

MASEI

FLEEING FROM EVIL, CONQUERING EVIL

The Holy Protection of Torah, and Additional Strength to Conquer Evil

A

Levels of Evil

The *parsha* lists the forty-two places in which Bnei Yisrael camped during their forty years in the Sinai desert before coming to Eretz Yisrael. Many *mefarshim* look for deeper significance in the list of these places. Simply speaking, this is to give us a historical record. Ramban says this is important in order for people to accept the veracity of the Torah. However, Chassidus follows the lead of the Zohar and sees deep spiritual significance in these forty-two stops in the desert.

These sources say that evil has forty-two levels. God made the world in triplicate form: *nefesh*, *makom*, and *zman*—people, place, and time. Various energies come into the world in triplicate form. Let's take the example of holiness. In place, the deepest holiness is found in the *kodesh hakodashim*, the most private room of the Beis Hamikdash. In the realm of time, the deepest holiness is Yom Kippur, which is called "*Shabbos Shabbason*, the Shabbos

of *Shabboses*.” Among people, the deepest holiness can be found in the *kohen gadol*.

The desert represents desolation. It is an abandoned wilderness, a frightening place with howling winds, jackals, and other animals. The desert represents evil. There are forty-two levels of this evil. During their forty years in the desert, the Jewish People moved from place to place. According to Kabbala and Chassidus, they did this in order to confront and conquer the forty-two levels of evil.

B

No Escape

The Midrash relates a puzzling statement that Hashem made regarding the time in the desert. God said, “During the forty years in the desert, you could have fled. But I wouldn’t allow you to flee. Instead, I made your enemies fall before you. Not even snakes or scorpions were able to hurt you in the desert.” Simply understood, this means that God protected His people from physical harm. What does it mean that Hashem didn’t allow the Jews to flee? Where would they have fled? Where could they have gone? A few times, the people complained and wanted to return to Egypt. Does the Midrash mean that or something else?

C

Two Methods to Deal with Evil

The Shem Mishmuel explains this Midrash in Chassidic fashion. The desert has within it the most extreme elements of evil. The challenge for the Jews was to confront those evil forces. Practically, there are two ways for a person confronted by the challenge of evil to proceed. One option is to flee. Say, for example, a person

finds himself in a bad environment. He has bad friends. What can he do? Instead of staying in this difficult environment, he should just leave it. Go away, move to a more protected environment. There, he will escape from these challenges. This is a quite simple and often effective way of dealing with evil. But is it the best way?

Consider, for example, someone who encounters a moral challenge in his workplace. If he leaves the job, he may have to take a big pay cut. He may not be able to do the good things that the job enables him to do. Moving away from a problem may be good for the individual in some ways, but the problem itself will not go away. That environment still remains evil. That company is still stealing. The same temptations remain for the next person who comes in. By fleeing the evil, the person may overcome his own challenge, but he won't fix the world.

A second approach is to stand strong and fight, and, with God's help, to defeat that evil. If this is done, then in addition to protecting oneself, the person will also fix the world.

This raises the fundamental question: What are we here for, to fix just ourselves or to fix the whole world?

D

Evil Confrontation

The Shem Mishmuel has a fascinating discussion of these two approaches: the approach of fleeing evil, and the approach of confronting evil, destroying it, and replacing it with something good. The discussion centers on Yosef. He was sold by his brothers into slavery. He was all alone in the house of his master Potifar. There, the wife of the house attempted to seduce him. He was subjected daily to difficult challenges. Yosef appreciated her, felt an attraction towards her, and it was not just from the evil urge. Yosef received an inspirational vision, *ruach hakodesh*, that he was somehow going to have offspring through her. Yosef didn't

know that he would eventually marry her daughter. His holy inspiration was for the family of Potifar, perhaps for the genes that this woman carried, but not for her. Yosef didn't know that, and he felt attracted to her. There was evil in this attraction, though, since she was a married woman.

Her husband was a scoundrel and a murderer, the chief executioner for Pharaoh. His wife might have been a nice woman, though, and she wanted to get away from her husband. She thought Yosef would be her ticket to escape. Yosef felt something for her.

Every day, Yosef was tormented by her. She did everything she could to get him to capitulate to her advances. It was a difficult situation for Yosef. Additionally, he was a slave. In that time in Egypt, he could have been executed on a whim. The courts did not protect slaves and their rights. She even threatened him. "If you don't give in to me, I will have you killed," she said. When he still refused, she threatened to have him tortured. "We will cut off your fingers and poke out your eyes, making you bleed to death." Egypt knew how to torture. She could have done this easily, since her husband Potifar was the chief executioner. Yosef was terrified, yet at the same time attracted. And he was helpless. So, what could he do?

One day, everybody went out to a celebration. She feigned illness in order to be alone with Yosef. He came in to the house, and she used her most powerful methods of attraction and seduction, Yosef was torn. He felt a moment of weakness. But then, with great strength, Yosef ran away outside. Subsequently, she called the police and her husband. Her husband knew that she was a disloyal wife. Instead of killing Yosef, he put him in jail. The rest of the story is history, as Yosef grew to great power and responsibility in Egypt.

Escape from Evil

In describing Yosef's response to the advances of the wife of Potifar, the Torah uses a double expression: "*Vayanas vayeitzei ha-chutza*. Yosef fled, and went outside" (Bereishis 39:12). The Shem Mishmuel notices that these two phrases seem redundant. How many times could he leave the house?

Yosef employed two different reactions that we can also use to conquer a *nisayon*, a spiritual test. First, Yosef ran away. He needed to escape the clutches of an evil situation. The Rambam at the end of Hilchos Isurei Bia gives important advice on this topic. If someone finds himself tempted by *arayos*, what should he do? You need to get out of there as quickly as possible—run! Don't stay in such an environment. This is the first method—no confrontation, just leave the evil behind you and move away. This took great courage. Yosef thus protected himself from falling spiritually.

The style of Chassidus is not to scold and berate, but rather to give inspiration. My great Rebbe, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik *zt"l*, once taught an important lesson. He recounted that a person from his *shul* came to him to ask about his daughter, who planned to attend a secular college. The father asked, "Should the girl dorm on campus or should she stay at home?" The girl wanted to live on campus, but the parents were torn. Rav Soloveitchik said the girl should live at home, because college campus life would present too strong a temptation. The parents, though, were unsure. They said, "Campus life will help our daughter mature. It will expose her to the real world, which she will encounter anyway eventually. There is a Hillel on campus, there is a Jewish sorority, and even a *minyan* on campus. She will confront the challenges there, and she will be stronger because she will not give in to them."

Rav Soloveitchik advised, "It would still be safer for her to stay at home. In a few years, when she will be more mature, she will be more equipped to handle the challenges of the world, and

she will be successful.” Sadly enough, the parents did not follow this advice. Sadder still, the girl living in the dorms of the campus abandoned her Orthodox practice and faith.

Rav Soloveitchik explained that the parents in this story wanted to do the right thing, to confront and defeat evil. But the stronger and more meaningful choice to confront, battle, and defeat the evil is not for the masses. The masses of people must choose to flee from spiritual confrontations and challenges, to live in a protected environment, where the evil doesn’t get close to them. People should not go to places where evil surrounds them.

F

The Fortress of Torah

For a person who is experiencing difficulty keeping his thoughts pure, the Rambam advises that he should engross himself in words of Torah, because “*Ein machsheves arayos misgaberes ela b’leiv ha’panui min hachochma*. Improper sexual thoughts only grow strong in a mind that isn’t considering wise ideas” (Hilchos Issurei Bia 22:21). The movement towards the immoral side of people comes only from lack of Torah.

The Gemara says, “*Barasi yeitzer hara barasi Torah tavlin*. I (God) created the *yeitzer hara* [which I put into man and woman], and I created Torah as the solution [to their desires]” (Kiddushin 30b). People can think about many different topics. But when one is engrossed in Torah thoughts, evil and improper thoughts enter much less often. There is something inexplicable about Torah, a mystical force that captivates the Jewish soul. This keeps the Jewish soul focused on the holy words of the Torah and doesn’t allow anything else in. In this sense, thoughts of Torah are more powerful than words of *tefila*.

The two main preoccupations of the Torah Jew, the primary platforms for reaching out to Hashem, are Torah and *tefila*. We

must learn Torah, as the verse says, “*V’hagisa bo yomam valayla*. Study Torah day and night” (Yehoshua 1:7). Another verse says, “*Lovdo b’chol l’vavchem*. Serve Him with all of your heart” (Devarim 10:12; see Ta’anis 2a). Put your heart and soul into prayers, into praising Hashem, requesting His help, and thanking Him for the goodness He does for us.

Amazingly, the power of concentration in Torah is much stronger than the power of concentration in prayer. It is all too common, unfortunately, for our minds to wander while we pray. We say the words, but our thoughts are not behind them. The power of prayer is great, but it has a certain weakness. It doesn’t build a fortress around the person praying. Even when people pray with great intensity, something in our mind does not allow us to become completely engrossed in our prayers. Something subconscious is going on, and we feel distracted. This is a painful and disappointing phenomenon that deserves a separate discussion. But the bottom line is that the *yeitzer hara* is not blocked by the power of prayer. He can fight *tefila*, can get into and even ruin it.

However, Hashem created an impregnable fortress in Torah. *Barasi yeitzer hara, barasi Torah tavlin*. *Tavlin* in this context means the antidote; Torah neutralizes the *yeitzer hara*. When we study Torah, we find that the *yeitzer hara* cannot enter. The crazy distracting thoughts, the idiotic things that enter our minds during prayer don’t come in while we are learning Torah. Torah will drive the *yeitzer hara* away. This is a mystical, mysterious force of Torah. Torah is the *vayanas*, like Yosef running away. It is a shield against the inimical, hostile, immoral environment that a person may find himself in mentally.

The Danger of Leaving the Fortress

This can explain the Gemara's statement (Sota 21a) that Torah study provides *migna*, protection. This is a kind of running away from evil. But if we keep running away, how can we destroy the evil? Whenever we leave the fortress, the evil is still waiting, lurking outside to trap us. Just running away from evil, even running away to the great fortress of Torah, does not destroy the evil that lurks outside.

Back to the story of Rav Soloveitchik and the girl who wanted to stay in the dorm at her college: When she was at home, she wouldn't even think of *chillul Shabbos*, of non-kosher food, or of intermarriage. The Jewish home was her fortress. When she left her fortress, though, the Torah did not protect her, and she fell.

This happens too often. If they go to college campuses too early, yeshiva-educated boys and girls can and do fall. In Israel, when boys go to the Israeli army too early, they also encounter harsh tests of their religious commitment. It is a great *mitzva* to go to the army and protect Jewish lives. But should a boy enlist when he is eighteen or when he is twenty-three? Do Jewish girls have to be in an army unit together with men, or should they do valuable volunteer work elsewhere? Of course, we know life is full of tests, and you can't always control your environment. But to the extent that we can, it is wise to flee from danger. Flee back to the Jewish school, to the yeshiva. Stay in the Jewish community rather than moving out of it. This may come with a price of possibly feeling more limited, less challenged, and less involved in the big world. But an average person is safer in a safe place.

This approach means that if, God forbid, a person leaves the fortress, if he or she stops the study of Torah or leaves the Jewish community to live by himself in the gentile world, evil is still waiting for him. It can pounce and destroy him, because he left the fortress. This is the power of the *vayanas*. It is safer to run to the

fortress. However, when you leave the fortress, you must be ready for a real and difficult battle.

Is there another way to deal with evil, a way to subdue and conquer it so that it will not always lie in wait for us?

H

Fighting Evil Directly

Yosef also teaches us a second method of facing evil. *Vayeitzei hachutza*, Yosef went out. After he fled, he emerged. The Shem Mishmuel explains that this means he emerged from the fortress of holiness to fight evil face to face. At this latter stage, Yosef was not afraid. He confronted evil head on and defeated it.

Yosef is the epitome of the confrontation with evil. He established a model of dual reaction. The first step is to flee to the fortress of holiness, to join other Jews and be protected by the Torah. The second level of confronting evil is *vayeitzei hachutza*, to be out in the street in the big world, in the bitter, difficult environment of a gentile world antithetical to Torah values. This might even be a greater way. If a person is successful in this method, then he will actually defeat and destroy evil!

The Shem Mishmuel makes an important point. This second method, that of confrontation and destruction of evil, is the ultimate purpose of the Torah. The purpose of Torah is not just to protect us in our *daled amos*, but to perfect the world as a place of Hashem.

I

Chanuka in the Streets

On Chanuka, we put the Chanuka candles outside in the street. The candles teach that the Torah can fix the world. Torah is not

limited to its function inside the house; it also can affect the outside. We place the candles on the left side of the entrance to the house, with the *mezuzah* on the right. In Jewish thought, the right side is always the side of prominence. With their important message, why should the Chanuka candles be placed on the left side?

When a Jew enters his house, the *mezuzah* is on the right. The *mezuzah* contains the words of the holy Torah. The Jew will find protection with the power of Torah study in the fortress of the Jewish home. The Chanuka candles, though, are on the left, which means that, on the way out of the house, they are on the right. When leaving his house on Chanuka, a Jew should think, “I am going out into the world and bringing the light of Torah and Chanuka into the world as I go. I am going out into the darkness of the night and illuminating it with the light of Chanuka.” This is a higher level of combating evil. Some people can do this the whole year, not just on Chanuka. They can be like Yosef.

Yosef went into Pharaoh’s palace. There were no Jews with him in the whole country. Thousands of Egyptian women wanted to marry this handsome, young prince of Egypt. They used to throw jewelry and flowers at him wherever he went. The Sages say that Yosef was above it all and paid no attention to them. He was able to fix the evil of the world, and he didn’t have to flee. His initial reaction was to flee, but his second reaction was to turn around and fix the world. Yosef worked to fix the evil of Egypt.

J

Not Everyone Is a Fighter

However, only Yosef and select individuals like him can achieve that. We must not be deceived by the *yeitzer hara*, who will make us believe that we can be like Yosef in Pharaoh’s palace. The *yeitzer hara* can make us think that we can go into the courts of gentile kings and queens and fix the world. Some of us indeed can, but

many of us cannot. We must honestly ask ourselves if this is really our mission and if we are suited for it. Perhaps this is not the mission for me, like that poor college girl we discussed earlier. Some people can and should go out to correct the world. But you have to ask if your evil side is deceiving you. Certain great Torah giants and leaders can do it. Maybe some of us can do it, too. It is a serious responsibility. Before a person makes this decision, though, he or she should seek counsel from people who have dealt with evil and know the nature of the fight.

Even in the family of Yaakov, only Yosef was able to do this. None of his other brothers were able to do it. Yehuda, for example, tried but failed. After selling Yosef, Yehuda joined together in partnership and friendship with a non-Jewish man. Yehuda had a tremendous downfall there. He even ended up living with (what he thought was) a prostitute. He eventually admitted his mistake and did *teshuva*, and that situation worked out. He realized, though, that he would not be the one to go out and fix the world.

This is the symbolic idea of the meeting between Yosef and Yehuda. Yehuda bowed down to Yosef. Yehuda recognized that Yosef was capable of bringing holiness to places where he was unable to. Yehuda must stay in the fortress.

K

Evil's Defeat in the Desert

This is the message of the Jewish People traveling from place to place in the desert, where, according to the Midrash, Hashem said, "I did not allow you to flee."

Bnei Yisrael were marching to Eretz Yisrael. There, they would encounter incredibly strong evil forces. These were the same forces that scared the *meraglim*, who thought that Bnei Yisrael were not strong enough to defeat them. But they were wrong. We spent thirty-eight years correcting their mistake.

In the course of forty years in the desert, there were forty-two stops. Each stop had a different evil force associated with it. The Jews wanted to turn away, to flee back to Sinai and study Torah there. They wanted to immerse themselves in holiness like when the Torah was given. But Hashem did not allow the Jews to run away. They had to stay in each place and combat its evil. Since the Jewish People would eventually enter Eretz Yisrael, they needed to learn to conquer any evil force that would face them. They could not always stay inside the Torah fortress.

L

Higher Calling

We have the bastion of Torah, the first fundamental building block of Am Yisrael. But Am Yisrael has an even higher calling—to take the Torah and bring it into the world, *vayeitzei hachutza*. The Jewish People in the desert had to fight evil in the forty-two places of the desert because they needed to develop a national skill. They had to be ready to confront evil. They would need this skill as a people when they arrived in Eretz Yisrael.

In our times, we also need to do this. We may be in the very last stages of Jewish history. When Mashiach comes, the people will not be tied to the fortress. Rather, the light of Mashiach will destroy every trace of evil from every corner of the world. The entire world will then shine with the light of Torah. This is what Hashem in His infinite wisdom prepared us for in the forty-two stops in the desert. He prepared us for the ultimate destruction of evil.

Let us hope and pray that we will merit to see the great day in which Hashem sends us the great Mashiach. He will destroy evil from the hearts of man. He will make people's souls pure, clean, and fearless, and evil will disappear.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do the forty-two stops in the desert represent?
2. What are the two methods of dealing with evil?
3. How did Yosef deal with evil in his own life?
4. What is the difference between Yosef and Yehuda in dealing with evil?
5. How does Torah study help with the challenge of evil?
6. Why are the Chanuka candles on the left side of the entrance and the *mezuza* on the right?

EXERCISE

1. For a week, keep a log of your confrontations with evil desires. How did you deal with them? Which of the two approaches did you use? Were you successful?

