



## TRIBULATIONS: THE PROCESS OF MAKING ALIYAH

**A**fter university, Judaism became my central focus. I went to Israel to learn in yeshiva, and being a young man of age, started dating. I found a beautiful young woman in Israel, and we got married. We had our first child, Yochanan, at Hadassah Ein Kerem. Soon afterwards we went to America for what was supposed to be less than four years of semicha at RIETS/Yeshiva University and then back to Israel, for Aliyah. Four years turned into five, six, seven, all while our responsibilities, obligations and family grew bigger. I became a rebbe at Yeshiva University and a rabbi at the local shul. My wife became a manager at B&H Photo and a rebbetzin. Our children attend a wonderful yeshiva day school. We have a community of

friends and marvelous neighbors. Are we really going to make Aliyah?

But saying goodbye to all of the above is not my main concern. In my mind, there is a dichotomy between what I hope my career will be *and* what is best for my family. I have the ambition, strength and aptitude to be a leader for the Jewish people. The unique opportunities at Yeshiva University have enabled me in this journey. I have learned to operate and develop Jewish communities. Being a Jewish educator and rabbi in America is fulfilling on many levels. Yet that ambition has been equally met with another juxtaposing force. My precious children. I believe the future of the Jewish people is in Israel. Consequently, the best I can do for my family is bring my children to Israel.

And that is just one of the multitudes of reasons Jews make Aliyah. Now you can start to understand my difficulty, my internal dilemma: self-fulfillment of the altruistic desire to lead and educate our people *or* my children's future.

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai teaches that there were three cherished gifts HaShem gave the Jewish people. All three gifts are only acquired through tribulations: Torah, the land of Israel and the World-to-Come (*Brachot 5a*). There is an intuitive logic to this fundamental teaching. Anything worthwhile takes effort to grasp (where effort is synonymous with tribulations). Often our wants and desires must be sacrificed in order to attain something greater. If we sacrifice our luxuries, we can attain

Torah, Israel and the World-to-Come. Many sayings of Chazal seem to indicate as much: the way of Torah is bread and salt, drinking water in measure, sleeping on the ground and a life of trouble... (*Pirkei Avot* 6:5, *Midrash Tanchuma*, Noach 3). Resh Lakish explains that we only attain Torah if we kill ourselves over it (*Shabbat* 83b). All these statements of Chazal and many others imply that physical hardships and forgoing luxuries are necessary to attain Torah. I will add that when we think of gedolim, we do not think of great wealth. Rav Aryeh Levin lived in Israel in a home that could fit into my bedroom. By extrapolation, the land of Israel and the World-to-Come also requires the same approach.

All the amenities and luxuries that have come with our growing responsibilities and obligations must be abandoned in order to attain more “cherished gifts.” The ambition for our careers should be released for the future of our children. That is a parent’s role. We plant the proverbial carob tree for the next generation without thought of our own selves (*Taanit* 23a). After all, all parents forgo their own ambitions, on some level, for their children. As Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai teaches, “the land of Israel is only acquired through tribulations...” or so it would seem.

The notion of tribulations takes on a different meaning when you consider the following two events: Over the last few years, my mother was becoming increasingly sick. There were good stretches and bad, in hospitals and out, alternative therapy and traditional medicine. Prayers. All this culminated at the end of October in Chicago with her death. Both of her parents are still alive and part of me feels she left

before her time. Two days after her death and a day after her burial, my son Meir Nechemiah was born. Sitting shiva on a hospital floor in New York, waiting for a baby to arrive, was quite an emotional contraposition. That was the most intense week of my life. My son is a light in darkness, a comfort to my loss (and Nechemiah brought the Jews to the land of Israel). The Gemara says that the death of an individual creates a “*din*” against the family for a year, but if a male child is born it heals the family immediately (Yerushalmi, *Moed Katan*, 3:7). It is an interesting duality between having a “*din*” and the *process* of healing.

When my mother died, of the many conflicting thoughts that came to my mind was that now I could make Aliyah. I no longer had to worry about being summoned to Chicago — that already happened. I wish I could have my mother back, but without her, I am more at peace with moving to Israel.

Second, I am a rabbi of a shul in Washington Heights, New York, that gets about 250 holy Jews every Friday night. Most of these shul-goers are young, single professionals. So, as I fill my Shabbat table with guests, conversation often leads to the shidduch crisis and other such woes of the frum dating system. One such Shabbat, after a very heated conversation about the difficulties of shidduchim, my wife dreamed up the most clever, innovative approach to these problems. We are now beginning a startup to address the shidduch crisis, called GamZuli.

Starting an initiative now seems ridiculous. Isn’t it better to wait until we are settled in Israel or push off a move until the initiative is established? Given the nature of the work, and my ability to promote, it

might make more sense to stay in America another year. But that is just the thing. There will always be those opportunities, those chances that seem to suggest against Aliyah, or at least push off the possibility of Aliyah (the next best thing). There is a reason that HaShem has given us this opportunity now. Maybe this opportunity only came because of our imminent plans to make Aliyah. Why? Because Israel is acquired through tribulations.

Tribulation is not just giving up amenities and luxuries (although that is a component of Aliyah). Tribulation means removing the focus from yourself, your career and focusing it on the other, in my case, my children. But tribulation is not just giving up a righteous career (although for me, making Aliyah involves just that). Tribulation means a willingness to sacrifice everything in order to provide a way forward. This could mean the death of opportunities, or the death of a loved one (a mother or a Jew fighting for the Land of Israel). Blessed is He who gives life to the dead. This is because Israel is acquired through tribulations, and tribulations are all of the above.

The *sugya* that quotes Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai is all about tribulations. If you read the entire *daf* you find there are many instances of understanding tribulations and justifying their occurrence. At the beginning of the same Gemara is the famous teaching about overcoming your evil inclination (*Brachot* 5a). When your evil inclination comes at you, first you ought to incite your good inclination to overcome your evil inclination. As Rashi explains, you go to war against your evil inclination (try to resist). If that doesn’t work, then you ought to

learn Torah. If that doesn't work then you ought to say Shema. If that doesn't work then you ought to think of the day of your final judgment. But wait, if you are going to tell me that the best strategy against the evil inclination is to think of your final judgment, why not just do that first?

Another question arises: later the same *daf*, we find the statements of Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan that learning Torah actually takes away tribulations. That seemingly goes directly against the teaching of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai mentioned above. What does Torah do — take away tribulations or is it only acquired through tribulations (maybe you can acquire Torah with tribulations but once you *have Torah* then you do not have tribulations)?

The underlying answer for all these questions above, the essence of this *sugya* and my personal dilemma (career against children), is that

tribulations are a process. Depending on where you are in any process, those tribulations may affect you differently. There are times when the tribulations we face are destructive, and we ought to approach these tribulations with a mind to overcome them to subdue our evil inclination. There are times when tribulations act as reminders to correct our direction. Sometimes our troubles are to show us that HaShem loves us (see the same *daf*). No matter what, tribulations are always opportunities to grow.

The reason the Gemara does not first teach “your final judgment” in the struggle overcoming the evil inclination, is to teach us to develop our own abilities to handle our tribulations. We need to develop the smaller skills in order to handle the greater difficulties. As our tribulations become more challenging, accordingly is our potential for growth. Says, Ben Hey Hey, “according to the labor is the reward (*Pirkei Avot* 5:23)

Giving up responsibilities and obligations, amenities and luxuries is one type of tribulation that is hard to relinquish. Giving up my ambitions and desire for career success is yet another level of tribulation, which only compounds the first set of tribulations. The tribulations of the loss of a parent and the serious work it takes to get an initiative off the ground are yet another level of tribulations. The tribulations to move forward in life.

We are constantly troubled, and Chazal were only too keen to be aware of that, to teach us for the future. But our tribulations are necessary in a process of growth. Our Torah, land and future are only acquired through a process of growth. Tribulations are that process. We, the Jewish people, are constantly moving forward. Forward to a time in the not-so-distant future when we all live in Israel. It will be a process to get there.

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## FOLLOWING THE DREAM OF OUR PARENTS

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are motivated by Chazal in how they embraced Eretz Yisrael at their arrival.

Rambam states in *Hilchot Melachim* Chapter 5 Halacha 10:

גְּדוּלֵי הַחֲכָמִים הָיוּ מְנַשְׁקִין עַל תְּחוּמֵי אֶרֶץ  
יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמְנַשְׁקִין אֲבָנֶיהָ וּמַתְגַּלְגְּלִין עַל עֶפְרָה.  
וְכֵן הוּא אוֹמֵר (תהילים קב טו) "כִּי רָצוּ עֲבָדֶיךָ  
אֶת אֲבָנֶיהָ וְאֶת עֶפְרָה יְחַנְּנוּ":

*Great sages would kiss the borders  
of Eretz Yisrael, kiss its stones, and roll  
in its dust. Similarly, Psalms 102:15  
declares: “Behold, your servants hold her  
stones dear and cherish her dust.”*

It is difficult to imagine that our  
greatest sages would expose

themselves in such actions that are  
frowned upon by the social code  
of dignity and respect. Yet, when it  
comes to Israel, nothing is off the table  
and while we feel the sky is the limit,  
we also know that the ground and the  
dirt are the limit as well.

Upon entry to Eretz Yisrael, we are  
reminded by our *gedolei chacahmim*  
that to be in Eretz Yisrael is to  
return to our core and foundation.  
You kiss the stones, you roll in the  
ground, because for the first time  
you are back to your source. Just like  
*Adam HaRishon* was formed from  
the *adama* (earth), so too, all *Am*

*Yisrael* was, is and continues to be  
“formed” through the land of Israel,  
*Eretz Yisrael*. Israel is there to humble  
us, and remind us of where we come  
from, it brings out the sweet child  
within, a child who so eagerly bent to  
kiss the land because he was taught  
that he is back home.

This summer, our family looks  
forward to taking that first step  
together on the tarmac of *artzeinu  
hakedosha*, and without hesitation, we  
will follow the call of our father, to kiss  
the holy land, the land that will finally  
be home.