



Toras Avigdor

Junior

Adapted from the teachings
of Rav Avigdor Miller z"l

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וארא

Learning in Lockdown

Mazel Tov to our parents
upon the wedding of our sister
to Benny Steuer

בורא עולם בקנין השלם זה הבנין



Learning in Lockdown

Nochum climbed the steps to Mr. Sternokovsky's apartment. Mr. Sternokovsky was the most popular man in the shul – he was the candy man – and he always made everybody happy with his big smile. But today it was Nochum's turn to make Mr. Sternokovsky happy.

Mr. Sternokovsky's doctor had said that because of Covid-19 it wouldn't be safe for him to be in a crowded place for so many hours. So now Mr. Sternokovsky didn't come to shul on Shabbos anymore. And so Nochum was going to visit him like he did every erev Shabbos.

The truth is that it was a pretty fun mitzvah because Mr. Sternokovsky was born in Russia way back, around 1930. He was almost 90 years old and he always had interesting stories to tell.

"Hi Nochum!" Mr. Sternokovsky said as he opened the door. "It's so good to see you again. I just put out some cookies on the kitchen table. Why don't we sit down there for a few minutes so you can eat something?"

Nochum sat at the table eating some of the cookies. When he checked the time he couldn't believe how fast forty five minutes had passed as Mr. Sternokovsky shared story after story about his life in Russia.

"It was Yom Kippur afternoon," Mr. Sternokovsky was saying, "and we were davening as quietly as we could so that the KGB wouldn't catch us. Even during *neilah*, when some of us were crying, we made sure to keep as quiet as possible.

"Suddenly there was a pounding on the door. *Bang! Bang!* 'Otkryvayte nemedlenno! Otkroy dver!' Open up immediately! Open the door!". We were prepared for a KGB visit – in Russia we always had to be ready for something like that – so we all followed the plan. Everyone ran for the secret exit in the closet while I stayed behind to lock the trap door behind them. Because I was the youngest in the group it was my job to stay behind and just play the part of an innocent teenager.

"Wow, Mr. Sternokovsky," exclaimed Nochum. "What a perfect plan! What happened next?"

“Well,” continued Mr. Sternokovsky, “it wasn’t so perfect because one of the *mispallelim* accidentally left a *machzor* on the table. I was arrested for having “forbidden material” on me and the judge sentenced me to prison for one year.”

“Oh my,” whispered Nochum. “That must have been hard! You must feel terrible that you wasted a whole year of your life. What did you do all day? You just sat and did nothing?”

“*Boruch Hashem*, no!” Mr. Sternokovsky exclaimed with a smile. “I spent my entire time in prison learning!”

Nochum was confused. “Mr. Sternokovsky,” he said, “How could it be that the Russians wouldn’t let you daven on *Yom Kippur* but they let you have *seforim* in prison?”

“Oh no, of course they wouldn’t allow us to have *seforim*,” Mr. Sternokovsky answered. “If someone were caught with a *sefer*, they’d be beaten and sent to Siberia! I’m talking about a different type of learning.

“As the guards locked me in my prison cell for the first time, I suddenly remembered what my father had told me. He said that in *Slabodka*, his *Rebbi*, *R’ Isaac Sher Zt”l*, taught a *medrash*. The *medrash* says that a terrible virus – a catchy virus kind of like what we have today with *Covid* – came along with every *makah* in *Mitzrayim*. With *dam* came a *Covid*, with *tzefardeia* came a *Covid* and so on and so on by each *makkah*.



“Why did Hashem do that? Hashem wanted the Yidden to be locked up in their homes during the makkos because that would give them time to think! You know if you can go out to work and play and shop so you get very busy with life – sometimes too busy – and you forget to think about the things you’re supposed to be focusing on.

“Rav Isaac Sher - that was Rav Avigdor Miller’s rebbi - said that Hashem wanted the Yidden to be locked up in their houses during the makkos and spend their time thinking about the lessons they were supposed to learn.”

“Lessons?” asked Nochum. “Weren’t the Makkos meant to punish the Mitzri’im?”

“Of course they were a punishment for the Mitzri’im!” said Mr. Sternokovsky. “But the main purpose was for us - we were supposed to learn a lesson from each makah! To see how Hashem is protecting the Am Yisroel; that He cares about us and that we’re His chosen people. And we learned the lessons! By every makah, the Bnei Yisroel sat in their homes in Goshen for a whole week studying the makkah and looking for all the lessons that they were supposed to learn from that – how Hashem could turn a whole country upside down and inside out whenever He wants to. Having time to think about Hashem, Rav Isaac Sher said, is one of the best gifts that Hashem could give a person in this world!

“And so, as soon as the Russian prison guard clanged the metal door shut on my cell, I told myself that I had to get to work doing the same thing that the Yidden did when they were locked in their homes. I was stuck in a cell all day doing nothing except thinking about Hashem as much as possible. I was doing teshuva and strengthening myself as much as possible in my avodas Hashem. And the same way that the Bnei Yisroel were a totally changed people after a year of thinking about Hashem, when I was let out of prison a year later I was a totally new person! I was prepared for a life of serving Hashem.”

Have a Wonderful Shabbos



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