I have here.” He would rather shiver through the night than lose his *geshmak* in learning. Years later, when he was already a revered leader of the generation, he once remarked to a *talmid*: “The warmth that a person feels in Torah never comes from the blanket – it comes from the fire inside.”

When *Horav Shmuel Rozovsky, zl*, was a *bochur* in Europe, he was so poor that he couldn’t afford bread. He would live on scraps of food given to him by kindhearted neighbors. Yet, he once said that those were the happiest days of his life.

“I was hungry,” he said, “but I was filled with Torah. And that hunger made every word of Torah taste sweeter.”

He used to say that the letters of the Gemarra became engraved on his heart during those days of hardship.

*Horav Chaim Kanievsky’s* life was a constant expression of sacrifice of Torah, but one small story captures it best. A relative once entered his home and found him eating a small piece of bread with sardines – standing up. When asked why he didn’t sit down to eat properly, Rav Chaim replied simply: “If I sit, it takes longer.” Even the extra seconds of sitting were too precious to waste when they could be used for Torah. Every moment, every breath, was sacrificed to learning.

In his early years in Europe, *Horav Elazar M. Shach, zl*, learned in the *yeshivah* of Slabodka under freezing, dark conditions. Many nights, they did not have enough money to buy candles. Rav Shach would stand near the window, trying to catch a glimpse of moonlight to continue learning. Years later, when he was already *Rosh Yeshivah* of Ponovezh, he once told a *bochur* who was struggling: “You cannot know what Torah costs until you learn by the light of the moon.”

In the Soviet Union, under Stalin’s reign of terror, *Rav Moshe Feinstein, zl*, risked imprisonment for maintaining a *yeshivah* in Luban. When the authorities discovered what he was doing, he refused to stop. He told his wife, “If they take me away for teaching Torah, I will neither be the first nor the last.” He was eventually forced to flee, but his unwavering faith and courage inspired generations. Even in America, with its new challenges of comfort and distraction, he lived with the same intensity: Torah first, always.

When *Horav Yaakov Kamenetsky, zl*, was offered a position that would ease his financial strain, but take time away from learning, he turned it down. He explained to a friend: “A person can earn a living many ways. But Torah --- that must be earned with one’s life.” His whole life embodied balance and reason rooted in this deep sense of sacrifice – that Torah study is not a pastime, but the very purpose of life.

After escaping Europe and settling in Cleveland, *Horav Chaim Mordechai Katz, zl*, faced a world indifferent – even hostile – to the idea of full-time Torah learning. He sacrificed comfort, health, and financial stability to establish Telshe *Yeshivah* in America. The yeshiva had no dorms, no salaries, no support – but *HaRav* Katz faith. He once told a student: “The Torah that survived Telshe did not come across in crates. It came through tears and fire. If you wish to carry it on, you must learn with that same fire.”