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RAV AVIGDOR MILLER ZT"L

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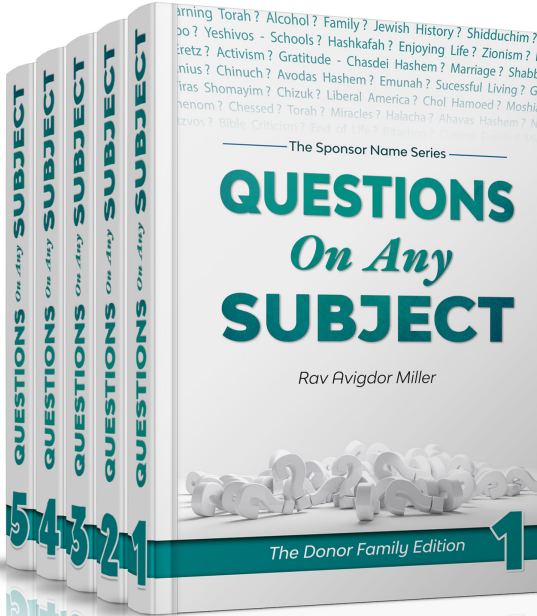
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Year 6 | Issue 41 | Parshas Mattos Masei

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פרשת מטות-מסעי

WITH

R' AVIGDOR MILLER ZT"l

BASED ON HIS BOOKS, TAPES & WRITINGS OF TALMIDIM

Close to Hashem

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Part I. The Sage that Wandered

Five Disciples

In Pirkei Avos we're told that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, one of the great Sages in our history, had five chief *talmidim* (2:10). It doesn't mean that he had only five students – he had thousands – but these five were unique; they were the *roshei hador*. Each one of them was a great man in his own right, with his own *yeshivah* and with many *talmidim* of his own.

Now if we begin to look at their names, we see right away who they were. Let's say the first one mentioned there, Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkanus. *The Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkanus!* And Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananyah; he was called the *chakima d'yehudai*, the great Sage of our people. This is the Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua who are always mentioned together in the Shas. They were *talmidim* of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai. Well, we begin to understand already the quality, the caliber, of his *talmidim*.

Now, among these five, the most outstanding one was a certain Rabbi Elazar ben Arach. It could be that his name sounds a little less familiar than the others but if we want to understand his greatness, we have to listen to the words of his *rebbe*.

Weighing In

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai said (Avos *ibid.*) as follows: אִם יִהְיוּ כָּל חַכְמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּכַף מֵאַזְנֵימַי – Suppose all the *chachmei Yisroel* were on one side of a scale. Imagine, he said, that somehow you were able to do that; to take all of the *talmidei chachomim* and put them on one side of a scale. So it's a heavy scale, heavy with wisdom! All the *chachmei Yisroel*! וְאַלְיָעֶזֶר בֶּן הוֹרְקָנוֹס בְּכַף שְׁנֵייהָ – And on the other side you put Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkanus; he's by himself on the opposite side of the scale. מְכַרִיעַ אֶת כָּלָם – Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkanus is just as important as all of them.

Now, that's an extreme statement to make, we would never have said it ourselves. And the truth is that even after hearing it, we don't quite understand it. But that's what the *rebbe* said about Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkanus, that he's *machria es kulam*.

And then Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai made a second statement about his *talmidim*. "If you would take this Rabbi Eliezer ben Horkanus and put him now on the other side of the scale, together with all the other *chachmei haTorah* – it's very heavy now; it's hard to imagine how heavy – and you would put Rabbi Elazar ben Arach on the other side, so he would be *machria es kulam*. Rabbi Elazar ben Arach would outweigh them all.

Now, that we *surely* can't understand. I wouldn't begin to attempt to fathom that but at least we begin to understand who Rabbi Elazar ben Arach was. He was a unicum, an unequalled phenomenon, something that happens once in generations.

The Disappearing Unicum

Now with such a preface, we are prepared to see the name of Rabbi Elazar ben Arach everywhere in the *ohalei Torah*. Wherever any matter is brought up for discussion, we should see his name among the chief of the participants. Not only in the halachic discussions. Wherever there's any question in the *hanhagah* of Klal Yisrael, the guidance of the people, what the Am Yisrael should do so Rabbi Elazar ben Arach is expected to be there.

But if you're a little bit familiar with Shas, as you turn the pages of the Gemara you will look in vain for the name of Rabbi Elazar ben Arach. He

is not there. Not that he's there infrequently – he just isn't there at all! Yes, you might find him in Tosefta in one place. You'll find him in Pirkei Avos in this place. And there's also a mention about him in Mesichta Shabbos. But other than that it's silence; nothing at all.

So what happened to Rabbi Elazar ben Arach that he disappeared from the Shas? How is it that he went lost from Jewish history? We don't find him among the leaders. His fellow *talmidim* are found everywhere in Shas. But Rabbi Elazar ben Arach, the one who was elected by his *rebbe* not only as the greatest *chacham* but the one who by far outweighs all the *chachmei haTorah*, is absent from the annals of our history. Now that's a puzzle that deserves to be studied.

A New Center

So we look at what the Gemara tells us in Mesichta Shabbos. What I'm telling you is pieced together from various places (*ed. See "Exalted People" 112-115*) but the general idea is in Mesichta Shabbos (147b).

You know, after the *churban beis hamikdash* there were a lot of problems. The Jewish nation had just been shattered by a crushing blow. A tremendous amount of people had been destroyed and many had been sold into slavery. And all the processes of Jewish life, the whole organization of the Jewish community, had been smashed and it was left up the *chachmei haTorah* to build up again from the ruins so there should be some semblance of the Jewish nation. And it was to the town of Yavneh where the *chachmei Yisroel* gathered to do their work, to handle the important problems of the Jewish people. And that's how Yavneh became the center of Torah after the *churban* of the *Beis Hamikdash*.

At that time the one who was put in charge was Rabban Gamliel, Rabban Gamliel of Yavneh. Now Rabban Gamliel was one of the *talmidim* of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai but he wasn't counted among the five mentioned above because these five were superior to him. And he was younger too. But since he was the Nasi – he inherited the crown – therefore he carried the responsibility for the Klal Yisroel on his shoulders.

The Old Generation

And in order to enhance the authority of this new Nasi, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, the elder Sage of the generation, removed himself from Yavneh and he went to live in Beror Chayil. Rabbi Yochanan was a towering personality after all. He had received the Torah traditions directly from Hillel and Shammai a hundred years ago. And therefore had he been in Yavneh, Rabban Gamliel would have been overshadowed. So in

order to enhance the stature of Raban Gamliel, Rabbi Yochanan remained secluded in Beror Chayil with his five main *talmidim*.

Now when Rabbi Yochanan was *niftar* at the age of 120 so the *talmidim* said to each other, “Look, there’s no reason to remain anymore in Beror Chayil if our *rebbe* is gone. So let’s go to Yavneh now, to the center of Torah living.” And so they all picked up their families and whatever belongings they had and went to Yavneh.

Now this is where our story begins because I say they ‘all’ went there but it’s not exactly correct because something happened. Something happened now that created this mystery of Rabbi Elazar ben Arach going lost from history.

Solving the Mystery

You know, there’s a French phrase used by the police. The police have a French saying in every mystery, in every crime that happens: “*Cherchez la femme*,” they say. It means “Look out for the woman.” If you want to solve the mystery, search for the woman in the case and it will give you a good lead.

And in our case, it was the wife of Rabbi Elazar ben Arach. She’s the one who did him the great ‘favor’ of taking him out of Jewish history. What’s the story?

Near Beror Chayil there were found the *maya d’Deyumsis*, the hot water springs of Diomeses. Now these springs were a rarity and it was a tremendous convenience in those olden days when they didn’t have hot water heating in the house. There was hot water coming out of the earth for free!

And so Rabbi Elazar’s wife said to him, “It’s so nice living out here in the suburbs; there are so many conveniences. Why should we go to Yavneh when here I can just walk out and cook without having to go to a well to draw water and then find wood and start a fire. I just take a pot and stick it in the hot springs and it cooks.”

Kavod HaTorah

Now, don’t think that his wife said it like that. She would never say such a thing. She wasn’t a modern Orthodox woman; she would never say, “Why do we have to move to the yeshivah? It’s so comfortable here.”

Here’s what she said. “Elazar, who needs whom? You need them?! Have you so quickly forgotten what your *rebbe* said about you, that you outweigh all of them put together?”

So he said, "Well, who can get along without *chaveirim*? You need comrades to succeed in learning. The best thing for us is if we move to the center of Torah life."

So she said, "But you *are* the center of the Torah. That's the *psak* of your *rebbe*. You're big enough to be on your own. If they want to make progress in their studies, they'll come to you."

Now, I'm sure she said even more thorough words, more convincing words, than I can think of. Maybe she said, "It's not the *kavod haTorah* for you to move there. You're lowering the dignity of the Torah if you drag yourself around for their sake. If you have a *sefer Torah*, can you drag it around? You have to maintain a certain regard for it; at least a minimum modicum of respect."

Hidden Motives

So his wife had good arguments and she said all the right things. But what caused all the good arguments? What caused the great regard for *kavod haTorah*? What caused the arguments to be so persuasive? The *maya d'Deyumsis*, the hot springs. That caused her to think about *kavod haTorah*.

And so Rabbi Elazar ben Arach finally conceded to his wife and he remained in Beror Chayil. What happened? They enjoyed the convenience of hot baths. And his wife had plenty of hot water to cook and wash clothes. But meanwhile his comrades were in Yavneh making progress from hour to hour and from day to day. It's true they lived in poverty and in crowded quarters. Everybody crowded into the town of Yavneh and it wasn't easy. But from day to day they became bigger and bigger and he, in Beror Chayil, became smaller and smaller from day to day.

Now, had he realized how events would unfold, he wouldn't have listened. He would have said, "I'm not interested in arguments! I'm interested only in being among the best and so we're going to Yavneh and that's the final word." But he didn't say that. He was persuaded to stay.

The Stultified Mind

And the Gemara (Shabbos *ibid.*) tells us a tragic picture of what happened eventually. There came a day when Rabbi Elazar ben Arach showed up. Years passed and he showed up finally. And it was Parshas Hachodesh and they gave him an *aliyah*. In those days anybody who had an *aliyah* used to read the Torah himself. Today, since people are not capable so they have one man who reads for everybody; but in those days

when you got up to the Torah you read yourself. Now, in the Parshas Hachodesh you say **הַחֹרֶשׁ הָיָה לָכֶם**. Well, Rabbi Elazar ben Arach got up and started reading and the *daled* looked to him like a *reish* and the *chaf* looked like a *beis* so he read it **הַחֹרֶשׁ הָיָה לָבֶם** – *their heart has become deaf*. Then he caught himself, but he already said it. From his mouth there fell a prophecy that described his plight: “Their heart has become deaf.” It means their minds have become stultified.

Now his comrades who were present at that time – it was at a certain meeting time when they were all together and when they heard these words coming out of his mouth – they all wept at the great tragedy which had taken place to the Jewish nation. The Gemara relates that they prayed and the Almighty helped him, he regained some of his wisdom. But he was no longer Rabbi Elazar ben Arach. It was a major tragedy in our history and it happened because of the decision to separate from the center of the Torah world.

Part II. The Tribes that Wandered

A Seeming Error

In Parshas Masei when the Bnei Yisroel were encamped in the Eiver HaYarden preparing to begin the conquest of Eretz Canaan, there came to Moshe Rabbeinu a delegation from the Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven. And they told Moshe that they would like to settle right there in Eiver Hayarden instead of receiving their portion in Canaan. After all **וּמִקְנֵה רֶב הָיָה לְבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן** – *the tribe of Reuven and Gad had a wealth of herds, exceedingly great*, **וַיֵּדְאוּ אֶת אֶרֶץ יַעֲזָר וְאֶת אֶרֶץ גִּלְעָד וְהָיָה הַמְּקוֹם מְקוֹם מִקְנֵה** – *and they saw that this land in the Transjordan was well-suited for pasture* (Matos 32:1).

Now if you recall in the Chumash, Moshe Rabbeinu then delivered a tirade – for the Chumash, it’s an exceptionally long speech. And he accused them of following the tactics of the *meraglim* years before who had caused the disaster that they couldn’t enter Eretz Canaan; and he accused them vehemently, saying that they’re repeating the same error.

Now if you remember the story, right after Moshe Rabbeinu speaks to them, they told Moshe that it’s not so, that he misunderstood them altogether. “We have no intention of hindering the conquest of Eretz Canaan,” they said. “On the contrary, we volunteer to go ahead as a vanguard, fighting on behalf of the nation.” All they wanted is when the

time comes to distribute the land that their share should be in Eiver HaYarden.

And so when you read the Chumash, it seems that Moshe Rabbeinu had made an error. It seems that he had become heated up and accused them unjustly. He accused them of going in the ways of the *meraglim* and trying to dissuade the people from entering Eretz Canaan but actually it was nothing but an error. Moshe Rabbeinu was a *choshed bekesheirim* because on the contrary, they meant business. They even meant to go ahead and be *chalutzim*; to be the vanguard that helps their brothers conquer the land. And so it seems from the Chumash that Moshe made a big mistake; he misjudged them and got overheated for nothing.

Crooks Make No Errors

Now Moshe Rabbeinu we have to know was capable of making a mistake. When he's speaking as a *basar vedam*, it's possible to make an error. It's only when he was speaking in the name of Hakadosh Baruch Hu, then he couldn't be wrong. But when he was saying his own words, he could make errors.

And he did. We're told so in the Chumash. And that's the glory, the truth of the Torah by the way. It proves the truth. *Lehavdil elef havdalos* in the Testament of Yoshke Pondra they'll never say once – never once! – that he made an error. He could make an error?! Hohoho! Or Muhammed should make an error?! It's out of the question! The answer is crooks never make errors. Only honest people make errors.

And so when Moshe made mistakes, we're told about it. There's nothing to hide. And yet in this case where he gave a tirade of rebuke and accusation against the Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven, this instance is not included in his errors. He's not even criticized for being a *choshed bekesheirim*. You know, a person who suspects innocent people, he's considered blameworthy. And he's punished too. חוֹשֵׁד בְּכַשְׁרִים לֹקֵהוּ בְּגִפּוֹ – *he's punished physically*. And here Moshe didn't say only a small word of rebuke; he said a long speech of accusation, very strong words. And yet there's no blame at all. Why is that?

Not Mistaken

The answer is that Moshe Rabbeinu made no error – he justly accused them. And what was the accusation? Not that they wanted to prevent the Am Yisroel from entering Eretz Canaan. That Moshe Rabbeinu mentioned for a certain reason – because it's true, that as far as what pertains to the nation on a whole this desire to stay in the Transjordan could cause a

weakening, a fear, among the rest of the people. But Moshe's real accusation was, "Why is it that you desire to settle so far away from the center of your people, from the main body of the people, on the other side of the river?"

In those days it wasn't a simple matter being so far away. It means crossing rivers and mountains – it was a real separation. "And if you're so interested in staying on this side of the Jordan River," Moshe said, "that already shows a symptom of something brewing." It could be you're a very pious man but if you're willing to settle far away from the center, you already have in you the germ of being a defector, a renegade.

You know, all sicknesses begin with a small infection. Some germs are wafted on the breeze and you breathe them in at a susceptible moment, when your resistance is low, and now the barrier is breached. Our whole system is coated with a mucus that's able to combat infection but when a person is tired or he's weakened so this membrane in some places is not efficient and then that little germ that once seemed so harmless, so benign, can now find a place to penetrate.

Let History Judge

And therefore, Moshe Rabbeinu, when he pointed out the results that could happen from this step, he was making no error. That germ of not wanting to be as close as possible, couldn't be allowed to develop and therefore Moshe wanted to nip it in the bud. It's true that in the days of Moshe it was only an innocent beginning. But Moshe Rabbeinu wasn't so shortsighted. And he understood that the fact they were choosing to live far away, was already the beginning of something much worse.

And history proved Moshe Rabbeinu right. The Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven, because they chose to remain on the far side of the Jordan, you know what happened? The fact is that because these two and a half tribes distanced themselves from the Torah center, they were the first to be influenced by their environment and they went lost first. That's history.

You know, all of the ten *shevatim* eventually went into exile but it didn't happen all at once. In the first installment, long before the rest were exiled, Gad and Reuven went lost. Moshe's violent rebuke sufficed to check this deterioration for seven hundred and fifty years but when they had reached a level which could no longer be tolerated, these two and a half tribes were the first to be torn away when Pul the king of Ashur carried them off into captivity. And our Sages tell us why it happened that way. It's their fault because they chose to live far away. That germ that

Moshe Rabbeinu had harangued them about so many years before, had taken root in the body of these two *shevatim* and finally, they were so sickened that they went lost.

And you can be sure that as they were marching off to be lost among the nations that some of them, the wiser ones, were thinking, “That’s the reason. Moshe Rabbeinu warned us long ago that this would happen.” And even those who weren’t thinking that, there’s no question that the other *shevatim*, who heard about this tragedy, they *were* thinking about it. And that’s why many of them left their homes and fields in the Northern Kingdom and they moved to Yehudah. They learned the lesson from the downfall of their brothers in the Transjordan and they made sure to move back to the Torah center of the nation.

The Ten Tribes

Many didn’t. And they eventually too went lost. You know we had a lot of brothers once; the ten tribes. We call them ‘tribes’ – we think they were Indians with feathers in their heads. They were more civilized than we are. *Shevatim* means ‘families;’ Reuven and Shimon, the *giborim* of Ephraim, the *alfei Menashe*. They were our great pride, but they were cut off. And today, without our brothers, we are like people with a hand cut off. People don’t even realize we’re missing our brother *shevatim*. A man who has lived a long life with one hand, he doesn’t realize what he’s missing.

What happened to them? They didn’t study the speech of Moshe Rabbeinu the way we are tonight and they chose to stay in the kingdom of Yeravam ben Nevat. And when the time came they went lost along with that kingdom.

Now it didn’t have to be that way. They could have learned from the tragedy of Bnei Gad and Reuven. What they could have done was when Yeravam ben Nevat came up with the plan to cut them off and not to travel three times a year to go to the *Beis Hamikdash*, they could have pulled up their stakes and they could have gone back to the land of Yehudah. They could have forsaken their homes. The truth is a lot did. It states in *Divrei Hayomim* that many Jews forsook the *aseres hashevatim* and they went to settle in Yehudah. There were many who were wise enough to say, “If we’re going to be cut off from the *Beis Hamikdash* then we don’t want to be here.”

But the vast majority remained. They said, “We’ll manage. We’ll get along. We will try to ignore Yeravam ben Nevat. Despite everything, we’ll hold out. We’ll maintain our ideals.”

Ease and Comfort

It’s like the family that moves away from Brooklyn or some other Torah center to be in the suburbs and they see that their children are becoming TV children – how could they not if all of their friends are? But the father imagines that they’ll be okay. He thinks they’ll maintain the ideals that he was able to maintain because he lived in Brooklyn. And anyhow, over here in the suburbs, life is easier.

Why did the Ten Tribes remain? You want to know reasons? There are many reasons why they went lost. Some reasons are reasons for reasons, motivations for motivations, but the Gemara tells us that the reason behind all the reasons was the desire for a life of ease. What caused them to be cut off from us? The Gemara says *chamra d’Prugisa umaya d’Deyumsis*.

Now, that’s already a familiar term for us. Just like Beror Chayil and just like the Transjordan, the land of the *aseres hashevatim* was a place of conveniences. It was a fat land. It was fertile. It was a good living there. And therefore they found reasons and excuses. But *sof kol sof* it was their desire to have an easy life, their reluctance to part with comfort, the lack of willingness to sacrifice, that caused them to go lost.

Saved by Sticking Together

You know who remained? You know who makes up the Am Yisroel today? Yehudah! Yes, Levi too. Levi was always mixed with Yehudah so they were saved, but we’re called Jews because we’re Judeans, from Yehudah. And all the Jews who moved towards the center, those were the ones who were saved. The Am Yisroel today is made up primarily of them. Everyone else went lost.

And what was it that saved them from being lost in oblivion? The fact that they gravitated towards the Torah center, to the place where the Torah was flourishing most. That’s what saved the Am Yisroel. That’s us, those of us who are still here; that’s why we’re still around today while so many of our brothers went lost. And you have to study that. It’s not an accident. There’s a great lesson in these stories – Rabbi Elazar ben Arach, Bnei Gad u’Bnei Reuven, the *aseres hashevatim* – and that is that proximity is one of the biggest factors in deciding the career of man and nation.

Part III. The Man that Wanders

The Secure Nest

There's a *possuk* in Mishlei as follows: **כְּצִפּוֹר נוֹדֶדֶת מִן קְנֶה** – *Like a bird that wanders out of its nest, כֵּן אִישׁ נוֹדֵד מִמְקוֹמוֹ – *so is a man who wanders away from his place* (Mishlei 27:8). There's a little bird in its nest, perched way up in the tree, hemmed in by the nest, and he's looking down and he feels secure. He feels even too secure and so he gets an idea into his little head: "I would like to travel around." In the nest, it has no experience with enemies and so he thinks that down below it's just as safe as in the nest.*

So he stands on the rim of the nest and decides to topple over. He has some fledgling wings so he doesn't get hurt too much. He lands on the ground, looks around and he feels he's at home. He's ready to conquer the world.

He starts waddling around and first of all he discovers that it's rough going. He didn't know it before but there are ups and downs in this world. There are bumps and detours, all types of obstacles. And then he sees big monsters coming. Here are skunks and there is a chipmunk. A squirrel is like a dinosaur to the little bird! And now the little bird is sorry that it has left its nest.

Who is the Bird?

'*And so too is a man who forsakes his place.*' What does that mean he 'forsakes his place'? The Gemara (Chagigah 9b) says **זֶה תַלְמִיד חָכָם הַפּוֹרֵשׁ מִן הַתּוֹרָה**. The little defenseless bird is a *mashal* for the man who forsakes the Torah.

Now don't misunderstand. It doesn't mean he forsakes being an Orthodox Jew. In the times of the Gemara, there was no such *heichi timtza*, no possibility. Nobody forsook being an Orthodox Jew. There was nothing else you could be in those days.

We misinterpret that Gemara because today you think that if you're a *shomer Shabbos* and you have a *sukkah* and a few more things so you already made it and now you're ready to face the world. Not much could go wrong anyhow. You won't be *poreish min haTorah*. You'll keep Shabbos, you'll wear *tefillin*, you'll make blessings. You'll be a good Orthodox Jew, so you're a success.

Forsaking the Torah

No, no. Being Orthodox, that's not enough. Of course if you're not that yet, then you'd better hurry up and get busy! Get busy catching up! You can't go on being a nothing forever. But even if you make it and now you're an Orthodox Jew, that's only the minimum. It's like a man who wears pants. If he walks down Ocean Parkway wearing pants, you think he'll congratulate himself? Do you know who will congratulate himself for that? A fellow who comes from Congo and he puts on pants so he thinks he's an aristocrat. But a civilized man who wears pants is not proud of it. He's no big *yachsan* for wearing pants.

So a *porush min haTorah* means that this Jew is still a *shomer mitzvos*, absolutely. He'll never remove his pants! He wouldn't even entertain the idea. When a man 'forsakes the Torah' in the language of Gemara it means he forsakes the *chaburah*. He forsakes his milieu, his environment. He forsakes his *yeshivah* or the place where he can keep growing. When a man goes away from his place where he belongs so he should know he's like a bird out of its nest.

Mayor Lindsay's Perilous Kollel

Imagine here's a *yeshivah* man. He's already of an advanced age, let's say twenty-six. An old man of twenty-six. It's been a long time – more than three years already – and his wife is giving him hints; her father is tired of supporting him. And so he's thinking, "What's such a big thing to be in a *yeshivah*? I don't need my *rebbe*s anymore. Outside I'll be able to learn by myself. Even if I work all day long, I'll be *koveia ittim* at night. Or whatever it is. I'll get along."

But this man doesn't realize that he is a little unprotected bird. In the nest, he has not experienced the perils of the outside world; and there *are* perils. Extremely big dangers are lurking in wait for every man. Very dangerous squirrels are waiting for him!

Now the man who never learned, he was never in a place of Torah, and he's out on the street, he's in an office or in the factory, he's also faced by these terrors but he doesn't know it. He has no idea how he's being destroyed by the environment. Here's a man and he's working, let's say, in a city office, in Mayor Lindsay's *kollel* where you work part-time and you get paid for full time. And in that same office there are – we'll call them ladies for the sake of charity. But they are dressed like I don't want to say. Wherever you look it's **פְּרוּץ מְרֵבָה עַל הָעוֹמֵד** – it's more open than closed. In Gemara language when a wall is down and there's only a

minority of the picket still standing, that's called פרוץ מרבה על העומד. And so it's dangerous, he's in a great peril.

You don't think it's such a peril? A *grubbeh yung*, an *am haaretz* who's raised with such things so he doesn't even begin to feel that he's being drowned in the swamp of immorality. He doesn't even sense the danger. But he's drowning. It makes no difference whether he knows it or not. And therefore a *frum* Jew has to know that forsaking his place, the place where he can grow best is very dangerous.

Roaring Yeshivah Towns

Now the Gemara (Kesubos 111a) tells that there was a *talmid chacham* who lived in Pumbedisa. Now Pumbedisa, you have to know, was a yeshivah town. People in America don't know about yeshivah towns. Had you lived, let's say, in Telz in Europe, you would know. It was a small town and the yeshivah occupied a central place. Wherever you were in the small town, you could hear the roar of the yeshivah. Sometimes near the beach, even a block away, you can hear the surf pounding by day and by night. That's how it was in a yeshivah town. It was a small town and you were never out of earshot of the yeshivah. Day and night it was like the roar of ocean breakers pounding up on the shore.

Even outside the town. When I was in Lithuania a friend of mine visited the yeshivah of Telz and he said he was walking with the yeshivah *bochurim* on the outskirts of Telz, among the farms outside the town. So the yeshivah *bochur* says, 'Es *shmekt uhn mit Ketzos Hachoshen*'. The fields around Telz smelled like the Ketzos Hachoshen! Why was that? For generations people had walked after the *sedarim* in the yeshivah, they walked there and they talked in learning, on the Ketzos Hachoshen. Now, if that was Telz, we can't even imagine what Pumbedisa was.

Reason for Cherem

Now, not far away from Pumbedisa was a little place called Bei Kubi. It was close by. When the Gemara wants to give an example of a short distance, it says *mePumbedisa leBei Kubi* – like from Pumbedisa to Bei Kubi. It says that frequently in the Gemara. It means it's right nearby. And this young *talmid chochom* moved from Pumbedisa to Bei Kubi.

So Rav Yosef who was the *rosh yeshivah*, he got up and he publicly excommunicated him. Rav Yosef considered it a very serious *aveirah* and he put this man in *cherem*. Now, to our eyes it wasn't much of a sin at all. This man didn't *chas veshalom* throw away his *yiddishkeit* and I'm sure he didn't throw away his Torah learning either. But because he forsook the

center – it was nearby still – he could come back every day, walk back and forth; but Rav Yosef wasn't satisfied with that.

Rav Yosef wasn't satisfied that this man should come to the yeshivah. He wanted his wife and his children also to be in the yeshivah. When a man is a *kollel* man, not only he is in a *kollel*. His wife is in the *kollel* too. And the children that are born to him during this period are also in the *kollel*. The family is a *kollel* family. They talk *kollel*. "Where's Daddy?" Instead of saying "He's in the factory," or "He's in the store," it's "Daddy didn't come back from the *kollel* yet." The children know that the father is a *kollel* man. And the wife behaves differently too. She's the wife of a *kollel* man. It makes all the difference in the world. And so Rav Yosef wanted that this man's family should also be in Pumbedisa. And therefore he put him into *cherem*.

Reason for Death

Now the Gemara in the same *sugya* tells us another case. A man once moved from Pumbedisa to Astonya. Now Astonya was far away, much further than Bei Kubi. He moved far away, to the suburbs. And he didn't live long after that. He died young.

So the Gemara says the following expression. We wouldn't say it on our own but it's there in the Gemara black on white: **אִי בְּעֵי הָאִי צְרָבָא מְרַבְּנָן** – If this young *talmid chacham* had wanted, he could have lived. Which means that the *chachmei haShas* said he was sentenced by Hakadosh Baruch Hu because he left Pumbedisa.

What was the big crime of moving to Astonya, the crime for which he didn't deserve to live anymore?

The answer is he's not in this world for ease. You're in the world to make the best you can from yourself. And the Sages are saying that it didn't pay for him to continue living because if he's willfully moving so far from the Torah center now all he could do was deteriorate. And that's not the purpose of living – you don't live to deteriorate. The truth is you don't even live to remain the same. But surely not to deteriorate. You're in this world in order to make some more progress. And therefore he left the world. **אִי בְּעֵי הָאִי צְרָבָא מְרַבְּנָן הָוֵי חַיִּי** – He could have lived if he would have remained in Pumbedisa.

Stay Close!

You're in this world in order to make progress and the best progress is among the good ones. That's why (Brachos 8a) **לְעוֹלָם יְדוּר אֲדָם בְּמִקוּם רַבּוֹ**,

a man should always try to live in the place where his *rebbe* is. A person should live always as close as possible to the yeshivah, to his *rebbeim*, to *frum* Jews, to yeshivah people, to *talmidei chachomim*. And therefore when you move in next door to a *talmid chacham*, next door to a *tzaddik*, it may be a big inconvenience for you. You wanted bigger rooms. You wanted a bigger garden. You wanted a less expensive house. And maybe the *talmid chochom* is learning late at night and the noise sometimes inconveniences you. There are always all kinds of *cheshbonos* to cause a person to be dissatisfied and to choose a different locale.

But as much as possible, we want to stay close. Because moving away means that you're planting seeds, the same seed that Moshe Rabeinu saw that the Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven were planting – seeds of coldness, aloofness from the Torah center. And we want to plant other, better seeds! We want to be as close as we can. Because to be close is such an achievement that it's going to mold your history – the same way it molds the history of our nation, it will mold the history of your family.

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שאל אביך ויגדך זקניך ויאמרו לך

Q:

Should I be saying *tikun chatzos* during this time of the year – the Three Weeks?

A:

Tikun Chatzos is a good thing, but don't just *daven* it up. I would say that it's a good idea to just sit down on the floor before you go to sleep – even for a minute. Do it after your wife falls asleep – or after your husband falls asleep – so that they won't think you've gone crazy. But sit on the floor in *aveilus* for the *churban Beis Hamikdash*, mourning for the destruction, for a full minute and then go to sleep.

A minute is also good enough. Don't think it's a small thing. When I was a boy I used to say *tikun chatzos*. But now – even better – sit on the floor for a moment and think about what we're missing. A minute for the *churban Beis Hamikdash* and then go to sleep. This is a very good *eitzah* you're hearing now – a very important piece of advice.

TAPE # E-239 (July 1999)



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