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The Power To Withstand A Spiritually Impure Environment

“And Yaakov left Beer Sheba, and he went towards Charan” - Yaakov Avinu followed his father Yitzchok’s request to find a wife from Padan Aram, and to his mother Rivkah’s command to run away, because his brother Esav is vengeful towards him about stealing the blessings and wants to kill him. Yaakov escapes and runs to the house of his uncle Lavan. He dwells with Lavan for 20 years, and before that, he had dwelled in the yeshivah of Shem and Ever for 14 years, as Chazal teach.

When we reflect, we can notice the following. Yaakov had grown up in the house of Yitzchok and Rivkah and he had gone to learn in yeshivah for 14 years - he lived a life spent in holiness. Then he goes to live with Lavan, who was known as “Lavan *HaArami*”, from the word *ramai* - a swindler; Lavan was a completely dishonest kind of person, and he was also a major idol-worshipper and sorcerer (as we learn from the fact that Rachel stole his *terafim*, the idols he served and did sorcery with). Lavan was all about dishonesty and *tum’ah* (impurity). Yaakov had lived his entire life in holiness, and now he had to go live for 20 years in a very impure place, the house of Lavan.

Upon some more reflection into the lives of our *Avos*, we see a common theme running throughout their lives: they were all placed into an unsavory environment, where they had to withstand tests of evil influences.

Avraham Avinu began his life growing up in the house of the wicked Terach, until he was told to leave his home. He had grown up in a house of idol-worship, and Chazal teach that Terach served every idol in the world. Even after Avraham left Terach and he went to Eretz Yisrael, there was a hunger and then he had to go down to Egypt, a depraved country, where his wife Sarah is abducted by Pharaoh. Later Avraham had to go Palestine, where Sarah is once again abducted by Avimelech.

Yitzchok Avinu didn’t have the test of having to go down to Egypt; he never left Eretz Yisrael, because he had the sanctified status of a perfect *korbon olah*. But he was also tested with Avimelech, [where Avimelech wanted to capture Rivkah].

Yosef HaTzaddik is sold to Egypt at the age of 17, where he would spend the rest of his life there; as the Sages teach, Yosef died in Egypt at the age of 110, so he lived his whole life there. He went through the house of Potiphar, he was put into jail, and he was later made into a servant of Pharaoh. Most of his life was spent in a place of impurity.

When we reflect into the lives of our *Avos* and the rest of the “seven shepherds” who led our nation[1], and the lives of the rest of our *Gedolim* who lived after them, and the life of Yaakov Avinu which is described in this week’s *parshah*, who had to spend 20 years in a wicked place – we can see that they did not always get to enjoy an atmosphere of holiness. They were often sent into the most depraved, impure places of the world, where they were tested.

It is upon us to understand, then, how all of our *Avos* were able to live truthfully in an impure environment.

Place Yourself In A Sheltered Environment

Yaakov Avinu testified about himself, “*Im Lavan Garti*”, and Rashi[2] explains that he was saying, “Even though I lived with Lavan, I still kept the 613 *mitzvos*” - he lived with Lavan for many years, yet he did not become influenced by his evil ways. Thus our *Avos* (and all of our other *Gedolim* who came after them) were able to live in evil places yet not be influenced by the people there. The Rambam famously says that normally a person is influenced by his surroundings and society; in spite of this, Yaakov Avinu was able to remain pure from Lavan’s influence.

It is clear that Yaakov could only survive Lavan because he had grown up in the house of Yitzchok and Rivkah, and because he went to yeshivah after that for 14 years. Chazal teach that for all the 14 years that he learned in the yeshivah of Shem and Ever, his eyes did not know of sleep. Only with this deep connection to truth that Yaakov Avinu had lived beforehand, could he have the ability to withstand Lavan’s evil influence.

The lives of the *Avos* show us how a person must live his own life. Ideally, a person must try to set up his life to be in the best possible environment, the one that will be the most spiritually conducive, where he can be distanced as much as possible from bad influences. It is within a person’s free choice, according to the unique circumstances which Hashem has placed each person in, to choose the best possible environment to be in: “*I will not dwell anywhere except in a place of Torah.*” That is the ideal kind of life that we need to strive for, as a first course of action.

How Can We Survive The Spiritual Tests In Our Times?

But many times, there are all sorts of reasons that will come up in a person’s life which do not enable him to live in a “place of Torah.” In today’s times especially, even if a person is living in a place of Torah, the evil influences are everywhere, because the power of evil is very strong in the final generations. Even if a person decides that he will not live anywhere other than in a place of Torah, the “place of Torah” itself which he is living in can become mixed with all kinds of bad influences, where the very foundations are being attacked and uprooted.

How can a person succeed like our *Avos*, and survive all of the evil influences, just as Yaakov didn’t become influenced by Lavan, and just as Yosef didn’t become influenced from Egypt? What is the way, and how? How did the *Avos* survive an environment which lived totally in the opposite of Hashem’s will?

Our Difficult Situation

In our generation, the inner, spiritual world is so hidden and concealed from people, and instead, superficiality dominates. Our test today resembles the test of Yaakov Avinu when he had to live with Lavan for 20 years, and like the test of Yosef when he had to live in Egypt.

Today a person can be living even in Eretz Yisrael, because he only wishes to live in a place of Torah and nowhere else, but there is still “impurity of the land”, as it is said of sorcery-ridden Egypt; for there are still people around him who are immoral; the world today is full of *tum’ah* (impurity)! It is not only the outside world which is swimming in *tum’ah*; those influences from the outside have entered into our inner circles as well.

Any sensible person can understand that in order to survive a place of bad influences, just as Yaakov and Yosef did, a person needs to have a deep connection to truth. He must be able to hold on firmly to truth and not become uprooted from his place, by the winds that blow against him. Even if a person wants to live internally and spiritually, and he is indeed searching for it and he really wants this, he still faces the tests of dealing with the influences of the outside world; whether he wants to actually deal with it or not.

Therefore, if one wants to pass through the tests that this generation is going through, he must hearken to the verse, “*Go, my nation, come into your rooms, close the doors behind you....until the wrath passes.*” One needs to try to find some shelter from the violent, crashing winds of the spiritual storm that rages outside in the world; he needs to find somewhere that is a bit cleaner, purer, and more sheltered from the evil influences.

There are some places today which are more safeguarded [from spiritually harmful influences] than others, but there is still no place today where we are totally safeguarded. We can choose to live in a place of Torah - relatively speaking - compared to other places in the world. But no matter where we live, the *Shaar HaNun d’Tumah* (‘50th Gate of Impurity’) is everywhere.^[3] Sometimes it is obvious and sometimes it is hidden, but the worst kinds of evil are still in every place, and no place is totally safe from it.

Any sensible person understands what is being said here.

The Only Hope

Therefore, the only sensible path to take is, to act similarly to what Yaakov Avinu did. Yaakov Avinu learned for 14 years in the yeshiva of Shem and Ever, but even if a person today cannot be in yeshivah for 14 years like Yaakov Avinu, he can still live his life with the same truthful perspective that Yaakov Avinu had.

During those 14 years, Yaakov Avinu dwelled in solitude; similar to how Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai hid in the cave. There he acquired the deep connection to truth, and to be able to totally disconnect from everything taking place in the world. He entered the deeper layer of life, the deep connection that a person can have to the light of his *neshamah*, and a deep connection to Hashem and to His Torah.

With the more that a person lives inwardly, with the more he lives “*lifnay v’lifnim*”, (“Before Me, and within)”^[4] as much as possible – the better of a chance he will have in passing the *nisyonos* (difficult tests) of today’s generation. He will at least have a chance at it! But if a person is only superficially connected to the spiritual, and he acts by rote, he does not have a deep and strong connection to his inner world, and it will be almost impossible for him to withstand the *nisyonos* of today.

Hashem has placed us into a situation of *nisayon*, so He surely gave us a way out. “The *yetzer hora* gets stronger every day, and if not for Hashem’s help, it is impossible to overcome.”^[5] Elsewhere Chazal say, “The task is not upon you to complete, but you are not exempt from it.” What is the root power we have, which can help us pass the *nisyonos* we face in this generation that threaten our spiritual purity? The only power that will save us is when we connect to the inner depths in our own soul.

This was always a task throughout the generations, and it isn't unique to our generation. But the previous generations were able to withstand the *nisyonos* of their times, even without this deep inward connection. If a person in the previous generations didn't reach this inwardness, although he didn't reach the desired purpose of life, at least he was able to withstand the evil influences; he wouldn't have constant spiritual falls, because in those times, they didn't have to contend with the '50th Gate of Impurity'.

But in today's times, if a person doesn't connect to an inner place in himself, he is in a world where the *nisyonos* will blow strongly at him and uproot from his place, dumping him into confusion and turmoil after that. Sometimes he will fall to it by force, sometimes he will fall to it willingly, and sometimes he will fall when he is neither fully awake nor fully asleep; sometimes he will fall in one particular kind of situation, and sometimes he will fall in a different kind situation. He will keep falling in all kinds of situations, until he becomes so confused that he will find it too difficult to understand how it's possible to fight back.

If a person doesn't penetrate into an inner place in himself, he is apt to fall into sin; it is only imminent in such a situation. But if a person understands the depth of our *avodah* in this generation, he knows that our *avodah* in this generation is: to enter inward.

Entering Inward

What does it mean to 'enter inward'? In clearer terms, it means that in anything holy that you do, you need to enter it deeply.

When you learn Torah, you need to enter it deeply, with your heart and mind. Enter the depth of Torah, enter it deeply, until you feel a deep connection to what you are learning. If you are learning Gemara, you need to come to a deep connection to what Abaye and Rava are discussing. If you are learning *Halacha* or *Agadta*, it makes no difference what – you need to enter your learning deeply.

When you *daven*, at least in the three times of the day when you are obligated to *daven*, you need to enter into the words of what you are saying, and into what the very idea of *tefillah* is. A person should not *daven* in a superficial way, as a lip service, but from the heart, for *tefillah* is called "service of the heart". Put your heart into it and realize that you are conversing with the King.

When you do *chessed*, don't just perform it mechanically; do it with your heart, from a desire to give to others and to bestow love upon others.

These are the three pillars which the world stands on – Torah, *avodah*, and *chessed*. But the point is always the same: enter it deeply and do it with your full heart.

Noach had to go into the Ark as the *Mabul* raged around him, where he was protected inside the Ark as the world was being destroyed. But in today's times, there is no 'Ark of Noach' to find shelter in. The Chazon Ish said that the 'Ark of Noach' today is the *yeshivos*, but that only was true in his times [more than 50 years ago]. In our times, the only 'Ark of Noach' is to have a deep, inward connection within our own soul!

There, we can be safe and protected, like the wine which Hashem created during the six days of Creation, which He safeguarded until the time of the future. The only safe place is in the very innermost depths of our heart: "*From all that you guard, guard your heart, for from it, comes life.*" The only thing that can keep us safe and sheltered is when we go deeper and deeper into the depths of our heart.

We have to keep going deeper, throughout our life. We need to enter the depths of our *daas* (thinking

and beliefs), both in the areas of our *hilchos de'os* (beliefs and perceptions towards life), as well as in all areas of our Torah learning; and to enter even further, into the *chadrei halev*, the “chambers of the heart” [6] – for there is room within room in our heart – until we find the very innermost point of the heart itself. But however far we get, we must keep entering inward. That is the only thing that can protect us today.

Going “Within” and “Above”

Avraham called the place of the future *Beis HaMikdash* as “mount”, Yitzchak called it “field”, and Yaakov called it “house.” In this week’s *parshah*, Yaakov expressed about the site of the *Beis HaMikdash* that “*This place cannot be anything other than a house of G-d, and this is the gate to Heaven.*” A mount and a field is an open space, but a house is a sheltered environment.

Yaakov called it a “house” even before it had become a house; it was only a mount and a field at that time. The depth of this is because the *Beis HaMikdash* reveals to us that a person can be connected inward, even as he in a space that connects outward to the rest of the world; he can find a “house” of shelter within himself, even as he is an open space.

Where do we see this? The ladder in Yaakov’s dream ascended to Heaven, and it was footed on this earth. The earthly base of the ladder was the “house”, the *Beis HaMikdash*, but we know that *tefillah* can reach the Heavens – as we are on this world, we can ascend, upwards, through *tefillah*. Yaakov called it a “house”, even though it hadn’t become a house yet, because he was not confined to the earthly aspect of this world, where there was no ‘house’ yet for the *Beis HaMikdash*. Rather, he was found at the ‘top rung of the ladder’ - which reaches Heaven.

There are thus two different attitudes of how a person can be sheltered in a ‘house’, even when there is no ‘house’ in front of him. There is a way to start from above, by living the exaltedness and greatness of the soul, of the ‘top rung of the ladder’ which is in Heaven; and the other way, which we have mainly been describing here, is to live inwardly: “*lifnay v’lifnim*” (“Before Me, and within”).

These are two distinct spiritual ways to live in our generation. One way is to live an inner kind of life, and to keep going more inward, to keep entering the depth of Torah learning, *avodah*, and *chessed*, as we explained. Another way is to live all the time thinking about lofty ideals; to live from a place of exaltedness.

Of course, there will always be ups and downs in a person’s level; “*a righteous person falls seven times and rises.*” Regardless of the inevitable ups and downs in our life, we are talking here of an issue of *how we need to approach our life*.

Avoiding Delusions

The main way to survive spiritually in this generation is to keep placing yourself at the “top rung of the ladder”, which is in Heaven.

You first need a ladder that is firmly rooted in the ground, though, and for this reason, we need to carefully observe *halachah*, as well as to treat others respectfully; if we ignore this part, it will make us delusional, when we think that we are being spiritual. But if we are making sure to be careful in *halachah* and in basic *derech erez* (which comes before Torah), upon that, we can sensibly go about making ourselves more spiritual and to live all the time with lofty concepts, along with *davening* to Hashem for help. In this way, one can live with his head in Heaven - to constantly be thinking of loftiness, greatness, and exaltedness.

In Summary

With these two points together (inward connection in one's heart, and thinking constantly of exalted concepts), a person has the power to survive today.

One needs to keep going deeper, throughout the areas of Torah, *avodah*, and *chessed*. One also needs to live all the time with exalted thoughts (according to his level, and not in a delusional way), to think of lofty matters, and to avoid thinking of the frivolous and empty things that much of the generation thinks about. One needs to think about higher things, to think into the depth of Torah, and of the exaltedness of Torah, and the exaltedness of the *neshamos* of *Klal Yisrael*, both on the general scale and on the individual scale; the thoughts of a person should always be about exalted things. "You exalted us from all the languages" – a Jew can become uplifted and exalted above all the lowliness of the generation.

Emulating Yaakov Avinu

When a person has these two parts together, this represents what is said of Yaakov Avinu.

On one hand, he will have the "14 years of learning by Shem and Ever", which represents the *avodah* of constantly going deeper into one's heart, which is the aspect of "*lifnay v'lifnim*" ("Before Me, and within").

In addition, before heading out to "the house of Lavan" – the evil surroundings of our times – comes Yaakov's Avinu's ladder ascending to Heaven, whose head reaches the heavens; in other words, the aspect of placing one's thoughts into an exalted place. Yaakov is called so from the word "*eikev*", heel, hinting to the foot of the ladder, which is on earth; Yaakov is also called "*Yisrael*", from the words "*Li Rosh*", "A head unto Me", for the head of Yaakov's ladder reaches the heavens.

With these two aspects combined (remaining connected to one's inwardness, and thinking about exalted concepts), Yaakov was able to go to "Charan", from the term "*charon af*" (wrath) – he was able to survive the "wrath" of the impure environment of Lavan. Yaakov could only survive Lavan because he had these two aspects together: he had reached the exaltedness, the "top rung of the ladder, which reaches the heavens", by learning how to always place his mind in a higher place; and he had a deep inward connection in his heart, to whatever spirituality he had acquired from beforehand.

In Conclusion: The Two Powers That We Need Today To Survive

When one has these two aspects together in his own life, he has a chance of surviving the evil influences of these times. One needs to work on these matters with great exertion and with *mesirus nefesh*, according to his own level, along with *davening* to Hashem for help, with tears. If a person does that, perhaps he has the chance to survive the deep exile of today which we are in.

There is no way to survive the impurity of today unless a person connects to the aspect of "*lifnay v'lifnim*" and to the *romemus* (exaltedness) of Hashem, Torah, and to the *neshamos* of Yisrael, on the general scale and on the individual scale. When one has the two aspects together (of being connected deeply to the "*lifnay v'lifnim*" in his heart, and to lofty, exalted thoughts about higher concepts), the light of his inner essence, which is hidden in the depths of his heart and in his upper roots which are found in Heaven, will be strong enough to protect him from the *nisyonos* of today.

Once a person is armed enough spiritually like this, even if he does fall to the *nisyonos* at times – and sometimes a person will indeed fall for more than a few times – he can always be reawakened by the inner light that is in his heart, his inward connection that he has in his heart; together with the exalted thinking that about lofty concepts, such as the greatness of Hashem, the greatness of Torah, and the greatness of man; harboring on these thoughts immediately returns him to his upper roots in Heaven,

where his head can be at the 'top rung of the ladder' which reaches Heaven.

Through this, a person will merit, with Hashem's help, the time in which "*I will remove the spirit of impurity from the land*", where the perfected state of Creation will be revealed, when we will be able to express, "*This is nothing but the house of G-d, and this is the gate to Heaven*" - a place that reveals completely the *Shechinah*, on This World.

[1] The "seven shepherds" are: Avraham, Yitzchok, Yaakov, Yosef, Moshe, Aharon, and Dovid

[2] Rashi in beginning of *Parshas Vayishlach*

[3] see ***Pesach_003_Avodah of The Generation*** and ***Derashos_103_Surviving Spiritually***.

[4] The term "*lifnay v'lifnim*" ("Before Me, and within") is said with regards to the Kodesh Kodashim on Yom Kippur, but the Rav uses this term many times with regards to living a life where one is connected to his neshamah and to feeling Hashem's Presence. See ***Yom Kippur_01_Disconnecting From Sin*** and ***Yom Kippur_026 (Returning To Your Inner Purity)***

[5] Sukkah 52a

[6] Editor's Note: The concept of '*chadrei halev*' (chambers of the heart) is written about in the collected letters of the Chazon Ish, *Kovetz Igros Chazon Ish*.

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