



Adapted from the sefer חמין במוצאי שבת a collection of maamarim on
תנא דבי אליהו given by the Tolner Rebbe shlita at Melave Malka

Melave Malka Parshas Vayechi 5770

The seventeenth of Teves is the *yahrzeit* of my *mechutan*, Harav Hachasid R. Yeshaya Yaakov Vekselman z"l. He was a teenager when the second World War broke out. He managed to survive the Gehinnom of the concentration camps, but found himself entirely alone, with no relatives or friends. Every member of his extended family were tortured and murdered by the wicked Germans *yimach shemam*.

The Gaon, Rav Yitzchak Hutner zt"l, taught a beautiful lesson that certainly applied to my *mechutan*. He pointed out that Am Yisrael are referred to by two titles that seem to contradict each other. In Yirmiyahu (31/1), they are called *Am seridei charev*, the nation that survived the sword. However, in the *bracha mei'ein sheva* that we say in Maariv on Friday nights, they are called *Am medushnei oneg*, a nation rich in pleasure. Rav Hutner explained that there is no contradiction between the two titles. The Jewish people are blessed with a depth of understanding that enables them to experience both aspects simultaneously.

Anyone who met R. Yeshaya Vekselman, saw the living embodiment of this lesson. People who didn't know what he had gone through in the war, wouldn't have imagined that this happy, content, man, who greeted everyone with joy, had experienced years of unspeakable horror. He "survived the sword" and rose from the ashes to build an illustrious family of G-d fearing descendants.

I remember that during one of our discussions about his experiences during the war, he told me that the horrifying images from the camps are always with him, and give him no rest in the day, and especially at night. He said that if he told me even a fraction of what he experienced, I wouldn't be



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capable of believing him. I asked him how he withstood the trials of that terrible period of *hester panim*. He told me that in his parents' home, he was brought up with the understanding that we don't question the way Hakadosh Baruch Hu guides the events of his world. He absorbed this lesson "with his mother's milk", and as he grew up, that understanding grew with him. The *zechus* of that strong belief certainly helped and protected him.

He went on to share another conclusion that he reached by thinking clearly and deeply about his experiences. He realized that many other Jews were brought up to have *Emunah peshutah*, and true *bitachon*. Nonetheless, after the war, they weren't able to deal with the questions of faith that they faced as a result of their experiences. Many abandoned *Yiddishkeit*. Certainly no one can judge them, *chas v'shalom*. However, R. Yeshaya Yaakov tried to identify factors that enabled him and others to maintain their *emunah*, even though they shared the same traumatic experiences.

He noticed that people who made sure not to become isolated, whether in the nightmare of the camps or after the war in the DP camps (when so many decided to abandon *Yiddishkeit*), managed to successfully maintain their *emunah*. They made an effort to find friends and to be part of a *chaburah*. They strengthened, supported and encouraged each other, and this enabled them to maintain their belief and identity during those years of incomprehensible horror.

We can all benefit from this lesson of R. Yeshaya Yaakov. Each of us has to try to be part of a *chaburah*, and to take care not to be *poreish min ha'tzibur*. The *Mishnah* (Avos 5/14) speaks about ארבע מדות בהולכי בית המדרש, four ways that Jews maintain their connection with the *Beis Ha'medrash*. The *Mishnah* says that הולך ואינו עושה, a person who goes but doesn't do anything, is rewarded for the very act of walking to the *Beis Medrash*. The *meforshim* all wonder why he should be rewarded for the travel, if he didn't learn when he reached his destination. (See explanations in the commentaries of the Bartenura, Midrash Shmuel, and Maharal). Chasidim answered this question by explaining that the very fact that this person left his house, and went to a place where Jews gather, is a great accomplishment, and he deserves reward for not staying home.



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The *seforim ha'kedoshim* explain that Yaakov Avinu taught this lesson to his sons in *Parshas Vayechi*.

וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶל בָּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי וְאֶגִּידָה לָכֶם אֵת אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא אֶתְכֶם בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים

(And Yaakov called to his sons and told them, gather together and I will tell you what will happen to you in the end of days).

He meant to tell them that the primary source of the strength that *Am Yisrael* will need to survive and thrive in *acharis ha'yamim*, the final generations, will be האסוף, gathering together.

As he spoke with his sons, Yaakov Avinu foresaw the terrible suffering that *Am Yisrael* would endure in the final generations. That vision caused him such pain, that the *Shechinah* left him and he was unable to continue the prophecy that he wanted to share with the *shevatim*. Nonetheless, he transmitted the knowledge that would help them withstand the suffering of that final era. Yaakov's descendant will have to form *chaburos* of friends bound together by unity and love. (The word האסוף also means to be healed and purified, and the word אגידה also means to connect and to continue)

This was one of the central aspects of my grandfather's *avodah*. He always sought to be in the presence of *tzadikim*, and never to be alone. Even in his later years, he would walk from Bayit Vegan to the Gerrer *beis medrash* in Geulah in order to attend the *tish* of the Beis Yisrael zy"א. He continued this practice with *mesirus nefesh* even when illness weakened his legs and walking was painful. He would walk for two hours, in the winter rains or in the heat of summer, never weakening or giving up.

I often describe Rav Meir of Amshinov's amazement at my grandfather's humility and modesty. Rav Meir once asked my grandfather why he struggles to go to the Gerrer Beis Medrash with such *mesirus nefesh*. He pointed out that my grandfather has his own *beis medrash* in Bayit Vegan, and that he could continue the *minhag* of his holy ancestors who conducted their own *shalosh seudos tish* with their chasidim.

My grandfather, with his characteristic *temimus* and simplicity, explained that he prefers to sit with many Jews, since *b'rov am hadras melech* (A gathering of more people gives more glory to the King). In Bayit Vegan, he would sit with twenty or thirty Jews, whereas in the Gerrer Beis Medrash he joined hundreds of chasidim.



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The Amshinover Rebbe said, "But those hundreds of Gerrer chasidim aren't "your people", they aren't your chasidim, they are chasidim of the Gerrer Rebbe." My grandfather objected, "Why do you say that they aren't "my people"? We are all brothers and we come together to benefit from the *kedushah* of the Gerer Rebbe. The Amshinover Rebbe was amazed by this reply and praised both the depth of the response, that expressed my grandfather's inner truth, and were expressed with such *temimus*.

My grandfather often told a story about his ancestor Rav Dovid of Tolna zy" a. In his old age, he was sometimes too weak to immerse himself in the *mikvah*. When he would enter the large beis medrash in Tolna, where thousands of Jews would gather, he bent over and walked through the crowd, declaring, "I *toivel* myself among Jews". The act of coming together with other Jews can purify us in the same way that a *mikvah* does. Of course, this only works if we throw ourselves into the gathering of Jews with the intention of joining them as part of one *chaburah*, with *ahavah*, *achvah*, *shalom*, and *reius*.

This is the lesson that we must learn from our *parsha*, and from my grandfather and his ancestors zy" a. Do all that you can to join a *chaburah* and to be a good friend and brother to every Jew. If we do all that we can to foster total love, and unity, we will be able to withstand all of the tests and difficulties that we face. The we will *zocheh* to experience the *Geulah* and the rebuilding of the *Beis Hamikdash* ! במהרה בימינו אמן



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