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PARSHAS VAYECHI

WITH

RAV AVIGDOR MILLER ZT" L

BASED ON HIS BOOKS, TAPES & WRITINGS OF TALMIDIM

BLESSINGS AND CURSES

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Part I. Yaakov's Blessing

Birchas Habonim

When Yaakov Avinu was on his deathbed, preparing to leave this world, he gave blessings to all of his sons. He turned to them and with his last breaths he spoke to each one words of prophecy; to each son a different blessing. And after he finished speaking, the Torah sums it up as follows: **וְזֹאת אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לָהֶם אָבִיהֶם** – *And this, all the words said above, is what their father spoke to them,* **וְיִבְרַךְ אוֹתָם** – *and he gave them his blessing,* **אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר כִּבְרָכְתּוֹ בְּרַךְ אֹתוֹ** – *each man according to his blessing, he blessed them (Bereishis 49:28).*

And so, in *pashtus*, the plain meaning is that what he had said before to each one of his sons or concerning each one of his sons was the blessing. It could be that in addition to that he blessed them with other blessings but the

plain meaning is that what he said to his sons as recorded in the *pessukim*, that is the blessing.

Curses and Punishments

But if you look at the words, you see he didn't bless all of them; there were exceptions. Because Shimon and Levi, he didn't bless them at all. On the contrary, they were cursed. Yaakov said, אָרוּר אַפֶּם – *Your anger is cursed* (*ibid.* 7). It means they have a hot temper, these two. They almost brought catastrophe upon the whole family when they destroyed the people of Shechem. It was a rash and foolhardy undertaking that was conceived in anger, Yaakov said, and so there's something in their personalities that needs to be adjusted and perfected. And so he cursed their wrath.

But not only their wrath. He cursed them with a punishment, a prophecy of retribution: וְאַפְיִצָּם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל – *I'm going to separate them in Yaakov, and disperse them among Yisroel* (*ibid.*). It means these two families, Levi and Shimon, I'm not going to let them remain together in one place. If these hotheaded people, these *kaasanim*, will be together in one place, it's too dangerous; who knows what they can do. They'll make fights and revolutions; even worse troubles they'll make. And so I must separate them from each other and from themselves too. They have to be scattered throughout the land. It means that even in their own land, they'll always be in *golus*, in exile.

Prophecy Fulfilled

And that prophecy was fulfilled because when the land was divided by Yehoshua, these two tribes weren't given a portion like all the other tribes. Levi received only *arei halevi'im*, individual towns here and there, scattered across the country. They didn't live together in one place; they didn't have a district for themselves.

And Shimon also had no territory of its own. At first they lived as guests with Yehuda, scattered across *shevet* Yehuda's portion. Later they went elsewhere but it was always as a guest with no territory of their own. They had to dwell on the land of some other *shevet*; some here, some there.

And so, the prophecy came true. The tribes of Shimon and Levi remained separated and scattered, just like Yaakov had said it would be.

Hidden Blessings

Now, there's a question here because to us this whole thing – “You'll be dispersed and scattered” – seems to be a curse, a punishment. So what does it mean that אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר כִּבְרָתוֹ – *every one according to his blessing*, בֵּרַךְ אֲתָם – *he blessed them*. Here we have two sons who remain unblessed. On the contrary, they were cursed. The others, we can discern a *bracha* in what their father said to them, but here it's not apparent. It's a plain question: Where's the blessing here?

Therefore we must say, whatever Yaakov Avinu said to his sons, to Shimon and Levi too, *was* a blessing. But it was like a physician's prescription. Sometimes it's a bitter prescription and at the moment it seems like a curse – and if he misuses the medicine it'll remain a curse – *but if the patient pays attention when the instructions are being given*, then it turns out to be a blessing.

That's why Yaakov Avinu made a preface to his blessings. It's noteworthy that he said **וְשִׁמְעוּ בְּנֵי יִעֲקֹב** – “Listen, sons of Yaakov.” And he said again, **וְשִׁמְעוּ אֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲבִיכֶם** – *and listen to your father Yisroel (ibid. 2)*. A double lashon: “Listen up my sons and listen again.” It means, study these words.

Now, if you go let's say to a *tzaddik* for a blessing, a regular blessing, how much do you have to listen already? He gives you a blessing and you walk out. If he has some pull with Hakadosh Baruch Hu, so you'll be blessed, and if he doesn't, so you won't be blessed. That's all. What's there to study?

A Different Kind Of Blessing

But Yaakov said, **וְשִׁמְעוּ** – “Pay attention” and he said it again: **וְשִׁמְעוּ** – “Pay attention.” So we see that Yaakov wasn't merely handing them a package of blessings. He was giving them a different type of blessing, a blessing that needs your attention in order to be effective. And he was warning them that in order that they should know how to utilize it properly, they must listen while the instructions are being given and then always keep the words in mind and study them forever. That's the point – **וְשִׁמְעוּ**! Pay attention! How important it is to listen when a wise man is giving counsel or criticism.

That's why, let's say you have an audience with the Lubavitcher Rebbe or with Reb Yankev Kaminetzky or some other *adam gadol* and they give you a blessing, that's wonderful. You're very fortunate. But if it's the other type of blessing – if it's counsel and criticism – you should know that you're even more fortunate. You should sharpen your ears and try to listen to every word, every nuance. And when you leave, don't walk out in a daze or in a cloud of glory that you're happy that you visited a great personality. When you leave, immediately try to recall exactly every word and if possible write it down. It's a big *bracha* he's giving you.

It hurts sometimes, that blessing? It's uncomfortable? Well, just because we like to be complimented and patted on the head, doesn't mean that the opposite is not a blessing. It's like the blessing when a surgeon takes out a knife and begins to cut out, to excise the tumor. Only that when the surgeon is giving you that blessing, you can sleep through it. He'll put a mask over your face, you'll go to sleep, and the *bracha* will be *chal*; it'll work. But the blessing of criticism and of a curse, like Yaakov gave to Shimon and Levi, that requires **וְשִׁמְעוּ** and **וְשִׁמְעוּ** again and again.

The Greatness of Golus

Now, what was the result of their father's 'blessing' that they'd be scattered and dispersed in Eretz Yisroel? How did not having their own land fit the crime of wrath that they had committed and how did the curse of *golus* become a blessing for them?

So you have to pay attention now. It doesn't say the details in the Torah but pay attention to what happened because this was the intention. As the years went by Shimon and Levi and their descendants had plenty of time to meditate, to reflect on what happened to them. Even for the many years in Mitzrayim and for forty years in the Midbar too, they thought about these words, אָרוּר אַפִּים.

And then when they entered Eretz Yisroel and all their brothers received a *nachlah*, a permanent share in the land that they didn't receive, it made a tremendous impression on them. Everybody was talking about it and they knew the reason why; it was a reminder that the curse of their great-grandfather was being fulfilled and they had to do something about that. And that's how the curse became a blessing. Because they understood that it *can* be a blessing, that it's an opportunity for a different type of achievement.

Greatness in Golus

So what was the opportunity of אָחֲלֵקֶם בְּיַעֲקֹב וְאֶפְיָצֶם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל - "I'm going to separate them in Yaakov and disperse them among Yisroel"?

Well, with my little head I can only tell you so much but everyone knows when you have your own land and you're independent so you're able to continue in carrying out your own wishes. You don't have the same opportunities for self-control as the man who is a tenant who is suffered by his hosts, those whose land he lives on. When you're not possessed of your own land you're not so arrogant. And so if Shimon lived for some time, let's say, in the land of Yehudah, they had to live in good behavior. If they did anything that displeased their host they could be driven out. So Shimon learned self-control; he had to behave.

Levi also, they didn't have fields and estates like the other *shevatim*. They lived primarily in cities and they couldn't raise their own crops. They didn't have income from their own fields so they had to get much of their *parnassah* from somebody else. You need help from other people. You have to buy things, trade things; you're much more dependent on others.

The Teaching Tribes

And therefore Shimon and Levi were poor *shevatim*; in general they were the poor people of our nation. And poor people need help from the wealthy people and therefore they weren't so ready to get angry. A rich man can get angry more readily than a poor man. So Shimon and Levi were more humble. Their anger was tempered because of their *golus*.

Not only that, our Sages say that included in the curse of ואפיצים, our father Yaakov sentenced them they should be *melamdei tinokos*, that Shimon should spread out across the nation to be teachers of children: אין לך מלמדי (Rashi 49:7). And Levi also, יורו משפטיך, they were teachers. And so now Shimon and Levi are teaching Jewish children all over Eretz Yisroel.

Now, this I heard from a great man once; he explained, why were they sentenced to become teachers of children? Because if you're an angry man, you cannot be around children much. At least not a teacher of children.

You know what it means to be a *rebbe* of children? Boys are always making trouble, all types of mischief. They're kicking their feet under the table at each other while the *rebbe* is trying to teach them. That's why the Gemara (Avos 2:6) says לא הקפדן מלמד – if you're impatient, if you get frustrated and angry, so you can't be a teacher of children. If you'll start smacking all the boys who misbehave, the principal will fire you. If you ever tried teaching the youth, one quality that you'll have to learn is to be patient. Otherwise, forget about it. Look for another job.

Employment Training

It's like the man who becomes a grocer because his father was a grocer. Being a grocer also will teach you to be patient. You have to deal with people who are always bringing things back; after they open up the cans, they open up the bags and they want to return it. They come with complaints. You have to be patient. And so a grocery store is a career of character training. There are other professions like that but in those days, this was the one that was most easily available because the Jewish people all studied Torah and all taught Torah and therefore Shimon v'Levi became teachers of the young.

And so in order to keep their jobs, the Shimonites and Levites had to watch their temper; they were forced to practice self-control, humility, tolerating insult and degradation, frustrations. When you are 'cursed' to be in that profession, you're forced to contain your temper; and if you continue to force yourself to restrain your anger, in the course of time, you're going to improve. And as the generations went by these two *shevatim* were forced by circumstances to mold their personalities more and more perfectly.

Part II. Acquiring the Blessings

Studios Tribes

And so, when Yaakov gave this curse upon the anger of his children and he said that they should be אהלקים ביעקב – they should remain landless, that was for their benefit that they should be able to overcome their nature and

gradually change it. And the more they would listen and be aware of this function, the more of a blessing it would be.

Now, Shimon and Levi weren't obtuse; they both listened carefully to their father and you can be sure that they and their children never forgot even one jot of his words. Every word, every letter, was impressed in their memory and they discussed it among themselves always; they studied what could be all the shades of meaning, all the nuances, in the words of Yaakov Avinu. And when Moshe brought down the Torah from Har Sinai and they saw that the exact words of the blessings were dictated to Moshe Rabbeinu to be a part of the Torah, so even though it was nothing new to them you can be certain that they paid attention to it even more now.

And yet, despite their assiduity, despite their diligence in studying Yaakov's words, there was a difference in the results. You know, sometimes two people can know the same *parsha* by memory, they can repeat it word for word and it seems that both are equally impressed and yet there's a tremendous difference between the way one has assimilated the lesson and the other. And we're going to see now how big the difference was.

Levi Chooses Greatness

The descendants of Levi, even in Mitzrayim, when they studied the words of their *zeide* – “אֲחֻלְקֶםם... וְאֶפְיָצֶם, I'm going to disperse them,” – they listened well; so well, that they changed their personalities. After all, they couldn't change the words of their grandfather, no. Once he said, אֲחֻלְקֶםם, that they're not going to get any land, it's settled forever and ever that they'll be a dispersed *shevet*. But what's going to be the result of that dispersal, that's the question?

And they answered that question by choosing with their free will to make that punishment into a blessing. The father said you don't get land and that's finished forever. But they got better than land! ה' הוּא נַחֲלָתוֹ – Hashem is his inheritance! (Devarim 18:2). Ah! That's a big surprise! The tribe of Levi became especially attached to Hashem. וְהָיוּ לִי הַלְוִיִּם – “The Leviim belong to Me,” Hashem says (Bamidbar 8:14). It's a remarkable statement.

The Curse Becomes a Consolation

And the potential for all of that greatness, all of that achievement, lay in Yaakov's bitter words of castigation. When he lashed out at his sons Levi listened and the end was that he took these words to heart so fervently that Hashem became his portion! Because Levi took the curse and he studied it and he saw the blessing in it: that he must use it to perfect his personality; to be humbled and to restrain his wrath and use it only for the most pure idealistic purposes. And that's how 'You won't have a portion' became 'Hashem is your portion'.

And now when we read in the Torah that לֹא יִהְיֶה לְבְנֵינִים הַלְוִיִּם כָּל שְׂבִט לְוֵי הַלֵּק וְנַחֲלָה עִם יִשְׂרָאֵל – there shouldn't be any share and any inheritance in the land to

the *Kohanim* and the *Leviim* among the people, (*ibid.* 8:1) we understand that even though this was a fulfillment of the curse, but the Torah adds to this words that are of the greatest importance: ה' הוא נחלתו – Hashem is Levi's inheritance.

Oooohhhh! That's not said about the other tribes. Yehuda was given broad lands. Binyamin had land. Reuven had land. All the tribes had land, but of them it's not said that ה' הוא נחלתו. But of Levi, it is said. Levi became elevated above all the tribes and Hashem is his inheritance. That's some consolation prize! Instead of a piece of land, Hashem became their estate! They became the closest and most dedicated to Hashem of all the tribes!

A Tribe of Greats

And from now on, the *shevet Levi* became the aristocrats of the Jewish people. If you look through our history, who are our greatest men? *Shevet Levi*! Not only in Mitzrayim when the criticism of Yaakov Avinu was fresh in their minds. That, surely – Moshe Rabbeinu was a Levite par excellence. Aharon Hakohen who was a Levite, was the father of the *kohanim* – but in the Midbar too. When a golden calf was made and Moshe Rabbeinu said, קִי לַה' אֵלֵי – “Who is for Hashem, let him come to me,” וַיִּאָּסְפוּ אֵלָיו כָּל בְּנֵי לֵוִי – so all the *shevet of Levi* came to Moshe's side! (Shemos 32:26). There wasn't a single one who stayed home. The *bnei Levi* when they saw what was taking place, they were indignant. And they took this quality of anger and they transformed it into an implement to serve Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

But even further and further, after they came into the land and began to labor under the curse of being scattered, they continued to achieve more and more greatness. If you look through the roster of the great men in our history, you find so many were *kohanim* and *leviim*. Shmuel Hanavi was a Levi. Eili Hakohen was from *shevet Levi*. Reb Elazar ben Azarya was a *kohen*. Shimon Hatzaddik was from *shevet Levi*. And who was the savior of our people in the time when they were in danger of being crushed to death in the days of Chanukah? Mattisyahu from *shevet Levi*. It's remarkable how many *kohanim* and *leviim* occupy the most prominent places among our sages and our *tzaddikim*!

Now, we're used to the idea already so we don't think too much about it but actually it didn't have to be that way. It happened only because this family listened! All throughout our history the *Leviim* used their circumstances – circumstances that others would have complained about – in order to perfect their personalities. All the various forms of greatness of character that can be acquired in the difficult circumstances of Yaakov Avinu's curse, they acquired. They squeezed out all they could and therefore, they took the curse and they exchanged it into a blessing.

A Different Tribe

Shimon however – now far be it from me to say any criticism of the son of Yaakov, Shimon. Certainly he was a perfect man and Shimon was a virtuous *shevet*, absolutely. But because his descendants didn't listen as carefully as Levi did to their father's words they didn't make use of their circumstances to change.

Now I'm sure he did listen but there's no question that the family of Shimon did not profit from Yaakov's prophetic words as much as Levi did. They didn't make use of the opportunity in the same measure as Levi, therefore Shimon lost out and never had any territory and never had any distinctions either. They remained without any inheritance, and they didn't gain any especial greatness either.

If you look in the list of Shoftim, every *shevet* had a *shofet*. In the time of the Judges, every *shevet* had a *shofet*, but not Shimon. *Shevet* Shimon didn't have a *shofet* (See Rashi, Sukkah 27b). They had *tzaddikim* and *talmidei chachomim*, yes, but there's no question that when they left this world they came to the Next World regretting that they didn't accomplish as much as their brothers, *shevet* Levi.

The Labor of Listening

So now going back, we see that Yaakov Avinu actually was blessing Levi. אֲחֵלְקֶם בְּיַעֲקֹב – They'll be scattered and won't have any land of their own? That's the best thing that could have happened to them because they made it into a blessing! Although it's not in the Chumash, all the details how it happened, but the Leviim labored and utilized the opportunities that were included in their great grandfather's words until finally they made it into a blessing.

And that, you have to know, is the greatness of a person. It's a lesson that applies to all of us *no less than it did to Levi and Shimon* because to a very great extent a person's success depends on how much he utilizes his station in life and the opportunities it brings; how he takes what superficially appears to be a curse and manipulates it into a blessing, into perfection of his personality. That's the great lesson of שְׂמִיעוּתוֹ, listening, and understanding what to do with your opportunities. It's the lesson of turning stones into diamonds, curses into blessings.

Our Exile

And we have that opportunity every day in our times. Because don't we know that being in *golus*, in exile, is a curse? We are accustomed to say מִפְּנֵי חַטֹּאתֵינוּ בְּגִלְנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ עַנּוּ – *we were exiled from our land because of our sins*; that the whole story of being thrown out of Eretz Yisroel and dispersed among the nation is a curse.

And although it is certainly true, by no means is it a simple statement however. You're making a big mistake if you think *golus* is just a tragedy, a

misfiring of the whole plan of history; that the only time that's worth living is to be in Eretz Yisroel, with Dovid Hamelech and with the Beis Hamikdash. Oh no! It wasn't a misfiring of a plan. You're living the plan! Right now wherever you are in *golus*, that's where you belong. Right now, right here, that's where you have your opportunities, opportunities to become very great just because of the *golus*!

And so even though Hakadosh Baruch Hu put a curse on the generations – it was foretold in the Torah that the Am Yisroel is going to be in the lowest kind of *madreigeh* when they'll be dispersed in exile; there'll be a lot of *tzaros* living scattered and dispersed among the gentiles – we have to realize too *that just because of our exile we have opportunities that never existed before*. And just like *shevet Levi* utilized the prophecy of their *golus* to achieve greatness, the same thing is all of us.

Joe and Harry

Now, he can be a nobody if he wants. He can be a plain Joe, a plain Harry. He can live according to the low levels of his times and be a nobody. But if he wishes he can choose and then it'll be *אֲנִלְאֵי מִלְתָּא לְמִפְרָע*, *it'll become revealed retroactively*, that this was a great generation. If he chooses to make use of the opportunity that he was placed in he can create a great personality from himself, an *oved Hashem*. Instead of being a plain Harry, he can be a great Harry!

That's what Koheles means, *אַל תֹּאמַר כִּי לֹא מִחֲבָמָה שְׁאַלְתָּ עַל זֶה* – *don't say, כִּי לֹא שֶׁהַיָּמִים הָרִאשׁוֹנִים הָיוּ טוֹבִים מֵאֲלֵהּ* – *that the olden days were better than now, כִּי לֹא זֶה מִחֲבָמָה שְׁאַלְתָּ עַל זֶה* – *because you didn't inquire of chochma regarding this*. It means you didn't take counsel of your wisdom when you say that because according to the opportunities now and according to your nature, that's where you can make yourself great. You can do now, in your exile, what was never able to be done before; *just because of our exile we have opportunities that never existed before*.

And that's what we're learning now, that it's possible to take a curse, a prophetic curse, and with your own efforts, to turn into a blessing. Not only is it possible but it's what we're expected to do. Just like Levi took that curse of "I'll scatter you" and used it to become great, we're no different in our *golus*.

Part III. Our Blessings

Brooklyn Versus Cracow

Now, I'm going to take the time to explain this a little more because I want that you should walk out of here with something in your hand. It's important we should understand how this principle applies to us, how we, in whatever

station of history that we find ourselves, are given the opportunity of changing the curse of *our* exile, into blessings.

According to our circumstances, according to our potentialities, we need the *golus* of today. And there are opportunities in exile that we never had before, opportunities to become very great just because of the *golus*! Because let's say you, with your little mind and your little soul, had been born in the days of the Rama. What would you be? Would I be sitting here talking to people in the Rama's time? In the Rama's time I'd be happy to be a porter, a water carrier. And even better than me would be happy to be one of the *hamon am* in old Cracow.

But in this *golus* that you find yourself now you can learn every day and become a *talmid chochom*. You can go to the *beis knesses* every day in the morning and learn a few lines of Gemara and then you can come back in the evening again and learn more. And on Shabbos all afternoon long and Sunday too and you can be a *talmid chochom*. In the Rama's time however, it would take much more than that because everybody knew everything! So many people knew Shas! It was very difficult to become distinguished in the Rama's time. Today it's so easy comparatively.

There's so much opportunity today to create from yourself a personality that will be admired in the Next World forever. Just because of *golus* there are so many English *seforim*, so much *torah* available. A plain woman in her home, a plain man in the synagogue, can become great by studying the Mesillas Yesharim in English, the Shaarei Teshuvah in English, the Chovos Halevovos in English. That person is not plain anymore!

Kiruv is an Opportunity

Today it's possible for you to become even a teacher, a man who influences people, who brings Jews back to Torah. You can accomplish so much more today because it's so much easier today! In the Rama's time you couldn't get any mitzvah by being *mekarev* Jews to Yiddishkeit – there was nobody to be *mekarev*. You'll bring in people and make them *frum*? Out of the question! Who wasn't *frum*?! Even the thieves were *frum*!

It's true! The criminals were *frum*! Everybody kept everything! Even Lubavitchers couldn't bring in people in those days! Because there was nobody to bring in.

Today there are Jews to bring back everywhere. Many years ago I was in Williamsburg; I was looking for a certain address so I asked a *chassideshe* Jew for help. I spoke to him in Yiddish. He said to me, "I'm sorry. I don't know Yiddish. English please." He was a new Satmerer, a *baal teshuvah*. Someone brought him in! It couldn't happen in the olden times!

Adopt—a—Building

Today there's gold lying here waiting for you, to bring in Jews and make them keep the Torah, make them *shomrei Shabbos*, make them eat kosher! You could get children and send them to yeshivas.

There are big apartment buildings right here on Ocean Parkway filled with Jews who know nothing at all. Right here! If because of *golus* so many Jews in Russia went away, so many Jews in America went lost, so this is your especial opportunity. They're not *apikorsim*. They're just *tinok shenishbas*, people with empty heads, people who know nothing.

So you can choose one building and make it your project. Talk to them. So go in there one day and write down the addresses of the Jewish apartments – if the super doesn't let you in, offer him ten dollars and he'll change his mind. Write down the addresses and send them the Jewish Press. For people who know very little the Jewish Press is excellent. There he'll read about kosher salami. There he'll read about kosher hotels, kosher restaurants. To him it's an eye-opener. It's a new world to him.

Of course after he'll make progress, we'll move to Mesillas Yescharim, to higher things. But in the beginning buy him a subscription to The Jewish Press and let him delight in stories of Shabbos and stories of *kashrus* and things that he never heard of before.

The American Wasteland

And so you have such opportunities today that never existed before! It's a wasteland, so many lost Jews. And it can be done. You know I remember in America years ago, a *frum* girl was a rarity in America. *Frum* boys also were not so *shechiyach*, but *frum* girls were *mamesh milsa d'lo shechicha* entirely.

So along comes a woman, a 'plain' woman in our days. Her name was Rebbetzin Kaplan, Rebbetzin Vichna Kaplan. She wasn't a Devorah Haneviah. She wasn't Sarah, Rivkah, Rochel and Leah. But she achieved in her lifetime as much as she could.

Number one, she had fourteen children. That's a big job, fourteen children. That's already making a blessing from this *golus*. To raise *frum* children in America?! Any mother who raises *frum* children, big families, in the filth of America can consider herself a very successful woman. A father too, but a mother especially.

The American Revolution

But in addition, Rebbetzin Kaplan made a Bais Yankev movement in America and she raised up girls who changed the face of America. So all the *frum* girls resulted from her *talmidos*. Then other people started copying her school. She inspired thousands of girls; they were taught to have big families and to marry boys and support them while they're learning.

And these girls went forth as a result of her teachings and they made a revolution in America. You don't realize what was beforehand. Reb Aharon Kotler *zichrono livracha* said, "If not for Rebbetzin Kaplan the *kollelim* in America couldn't exist." You need women who are willing to marry *kollel* men.

And on her shoulders alone is a tremendous credit for hundreds and thousands of boys and girls who were born because of her inspiration. And so many *kollelim* and *talmidei chachomim* as a result! One person! One woman by himself!

The Right Generation

I remember way back, even *rebbetzins* didn't cover their hair in America. *Rebbetzins* didn't cover their hair in America. I remember that. *Rebbetzins* didn't cover their hair in America. And she brought a generation of girls with *tzniyus* and everything. A whole generation. That's her work!

Now had she lived in any time, she wouldn't have the opportunity. They didn't need her. In Moshe Rabbeinu's time, the whole nation was in *kollel*. Everybody was learning Torah in the *midbar*. It was one big *kollel*. Everybody had children. But in her time, she fulfilled most perfectly her destiny. It couldn't have been better if she had been in the *dor hamidbar!*

Jewish Muscles

I'll give one more example. I have written down here more than that but we have time now for one more. Our *golus* is also an opportunity to build up the muscles of standing against all the gentile influences. I'll explain that. You know the *middah* of strength, of being a *gibor* in rejecting the influences of the outside world is a perfection of character that you take with you into the Next World forever. Forever and ever it stands to your credit.

But it's a *middah* that atrophies when it's not utilized. Like a man who doesn't do any physical labor so his muscles become flabby after a while. And to a certain extent for someone living in the 'good old days' those muscles became weak. After all, in old Europe there was a wall around the ghetto, and there were watchmen at the gate, to see that no Jews would leave and no gentiles would come in. *Goyim* didn't come in there and so the ghetto was a *makom kadosh*.

The streets were holy. There was no influence of the *umos haolam* in the streets of the ghetto. What influence was there? Only the *ruach hatorah*; all you could see was *frum* Jews. All you could see was people doing the *minhagei Yisroel*, dressed like Jews. If you lived in the ghetto you were stewing in Jewish juices your whole life. And so it was easy to be a *frum* Jew, to resist the blandishments of the gentiles. There was no other way. And so nobody's personality was especially perfected just by keeping away from the gentile ways.

But today it's different. In our *golus* we have the opportunity to stand up against the gentile culture. Today you can become great just because of that.

South American Heroes

A man came here once and he told me about his father and mother, *frum* Germans, who had to leave their *frum* community and they went into exile in South America. For them it was a curse. They lived among irreligious Jews. They were the only *frum* family. His mother was the only one who wore a *sheitel*. They were ridiculed by everybody. They couldn't go anywhere because everywhere, it was *treif*.

They were surrounded by people who were disloyal but his father and mother were loyal to the Torah through thick and thin. Not only they were *frum* but they kept all the *frum* German *minhagim*. It's an inspiring story!

These people don't know how great they are. They were writing a history, a history of perfection down there in South America. They were unknown, but Hakadosh Baruch Hu knows. A book should be written about it. In Shomayim a book was written about them, absolutely, because they became great under the most adverse circumstances. I say "under the circumstances" – it was *because* of the circumstances. They took their exile and turned it into a blessing. They created great personalities from themselves just because of that 'curse'.

Just Say No

And that's an opportunity for all of us in this *golus*. To say no to all of the garbage, to keep the home quarantined, isolated from all outside influences. And that means that there cannot be a Jewish home with television. Television and the *kedusha* of a Jewish home are two contradictory things. And no matter how you'll try to assuage your conscience with explanations and *teirutzim*, you're making a fatal error of misusing the curse of *golus*.

Even a radio. The radio today is terrible. Now, I don't want to waste too many words on that because it's a waste of talking. People are so hardened that they refuse to listen anyhow. There was a man who listened to me. I once spoke about this so he told his wife and they both decided and they got rid of it. They are the successful ones; they made use of the curse of *golus* for greatness. They won't regret it.

Greatness in Laughter

And that's a lesson for all of us to keep in mind. To say no; there are so many opportunities. In this *golus* you can laugh at evolution. The whole world is yelling "Evolution! Evolution!" and you're yelling back "Bereishis Bara Elokim! Bereishis Bara Elokim!". In the Rama's time you couldn't do that – they weren't stupid enough to even think up such foolish ideas so you didn't have such

opportunities. And so today you have the opportunity to create a great personality by laughing at all the crazy ideas of the gentile world.

Of course, a person can wallow in complaints and do nothing. And so he'll remain a plain Jew. Now, a plain Jew that's nothing to sneeze at but compared to what you could have made from yourself in *golus*, just *because* of *golus*, it's a waste. It's a waste of the opportunity to turn a curse into blessings.

Happy in Golus

And this brings us back to the principle. The curse of the *golus* certainly is a curse, but it's one of the greatest blessings because in this *golus*, we have opportunities that never existed before. But it's up to our *bechirah*, our free will, to take a curse and with our own efforts, make it into a blessing. That's what we're learning tonight.

We're not living when we're living and where we're living as result of an accident. No! We're in our *golus* because Hakadosh Baruch Hu wanted us to be in *golus* and our job is to do the best we can wherever we are. Hakadosh Baruch Hu puts us in circumstances for our benefit. And so let's not be dissatisfied. Wherever you are, you can gain greatness. You can achieve in the *golus*! You can achieve just because of *golus*! Wherever you are, it's a place where you can turn curses into blessings.

Have a Wonderful Shabbos

Let's Get Practical

Turning Curses into Blessings

When Yaakov blessed his sons, one blessing appeared to be a curse. However, the tribe of Levi transformed it into a true blessing through their diligent study of their father's words and their efforts to self-improve. Living today in Golus, surrounded by immorality and perversion, may seem like a curse. Paradoxically, it's precisely these challenging circumstances that make our generation uniquely blessed. This week I will *bli neder* spend thirty seconds each day reflecting on the opportunities of being alive today and how I can best utilize these opportunities for the greatest blessing.

This week's booklet is based on tapes:

95 – The Time is Now | **179** – Purposes of Exile | **320** – Levi
354 – Prophecy and Free Will | **707** – Learning From History



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SCAN TO WATCH



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QUESTION

Is it possible to love Hashem with all of one's heart when *chas veshalom* he has a severe illness?

ANSWER

And the answer is it's not easy. But it's also not easy to love Hakadosh Baruch Hu when your pockets are full of dollar bills and you're young and you're walking down Ocean Parkway and whistling. You haven't a worry in the world. It's also not easy.

To love Hakadosh Baruch Hu is one of the sciences that require labor, so certainly when his pockets have nothing but holes in them and also his internal organs have holes in them and he's bleeding, let's say, and lying in a hospital, to start then on the *derech* of loving Hashem is a little bit late. It's like a parachutist who is learning how to make a parachute jump the first time when his airplane cracks up in midair. A little late to start practicing parachute jumping. He should start practicing long before.

However it's still possible. It's still possible. If you could give this idea to somebody who is dying and tell him look, you're dying anyhow so make use of your last moments to love Hakadosh Baruch Hu and know that it's for your good even though you don't feel it. Love Him anyhow and try to love Him as much as possible and utilize the last moments of your life to accomplish this great achievement. It's something. Maybe a little bit he will.

But the time to practice is when things are going well. Right now you're young and you're handsome and you still have all of your teeth. Life is ahead of you. You can digest a regular meal. You can walk on your own two legs. You have two eyes. You can still hear. You don't need hearing aids. You're not bent over. So as you strut out of this place sturdy, stalwart, confident and the blood is coursing through your veins, that's the time to start working on loving Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

There's no time to lose but it's a very important and very big subject. If you postponed until now, so get busy and start studying it and practicing it.

Tape # 98 (November 1975)

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