

קונטרס תורת

"ממאור עינינו"



הרב אריה לייב חייטובסקי



The Torah thoughts of Rabbi Leible Chaitovsky

*Insights into the parshios, chagim, tefilos, and daily life of a
Torah Jew*

Delivered to the students of Ashar after shachris





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בס"ד יום ג' לסדר כהעלותך את הנרות השע"ה לפ"ק

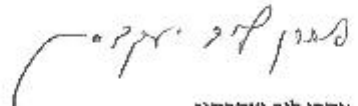
אפריון נמטייה לידיד נפשי הר"ר דניאל סטאום שליט"א, מחשובי רבני עירנו מאנסי ומיקרו רמ"י ישיבתנו, שהועיל בטובו לסדר שיחות הר"ר אריה לייב חייטובסקי שליט"א ולהעלותם על מזבט הדפוס לזכות חרבים בכלל והורים ומתנכים בפרט.

ידועים דברי חז"ל שאם דומה חרב למלאך ה' עבקות יבקשו תורה מפיהו ואם לאו וכו'. ובאך בעל ההפלאה ז"ל, שהאדם מכוון 'תולד' והמלאך 'עומד', כמאח"כ (זכרי ג', ז') 'ונתתי לך מהלכים בין העומדים האלה'. והיינו דהאדם תמיד כמזב של תנועה לילך מחיל אל חיל, הן לטוב הן למוטב. משא"כ מלאך הנברא באופן מסויים לתכלית מסויימת ומשאר איתן במקומו ועמדו מבני לווז כלל.

והנה בדרך כלל מחוייב איש הישראלי להשתדל לעלות מעלה מעלה בקנייני התורה והיראה, ואם אינו משתדל תמיד לעלות מעלה מעלה בע"כ יורד מטה מטה, כפי הגרי"א למשלי (טי"ו, כ"ד). לא כן חרב אצל תלמידיו, שאם יעלה בקוצב מהיר מדאג, לא יוכלו התלמידים להתחסס אליו ובוודאי ילקה הלימוד וביותר חשפעת הרב במדות וד"א. אלא צריך הרב בעת לימודו והתייחסותו לתלמידיו להדמות למלאך, העומד בנוקוס, עד שמצליחים התלמידים להתקרב למדרגתו, ורק אז ימשיך לעלות ויעלה אף התלמידים איתו.

שמו הטוב של חרב חייטובסקי כמחנך מומחה מיוחד במינו הולך לפניו כבר יותר משלשים שנה, הן בין כותלי ישיבתנו והן מחוצת לה. ובעיקר ידוע ומפורסם כימלאך ה' עבקות, אשר אליו נהרסים מאות תלמידים לסינייהם, כיא לפי מה שהוא, וכארי"א מרגיש אהבה לבבית שאינה תלויה בדבר ומסירות נפש, יהיה מה שיחיה. והיינו משום שהר"ר לייבל שליט"א בחינת 'עומד', וסובל ומסתר עד שיתקרבו הם למדרגתו ומודותיו התורמות, ורק אח"כ מעלה תלמיד יתלמידים עמו במחיצתו לאות ולמופת.

השיחות שבקונטרס הניכחי נלקטו מתוך דברי תורה של רבינו שהיעברו לתלמידים מידי יום כיזמו אחריו תפילת שחרית, ומוכח מתוכם האיש ושיחו. יה"ר שימשיכו הרב חייטובסקי שליט"א והרב סטאום שליט"א להפיץ מעיינותיהם החוצה לתועלת התלמידים והקהילות, מתוך כ"ט בגשם וברוח וחת דקדושה מיצ"ח לאורך ימים ושנים טובים, כידו יתברך הטיבה והרחבה.

הכרי"ח לכבוד התורה, לזמניה ומלמדיה,

אדולף ליב יעקבסון

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June 5, 2015

Rabbi Leible Chaitovsky
 25 Lyncrest Drive
 Monsey, NY 10952

Dear Reb Leible שליט"א:

More than a privilege, it is an elevating mission for me to revive a partnership that kept gaining in strength for 30 years. Yes, it was a partnership. The definition of partnership in Halachic terms is that each partner has the rights and authority of their joint glorifying pursuit. Thus, each partner is considered as an owner of the *entire* undertaking, in spite of the fact that technically only half of his share is his legal jurisdiction. Halachically and spiritually, however, he is considered a *full owner*. This is in spite of the fact that somewhere in the background there is another owner who claims the exact same hold on the partnership.

It is in this context that I believe it is worthy to interpret once again the statement of the Tanaim in the Mishna who said: "הרבה למדתי מרבתי ומתלמידי יותר מכולם". It is my preference to read this as a reinforcement of the power of the Rebbi, except that it adds a caveat. The power of the Rebbi, the strength of his Torah, the outreach of his embrace is as strong as the lesson that his תלמידים deliver back to the origin of the wisdom that they convert into a power of discovery that fashions the well that refreshes itself כמעין המתגבר, feeding fresh, pulsating, living water from the ever trustworthy source known as באר מים חיים.

Following the years of work in Torah Chinuch in another state in another community, Reb Leible came to us ready to search to dig new wells, and to open precious flows of pure water of growth of ambition. It is a way of teaching that is really an act of creating. It is quite consistent with the Gemara Sanhedrin that summarizes three outstanding features to being a מחנך. The first one is המלמד את בן חברו תורה כאילו עשה את עצמי. The second is המלמד את בן חברו תורה כאילו עשה את עצמי. The third one is המלמד את בן חברו תורה כאילו עשה את עצמי (להבדיל). The teacher firstly recreates himself. Secondly, he adopts Tofah to his new self and a new environment which reflects changes. Finally, he reaps the consequence in the reality that his תלמידים have become independent excited Torah lovers and Torah learners.

As the two of us were partners over the years, we both gained the ownership of the total undertaking. Today is a wonderful occasion, an anniversary that honors the past, acknowledges the present, and leads us to the future to say to you and to all whom we jointly represent, may Hashem allow us to be the partners for long years להגדיל תורה ולהאדירה.

Proudly and affectionately,



Rabbi N. Muschel

NM/jlg

דברי ברכה מהרב יוסף זילברברג

חתנו של הרב חייטובסקי

I am elated to hear that you are honoring my esteemed son-in-law, Rabbi Leible Chaitovsky, by compiling a *sefer* of his *Divrei Torah* that he delivered in Ashar.

With these *Divrei Torah* he has been able to teach his students and imbue in them an extraordinary positive feeling towards Judaism. Just as he practiced the mitzvah of “*v'shenamtem l'vanecha*” and raised his personal “*dor yesharim oomevorach*” so too he helped raise Ashar's “*dor yesharim oomevorach*” in fulfillment of “*v'shenamtem l'vanecha eilu talmedecha*”. How many evening hours, after school hours, and vacation hours, did he utilize to prepare his students to go in the way of Hashem?

With Hashem's blessing of strength and patience, Rabbi Chaitovsky imbued excitement, exhilaration, and happiness to his classes, in fulfillment of the blessing “*v'ha'arev nah Hashem es divre Torashecha*.” He made his teaching sweet. He coached the Torah Bowl contests, took his classes on trips, and participated in other contests. He was not only a teacher, but a mentor, a counselor, and a friend to his many students.

We have to thank Rabbi Dani Staum and all who assisted him, in his painstaking effort in compiling and organizing the *sefer* which is made up of these *Divrei Torah* which are interesting, original, and enjoyable reading for now and for many years to come.

With Torah blessings,
Joseph Silverberg

דברי ברכה מהרב בןציון ואזנר

בעזה"ת עש"ק לס' "בהעלותך את הנרות" התשע"ה

וזאת לתעודה בידי האי גברא יקירא מיקירי קרתא דא שמו הטוב הולך לפניו, הרב לייבל חייטובסקי שיחי' לאוי"ט המקדיש עתו וזמנו ליגע בתורה ולהכניס יראת ה' בצאן קדשים תלמידיו היקרים, וזה רבות בשנים שאני מכירו מקרוב כאיש ירא את ה' ורב חסד, וכל מגמת חייו להיטיב עם זולתו, יתן ה' ועוד רבות בשנים יזכה לעמוד על משמרתו, ולעשות נחת רוח לאבינו שבשמים להיטיב ולהתחסד עם בריותיו, כה יתן ה' וכה יוסיף ה' בידו להרבות ולחזק תורת ישראל מנהגיה והלכותיה, ויזכה לכ"ט בזה ובבא.

כעתירת ואיחולי ידידו נצח
בןציון יעקב הלוי ואזנר
פה בית שמש בארה"ק

דברי ברכה מהרב יהושע חייטובסקי
מנהל, ישיבה תורה אור, ירושלים עיה"ק

To my dear brother Rav Leible שליט"א ,

Chazal explain that what it says in the Torah "ושננתם לבניך", it doesn't mean your children but your students. If so, the question arises that it should have said in the Torah "ושננתם לתלמידך", why did it say לבניך?

My grandfather, Rabbi Scheinberg zt"l explained that only if the rebbe feels that his students are his children, then he will have success as a rebbe and the talmidim will give him much nachas.

Boruch Hashem, you have been the role model of a true fatherly figure to all your students, and that is the secret of your continued success with all your talmidim. May Hashem give you the *'koach'* and good health to continue being a father to all your talmidim and may you have much *Toredika nachas* not only from your class children but from your home children and grandchildren as well.

With great love and affection,

Shea

PREFACE

In a world with so many distractions and competing interests vying for a child's attention, teaching anything isn't easy. Teaching Torah is all the more challenging. To be a successful rebbe in today's world entails being able to inspire students and foster within them deep admiration and respect for Torah and its values.

ASHAR prides itself on being a yeshiva where "students love to learn". In that respect Rabbi Leible Chaitovsky is one of the greatest rabbeim I know. "Rabbi C" is a veteran of Ashar for over two decades. In his quiet and unassuming manner, he teaches, inspires, and fosters deep connections with his students, which remains long after those students have left Ashar.

I see it all the time. Students who have graduated Ashar years ago - even decades ago - return to visit Ashar. The smiles on their faces when they see Rabbi Chaitovsky speaks volumes of the respect, admiration, love and nostalgia that they feel for him as a beloved pedagogue and mentor.

When I, or my colleagues, have a question in chinuch – how to approach a certain situation or incident, or general tips on how to best help a certain student – we first turn to Rabbi Chaitovsky to solicit his advice and guidance. It is no exaggeration to say that he is an educator's educator, a mechanech par excellence. Teaching and educating is in his bones.

On Tuesday and Wednesday mornings after shachris each week Rabbi Chaitovsky shares with the talmidim a novel thought and perspective, generally connected to the parsha. His thoughts often contain a captivating story, frequently from the annals of Ashar history, along with a practical lesson pertaining to their daily lives. The talmidim enjoy the stories that are always mixed with a blend of wit and masterfully told in his inimitable fashion.

We, the rabbeim, are often amazed by the ingenuity of his explanations. The students cannot always appreciate the unique perspective and new meaning he has given to the pasuk with his novel explanation.

The thoughts recorded here are merely a sampling of those classic thoughts. It is my personal notes from many of the speeches delivered during the last three school years.

I once asked Rabbi Chaitovsky if he records his ideas. I was surprised when he replied that he does not. That means that for all of the unique ideas and stories that are presented here, there are myriad more that have not yet been written.

Writing these thoughts has been a labor of love. I enjoyed reviewing the lessons he taught and I heard his voice in my ears as I typed them. I tried to preserve his style of presentation and wrote it in that manner.

I have called the sefer "תורת ממאור עינינו" because the gematria of ממאור עינינו (483) is the same as אריה לייב הייטובסקי. The name is apropos because Rabbi Chaitovsky has been enlightening and inspiring students (and faculty) of Ashar for decades. These thoughts are indeed "Torah from the light of our eyes".

It is my hope and tefillah that anyone who reads them and learns them will appreciate the insights and creative approach to Torah that Rabbi Chaitovsky teaches and fosters in his students. More importantly, I hope his students will be able to be reminded of his timeless lessons and will remember their great rebbe that personifies his teachings and teaches by example.

I humbly count myself as one of his students – not only in regards to my own career as a rebbe but also in how to analyze, ponder, and appreciate the nuances of every word and letter of a pasuk. His love of Torah is truly contagious.

This year Ashar celebrates Rabbi Chaitovsky's concluding three decades of teaching Torah to Ashar talmidim and talmidos. May Hashem grant him the ability to continue teaching and inspiring students in good health and with all blessings for years to come.

With admiration and appreciation,

Dani Staum
Sivan 5775/June 2015

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to all those who made this sefer a reality.

In particular, thanks to...

Rabbi Jacobson for embracing the idea of printing this pamphlet of Torah and for sharing the desire to honor Rabbi Chaitovsky's three decades of teaching at Ashar in such a fitting manner.

The members of this year's boys and girls Torah Bowl Team who donated to this sefer in honor of Rabbi Chaitovsky's constant efforts on their behalf.

Sarit Kaplan (SK Design Solutions, www.skdes.com) for designing the stunning cover. Sarit has designed many flyers and other projects on behalf of Ashar, as well as for our shul, Kehillat New Hempstead. She is always so gracious and willing with her time. Her work is always beautiful and adds much to the project at hand.

Tomer Naftali and TNT Design Group for printing this pamphlet, and for being such a pleasure to work with.

All those who wrote divrei beracha in honor of Rabbi Chaitovsky which are undoubtedly personally meaningful to him.

קונטרס תורת

”ממאור עינינו”

Rosh Hashanah

On Rosh Hashanah we hear 100 blasts of the shofar.

The source seems to be somewhat strange. The 100 blowings correspond to the 100 tears that the wicked Sisra's mother shed when she realized her mighty son, the great general, died in his battle against the Jews and was never going to return.

Devorah, the great prophetess and leader of Klal Yisroel, feared those tears. She mentions them in her shirah. Those were powerful tears shed by a loving mother; tears of a mother's longing, hope, care, and a broken heart. What could be more powerful than that?

Avrohom Avinu sets out to slaughter his son – his only son, the son he has waited 100 years for, the son in which his whole future, including all his hopes and dreams, are invested in. He ascends Har Hamoriah, knife in hand, and raises it to end all of his dreams and aspirations, as instructed by Hashem. Yet we do not find a mention of as much as a tear trickling down his cheek.

Yitzchok ascends the mountain with his father. Only then does he find out that he is the subject of the sacrifice. He asks his father to bind him so he doesn't move, and stretches out his neck to allow his father easier access to fulfill the word of Hashem. But Yitzchok too does not shed a tear.

Who cries? The angels in heaven. The Medrash relates that their tears fall into Yitzchok's eyes and blind him. But Avrohom and Yitzchok, in complete devotion and subservience and love of G-d, do not cry.

What is greater and more powerful than the *'tveren foon a mama?*

The absolute unyielding uninhibited *deveikus* of a father and his son! One whose love for his Creator is so deep that it supersedes the incredible love he feels for his son.

The sound of the shofar, which symbolizes the horn of the ram offered just after the akediah is the antidote which neutralizes the power of the tears of Sisra's mother. She cried

100 tears of anguish and pain and loss. We counter that with the blowing of 100 blasts of sheer devotion, dedication, and love.

That is the essence of Rosh Hashanah – the complete devotion and love for Hashem!

Rosh Hashanah

It's like a scene from an Alfred Hitchcock movie. The audience is aware of something that the characters themselves are not aware of. It's an example of what's called dramatic irony.

The audience knows that there is poison in the tea and the characters are sitting around and schmoozing and one of them lifts the glass while continuing to talk. The audience holds its breath as he lifts it to his lips. Then suddenly he becomes involved in the conversation and places the cup down. There is a knock at the door and the audience is aware that there is some terrible danger waiting on the other side of the door. They watch nervously as the homeowner walks towards the door, involved in his own thoughts, and begins to turn the knob.

We have two such stories of incredible drama in the Torah

Yaakov has entered Yitzchok's room to take the berachos that Yitzchok intended to give Eisav. We feel the emotional tension as we wait to see if Yaakov will be caught. Eisav is beginning to head home while Yaakov is standing before Yitzchok nervously. Suddenly Yitzchok becomes suspicious and summons Yaakov to stand before him. Yaakov is clad in garments of deception which his mother has placed upon him. He approaches and Yitzchok declares that he smells the field of blessing which Hashem has blessed. Rashi explains that it is the field of apples. [This is the only time that apples are mentioned in a story in the Torah!] Eisav is entering the house. He stands at the entranceway. We hold our breath. But Yaakov leaves one door just as Eisav enters a different door. We breathe a sigh of relief.

A second story which contains high drama:

Yaakov is marrying Rochel, for whom he has worked tirelessly for seven years. He stands under the chupah adjacent to the woman he thinks is Rochel. The crowd at the wedding has been paid off by Lavan, and they are all cheering on Rochel. In fact, only one person in the whole town is not present at the wedding – the woman Yaakov thinks is standing next to him. Rochel remained at home so as not to be discovered.

We read the story with bated breath. Will Yaakov find out in time?

But no! Every one of the Simanim that he gave to ensure he not be duped have been given over. We wonder how could this have happened to the great Yaakov Avinu? Yaakov is fooled and he ends up marrying Leah.

But if one were to ask Yaakov later about that event, Yaakov would unquestionably reply that it was one of the greatest events to happen to him in his life. He could never have raised the twelve shevatim if he had not also married Leah.

On Rosh Hashanah we have two minhagim which remind us of these two highly dramatic events. We eat an apple which reminds us of the first event in which Yitzchok smelled the field of apples in Yaakov's clothing just before he blessed him. We also eat Simanim which are reminiscent of the Simanim Yaakov gave to Rochel to ensure that he not be fooled.

In both of those events – the one in which the outcome immediately pleased Yaakov and the one in which Yaakov was shocked and disappointed – the will of Hashem was carried out, and it became very clear that it was all for the best.

On the night of Rosh Hashanah we are the character in the story who are unaware of the outcome. The angels tremble in fright for they are privy to the great judgment transpiring in the celestial worlds at that time. But we are unaware. Still we know that undoubtedly whatever occurs – whether it seems good to us or otherwise - will be the Will of Hashem, just as was the case with Yaakov Avinu.

Still as we take the apple we dip it into honey in the hope that our judgment will not only be good (for all that comes from Hashem is good) but also sweet, in the sense that it be pleasant, even from our earthly perspective.

Succos

We always try to do mitzvos in the best way possible. We buy top quality matzah, we only buy tefillin from a reputable sofer, we decorate our succah, we buy top of the line *daled minim*.

The halacha is that a succah can be four walls, three walls, and even two walls and a tefach of the third.

Why isn't there a *biddur mitzvah* to have four walls? If only one distinguished rabbi in the last 2,000 years stated that it's preferable to have four walls, everyone would ensure that they had four walls. But there doesn't seem to be any such preference.

The Torah states that we are obligated to sit in the succah for seven days. But we are allowed to have a succah with many openings. Even beyond the openings of the walls, there are many laws which permit spaces within the walls themselves – *lavud, dofen akumah, gud achis*, etc. What might the permitted openings of the succah be a message for? Why should a succah be allowed to have spaces?

There was another flimsy structure known for its open spaces, in fact it had spaces on every side. Avrohom had spaces on every side of his tent, in order to welcome and invite others. Perhaps the succah has spaces to symbolize that we are welcoming everyone (as the gemara says that it is fitting for every Jew to sit in one succah).

The pasuk says "You shall dwell in succos for seven days; every citizen in Yisroel shall live in succos." You should dwell in succos and invite others too.

The minhag on succos is to mention the Ushpizin, symbolizing our welcoming guests. The first of the ushpizin is Avrohom, the champion of chesed and inviting others.

Succos

I take along my son and my dog Rover on a road trip. We are on the highway when suddenly a tremendous storm breaks out. I can't see to my right or to my left and my son is guiding me from the back seat, while Rover is barking incessantly.

Miraculously we make it through. I tell my son that thanks to his help a miracle happened to us and every time I drive past that place I will recall that miracle.

In honor of his help and to remember what occurred I call the place "Rover". My son is more than a bit insulted.

Perhaps this sounds like a far fetched story, but it sort of happens in parshas Vayishlach.

After his meeting with Eisav, Yaakov spends a year and a half in Succos. While there he builds houses for his family and little Succos-huts for his animals. Yaakov is very successful in that year and a half – he learns Torah with his family. When it's over he decides to express his gratitude and he wants to remember the goodness that Hashem did for him there. So he calls the place 'Succos' in honor of the huts he built for his animals.

Why does he name the place based on his animals?

Seforim connect each of the three major Yomim Tovim to the three avos.

On Pesach we became Klal Yisroel, as Avrohom discovered Hashem

On Shavuos we totally give ourselves over to Torah, as Yitzchok gave himself over for the akeidah.

Succos corresponds to Yaakov because Yaakov built Succos for his animals.

Let us try to 'shed' light on this enigma:

People become wealthy and sometimes forget where they came from.

Yaakov gave away a great deal of his wealth to Eisav as a gift. Yet he now realizes that he is still laden with wealth. In fact the Torah says Yaakov came to Shechem complete – which includes complete with his wealth.

The people of Shechem are so enamored with his wealth that they want to intermarry with Yaakov's family so they can be connected with that wealth.

Yaakov Avinu never forgot the fact that Hashem endowed him with so much wealth. He made Succos to protect the animals which he always remembered Hashem had given him.

We sit in Succos to remember our exodus from Egypt

Yaakov built Succos to remember his personal exodus from the home of Lavan.

In the haggadah too we mention Yaakov's salvation from Lavan.

Parshas Bereishis

For a third grader doing math homework, certain numbers are favored, such as 0, 1, and 5. Those numbers multiplied or divided are easy to calculate.

But other numbers like 19 and 23 are not so favored.

In parshas Bereishis there is a number that has special significance, and then comes up again in parshas Noach repeatedly.

Hashem never came to Noach on the day of the flood and told him it would start that day. Seven days before, Hashem told Noach that it was to begin in seven days.

After the flood is over, Noach and his seasick zoo are waiting to leave the taivah. They notice some mountaintops, and Noach opens a window and sends out the raven. The raven doesn't leave the area around the taivah and so Noach waits seven days. Then he sends out the dove. But the dove has no where to land and it returns tiredly. Noach waits another seven days and sends the dove again. This time the dove returns with an olive leaf in its mouth. Noach waits another seven days and then everyone disembarked from the taivah.

As long as all of the animals were still in the taivah Noach had the overwhelming job of feeding them. If I were Noach I would have sent the dove every single day, hoping that it would find dry land as soon as possible.

Before the flood Hashem told Noach that the flood was coming. So why couldn't Hashem come to Noach after the flood and tell him to leave? Why did Noach have to be busy sending a dove in the first place? A whole year went by before Hashem told Noach to leave?

Seven days can only have one meaning – Shabbos! In Parshas Bereishis we are taught about Shabbos being every seven days.

Seven days before the flood began Mesushelach died. Avos d'Rebbe Nosson says that Hashem pushed off the flood seven days to honor the shiva period for Mesushelach. During that time there will also be a Shabbos, and perhaps that Shabbos will inspire them to do teshuva, because all it takes is just one Shabbos to save the world.

At the end of a year in the taivah, Noach sends the raven. Once that mission was unsuccessful Noach waited another week, another Shabbos. Perhaps that Shabbos – the magic cure for the world - will make them worthy to leave the taivah.

Hashem didn't speak to Noach in the taivah, because it was a bit of a complaint against Noach that he needed a taivah, because he did not influence his generation.

Avrohom Avinu on the other hand, spent his life trying to influence others.

Each time Noach waited another seven days, another Shabbos, in the hope that the zechus of that Shabbos would make them worthy of resettling the world.

This Shabbos is a special Shabbos – Shabbos across America! There is a great effort to get as many Jews as possible in America to keep Shabbos. Last year this was done in South Africa with many thousands of Jews keeping Shabbos for the first time.

How was it done? It was just one Shabbos. They were invited to participate and to keep Shabbos.

Last night I was holding my cell phone and wondering could I also convince certain boys to join me for a Shabbos? Would they agree? These are young men who lack boundaries, are very caustic, and lack self-control, though they come from religious Shabbos observant families.

I was sitting with my son-in-law and I decided to make the calls. I called three boys and went 3 for 3. They all agreed to walk over to my neighborhood, daven with me, and stay for Kiddush, and maybe then even beyond.

Noach demonstrated this message, which Hashem taught us in Parshas Bereishis: The power of a Shabbos! It can change the world!

Anyone barred up in the cocoon of his own taivah, Hashem won't appear directly to him, even if he is caring for the world. It's only when one invite others to taste the beauty of Shabbos, that Hashem will surely join him.

Parshas Noach

People are always full of ideas. Some are good ideas, some are bad ideas. But people often have an emotional connection with their ideas, and the ideas become entrenched in their midst. Sometimes they will defend their ideas, even after they were proven to be failures.

The Gemara tells us of a time when the entire city of Beitar was killed out, and the bodies were left out in the field. But years later the Rabbis discovered that a great miracle occurred when the bodies didn't decompose until they were able to bury them. The Rabbis felt this was too great of a miracle to allow to pass, and so they composed the fourth beracha of Bentching – Hatov V'hameitiv.

At the end of parshas Noach, a tower is built, perhaps even taller than many of today's towers.

NBC news came to interview some of the builders of the tower and asked them why they were investing so much effort in its construction.

The first builder replied, "We are going to war against G-d! He's all the way up there and we're all the way down here. So we're building this so we can go up there to fight Him."

The second builder replied, "There was a massive flood a few years ago that wiped out the world, so obviously there's a leak up there. We're building a tower to get plumbers up there who can fix the leak."

The third builder replied, "The problem with the flood was that the waters reached fifteen *amos* above the highest mountain. If they only had a place to go which was of a little bit of a higher elevation they could have all survived. We are building this tower, so we will be able to survive the next flood."

These answers may sound strange, but the Medrash relates that these are indeed the responses they gave.

The people who built the tower were very confused. They were all trying to accomplish something but they weren't exactly sure what it was.

The fact is however, that the tower was constructed in the valley of Bavel. One common denominator between all of their reasons is that they wanted to climb up to the sky. If so, why did they build it in a valley? Wouldn't it have made more sense to build it atop a tall mountain? Why would Nimrod have allowed them to build it there?

The answer is because all of the bones from the dead bodies of the flood landed up there. Rashi says Bavel was called *Shinar* because it's an expression of being shaken up. All the bones were shaken up until they ended up there. They saw the bones and perhaps recognized some of their dead relatives.

When they saw the dead bones they became emotional and ran to Nimrod for an idea. Nimrod rallied the people to construct a tower. They were caught up in the emotions of the moment and all joined. It may not have made much sense but they were too frenzied to think about that. That is the power of crowds and groups. We become swept away in them and it's hard to not follow the masses.

There is also a positive power of groups. When we make a simcha we invite our friends and neighbors so that there will be a public display of joy and celebration.

This coming Shabbos a great event is happening. All across the world Jews will be joining to keep Shabbos together.

There is a boy named Yaakov. I knew Yaakov when he was in ninth grade and he looked like a wonderful ben-Torah. By tenth grade that look was gone, and by eleventh grade he was clearly influenced by the wrong crowd. He no longer had any connection with Torah.

Sometime ago I met him outside one of the local stores. His resentment and distance was so deep that he told me he wants nothing to do with this religion. He doesn't even want to marry a Jewish girl.

I debated in my mind and then I decided to text him last night: “Yaakov, a bunch of boys will be walking to me on Shabbos for Kiddush and the seudah. I would love it if you would come and bring a friend.” I then went to sleep. This morning when I work up I saw his response: “Rabbi, it would be my pleasure!”

Parshas Lech Lecha

I would like to share with you two stories, but I won't yet share with you their endings:

The first story took place yesterday here in Ashar. I was on my patrol during lunch and I stepped out of the dining room to monitor the halls. I noticed in my periphery vision that there was a boy walking behind me. I figured that if I turned in his direction he would immediately turn around and head back to the dining room. I was surprised when I turned down the hall near the office and noticed he was still trailing me. I walked back towards the lunchroom through the other side of the building and arrived back in the lunch room after having made one long *bakafab* around the school. As I walked in, sure enough, there he was right behind me. I asked him what that was all about? Why did he follow me around the entire school?

To be continued...

There was a great tzaddik in Yerushalayim named Rav Aryeh Levine. Rav Aryeh was as poor as cold be. On one occasion he had a guest for Shabbos. This was not a guest like we have guests; what we have is more in the category of company where we invite people we know. Rav Aryeh however, did not know his guest. He was a complete stranger. They spent an entire Shabbos together. When Shabbos was over Rav Aryeh and his wife noticed that the only thing of value that they owned – her silver Shabbos candlesticks – were gone, and so was the guest. Now Rav Aryeh turns to his wife to say something. What does he say?

To be continued...

One of the most amazing gestures of generosity seemingly was made by the King of Sedom. People have given him incredible wealth and his city possesses incredible wealth. Yet he offers it all to Avrohom. He seems so generous. But we know as the king of the most selfish city he obviously wasn't being generous.

Avrohom refuses it all and replies that he will not accept a penny from the king.

In Pirkei Avos (Perek 5) the Mishna discusses one who declares: “What’s mine is mine; what’s yours is yours”. Most boys in this room would agree that that is a fair statement. The Mishna too first states that such an attitude is that of the average person. But then the Mishna states a second opinion that one who has such an attitude has the character trait of the people of Sodom. Imagine a teacher writing a comment on a report card “His behavior is either normal or totally insane.” How can the Mishna say that it can be of two extremes?

The answer is that it depends what the main focus is when one declares “What’s mine is mine; what’s yours is yours”. The King of Sedom offered all of the wealth to Avrohom, not because he was so generous, but because he was looking at it from his selfish vantage point. The rules of war state that the victor gets all of the spoils. The king of Sedom knows that if he would have won the war that’s what he would have done. So he feels obligated to give the wealth to Avrohom. The focus there was on himself and he felt he had to give it away.

But those of us who feel that “What’s mine is mine; what’s yours is yours”, our main focus is on the other person. We have things but we look to share and we look to ensure that others have what they need.

The boy who followed me around the building yesterday replied that he had borrowed a dollar from me on Thursday. Now he had the money with which to pay me back. It was still his dollar, but he owed it to me. His focus was on paying me back. He followed me around the entire building until he caught up and was willing to repay his debt.

When Rav Aryeh Levine zt”l looked at his wife after they saw that their candlesticks were stolen, he said that “This should be a lesson for us. The lesson is that we should never hesitate to invite another guest. Now we have nothing valuable left to steal and so we have nothing more to worry about.”

Rav Aryeh and his wife too were always focused on others, not on themselves.

Avrohom Avinu gives his three guests each a cow and expensive tongue – the focus is on others, not himself.

If our focus is on ourselves than the attitude of rigid boundaries is Sodom-like. But if we are focused on others then it is a perfectly normal attitude.

Parshas Lech Lecha

The first allusion to tefillin in the Torah is in this week's parsha.

The King of Sedom offers Avrohom everything – all the wealth of his city. Avrohom replies that he wouldn't accept anything – not a string or a shoelace.

Our Rabbis teach us that because Avrohom uttered those words we were granted the mitzvos of tallis and tefillin. What's the connection?

If someone came to offer me a lot of money and I didn't want to accept it for whatever reason, the proper response is to say "No thanks". Imagine if a restaurant owner offered me a free meal, and I replied "I wouldn't accept a glass of water here!" How rude! What if a principal offered parents that their children can come to the school for free, and the parents replied "We wouldn't allow our children to even breathe the air in your school!" How insulting and degrading.

Why does Avrohom reply that he won't accept a shoelace or a string? Let him just say "No thanks", and move on. Isn't Avrohom the example of sterling character and proper behavior? Is that the way he should speak?

Seforno explains that Avrohom rather lived among the Cana'anims than among the Sodomites, because Sedom was so incredibly immoral and corrupt. Still, Avrohom seemingly should have been more cordial.

The following story is true but names have been changed: There was a town whose hero was an athlete named Anderson. There was a restaurant in town who named one of their trademark sandwiches after their hero – the Anderson Sandwich. Anderson himself would frequent the restaurant and would order the sandwich. He was very proud of the publicity.

Then one day Anderson was caught doing something terrible. It was all over the news and everyone was censuring him. Suddenly the restaurant no longer called their famous

sandwich after Anderson. They took out a full page ad in a local paper declaring that they had no connection and did not in any way promote the now shamed Anderson.

Why did they need to do that? They are an eatery; who cares about who its named after?

The answer is that restaurant did not want to have any association with him or with what he did. They did not want to tarnish their own reputation because they had any connection with someone who had acted so inappropriately.

King of Sedom offered Avrohom shoelaces for his shoes, and a string, Chizkuni explains that the string was one that women wore in their hair. Avrohom replied that he wanted nothing to do with King of Sedom. He didn't want the king to be able to point and say "Look at Avrohom's shoes. Those shoelaces were my gift to him. Look in Sarah's hair. That hairpiece was my gift." Avrohom wanted to ensure that Sedom could never say he had any association with Avrohom. Avrohom lived for Kiddush Hashem and would not allow himself to be connected with such immorality and corruption.

The gift to Avrohom was the mitzvos of tzitzis and tefillin. When we are donned in them, Hashem can point to us and declare: "You see him, he is Mine!" For thousands of years we have belonged to this exclusive club. If anyone sees another wearing tzitzis or tefillin he knows he is a Jew. So many things in the world have been copied. But these two mitzvos have never been copied. They are exclusive to us for thousands of years.

The message Hashem gives us is "You are Mine!" It's a precious mitzvah every moment we wear them.

Parshas Vayera

Talk about publicity!

Avrohom is sitting by the edge of his tent in the orchards of Mamrei, waiting for guests.

Mamrei is name of a fellow who lives in the area. I guess a rich fellow, no one special. Yet in tens on thousand of places throughout this world this coming Shabbos his name will be mentioned, and has been mentioned for four thousand years, as the place where Avrohom sat outside his tent. Why?

A fictitious event:

I received an invitation in the email, which is always exciting. The heavier an invitation the more excited I become. [I even once received an invitation made of glass]. Of all things, the event was going to take place at Good Samaritan Hospital. It was to be in the reception room, where they have lectures for doctors and nurses. This would be a major party. I read what the party is about. Their relative is having an appendectomy. During the operation they rented out the room, so the friends and family can have a major celebration. And while he is in recovery, they are going to have catered foods available – the best drinks, along with a bartender, a smorgasbord with hot food. There will be speeches, a band, etc.

I was wondering what in the world this celebration is about. During the celebration everyone should be in shul davening, or at least busying ourselves with his situation and ensuring everything is going as well as possible.

The truth is that we have a ceremony which is kind of like the situation I just mentioned. It's called a b'ris. We inform people about it. [We can't invite people, because it's so important that if they were invited they couldn't refuse.] It's often a catered event, there are speeches, everyone is happy, and yet the baby is in pain.

Where did this all come from? Why should we celebrate a b'ris?

The idea actually came from Mamrei. When Avrohom was sitting with his three friends, Aner, Eshkol, and Mamrei, he asked them what they thought about him doing the b'ris. Now Avrohom was not asking if he should do it; he was unquestionably going to fulfill the command of Hashem. He was asking if this was the type of mitzvah that should be done in a quiet manner, so that no one should know. Or is this a big deal that he should publicize and let everyone know.

Avrohom wanted to know if publicizing his performing this mitzvah was “good for business”. His business was to inspire people. Will doing this mitzvah inspire people or will it make them want to look for another religion?

Aner replied that it's an operation and publicizing it will chase people away. Eshkol said that if Avrohom publicizes it than he's making the Jews be branded as Jews. He noted that Avrohom had defeated the Four Kings. There were survivors and they will want to come after Avrohom's family. If they have b'ris milah they will never be able to hide.

Mamrei however said “The G-d who saved you when you were thrown into the fires of Ur Kasdim, saved every one of your 248 limbs. If he's asking you to do a mitzvah with one of those limbs you owe it to Him. Not only that, the event at Ur Kasdim was good for business, because afterwards people followed him. According to Targum Yonason, Nimrod's own son – Eliezer – became a loyal follower of Avrohom. [It makes it more dramatic that when Avrohom went to fight Nimrod with Eliezer, it was a battle against Eliezer's father.] That same G-d who saved you then, if you do the mitzvah of milah proudly, you will see it will be good for business.”

Indeed it has been a source of joy, and has not been bad for business in all of these years. It was Mamrei's suggestion that the mitzvah be publicized. How does Hashem reward Mamrei for telling Avrohom to publicize this mitzvah?

The Torah publicizes his name.

It's easy to suggest to a classmate to do something impolite or naughty. But sometimes you give a suggestion to do something nice, and you can never know the effect of your suggestion.

About fifteen years ago, a boy named Yair was in a class where a classmate gave him a suggestion: When you go for a high school interview, always think of something outside the box which you can do, which would be a nice gesture. M.T.A. comes to Ashar and calls in boys one by one into a room to be interviewed. Yair was not a successful student in class. He didn't pay attention or do well in class, but he desperately wanted to get into a mainstream high school. Normally when called in the boys have to read some gemara. Yair couldn't do that well at all.

Yair walked into the room where he would be tested, and noticed a piece of paper on the floor next to the garbage can. He picked it up and threw it away. Then he sat down.

Afterwards, I called M.T.A. and asked how everyone did. Surprisingly the Rabbi told me he would take Yair. I was happily surprised, but I wasn't going to say anything. But the Rabbi explained that when he tested Yair he really didn't know anything. "But a boy who walks into a room and picks up a piece of garbage and throws it out, if he is so decent, how could we not want to take such a student!"

Yair has since graduated high school, and today is a successful contractor. A small little suggestion that someone made may have made an incredible impact upon his life.

We don't have to publicize who did something, but Hashem will always one day publicize the acts done.

Parshas Vayera

The announcement goes out that three students are suspended for a week. One of my favorite students approaches me and begs me not to do it to them. "It will go on their records, it may effect them getting into high school; please don't do it." I replied that they deserved it. But he again begged me not to do it anyway. I insisted that they had their chance and now must suffer the consequences. He tried one last ditch attempt, by uttering those words which cannot be ignored: "I am nothing more than dirt and ash, and I beg you to please spare these boys."

That would throw me for a loop, because I wouldn't know what he's talking about. But the truth is that he would be quoting Avrohom – who used those words in his last attempt to try to save the undeserving people of Sedom.

Hashem understood what Avrohom meant. He is like dirt because he once threw dirt at the Four Kings, and if Hashem wouldn't have saved him, he would have been dirt. And when he was cast into the furnace he would have been ash, but Hashem saved him.

Dirt and ash – one has a past and one has a future. Ash has a past – it's the remnants of destruction; dirt has a future – it can be planted.

Hashem replies that He cannot save Sedom entirely. But He would grant children of Avrohom two rewards – a mitzvah with dirt and a mitzvah with ash. Parah Adumah is reduced to ash and only then does it becomes usable. The dirt of Mishkan was taken and mixed with water and given to the Sotah.

The ash that has a past would be sprinkled take Jews who came into contact with death and purify them and give them a future. The dirt that has a future is given to the Sotah to show us that her past is good so she can proceed into the future.

Avrohom demonstrated the ultimate humility – I am not a past or a future.

This morning, there is one Torah law we all observed which demonstrates I am nothing – not eating before davening.

Shulchan Aruch chapter 89 states that before you daven you cannot eat. Mishna Berura explains that the Gemara states that the reason is that someone who eats before davening is sending G-d a message “I come first. G-d you only come second.” One who eats before davening is haughty. Not eating demonstrates humility.

Parshas Vayera

A number of years ago, my family took a trip along the coast of Massachusetts. Along the way we drove through Plymouth, Massachusetts. We knew we had to visit Plymouth Rock. After all, when the pilgrims landed here it was at that rock. We didn't really think about why that makes the rock important, but since it was listed as a sight to see we knew we had to find it.

I had printed directions from MapQuest (this was the days before GPS). We drove down the road and realized we had missed it. We drove back and missed it again. We figured we would look for the masses of people and that's where it would probably be. But there were no masses of people. So finally I did something which is very hard for a man to do - I asked someone for directions. He told us to park and walk across the street and we would see it.

We followed his instructions and arrived at the rock. I figured there would be a tribute printed nearby detailing the great statements made by our founding fathers about the importance of the rock. But there was no such tribute.

What's the point of the rock? How does it prove that the pilgrims actually landed there? Who said it really has any significance?

But then around the corner I saw many stores selling merchandise with pictures of the rock and other such things. I then realized that it was those stores who benefit most from the rock.

Avrohom Avinu seeks to prove to Avimelech that the well is his. Avimelech claims otherwise. Avrohom approaches the well and the water begins to rise towards his sheep. Then Avimelech's sheep approach the well, and the waters recede.

Perhaps it was just a trick. So Avrohom wanted to prove the legitimacy of his claim. How did he do so? The pasuk states that he gave seven of his sheep to Avimelech. What did that prove? How did that show that the well was really his?

The brother of the Maharal explained that as soon as Avrohom gave the sheep to Avimelech the waters of the well, which had risen towards those same sheep five minutes earlier, now receded. That was clear proof that the well indeed belonged to Avrohom.

The property of a Jew has an elevated status just by the virtue of the fact that it belongs to a Jew.

A cow that belongs to a non-Jew can work on Shabbos, but a cow belonging to a Jew must not be allowed to work in the field on Shabbos.

The holiness and specialness of a Jew extends even to the things we own, as Avrohom Avinu demonstrated to Avimelech.

Parshas Chayei Sarah

Everyone in town was coming to hear this speech. They never experienced anything like that. An old Jewish man was going to be speaking. Next to this old Jewish man is the coffin of his departed wife. He is crying, and they all gathered around in respect for this important old Jew.

The old Jew was Avrohom Avinu; the lady in the coffin was Sarah. The people who have come to hear the speech are Cana'anim.

The Medrash says that because the people of Cana'an showed respect and came to hear Avrohom's speech, they were not attacked by the massive giants that lived north of Cana'an.

Normally one would never deliver a eulogy until he has a place to bury the person. But here Avrohom gets up to give his speech about his wife, even though he does not yet know where he is going to bury her. As Jews we are very sensitive not to delay burial, and yet here Avrohom begins negotiating afterwards.

The logic apparently was that Avrohom hoped if Ephron heard how great Sarah was he would be more willing to sell him a burial plot for her.

We weren't at the speech but there are few sources which reveal to us what he said: "*Aishes chayil mi yimtza...*"

Rashi reveals to us what might have been another part of the speech. We all know the speech, but we may not have realized it was part of the speech. Rashi says Sarah died as a result of hearing the news. What was the news? Yitzchok was about to be *schechted* at the akedah. Rashi tells us this point – not in the Torah's account of the akedah, but when it tells about the eulogy Avrohom said for Sarah.

In describing how Sarah died Rashi says "*parchab nishmasah* - her soul flew out". That expression is used at other times to describe a happier way of one's soul departing.

When great people hear bad news we expect that they will not fall apart, for they have faith in G-d.

Sarah was very worried about the older step-sibling who didn't behave right, Yishmael. Sarah was always worried about Yitzchok. She died at 127; that's how long her life was meant to be, but Sarah was always wondering "Is my son Yitzchok the son I hoped he would be?" She knew he was righteous, but was honoring Hashem his foremost priority in life?

At the age of 127, Sarah was informed that Yitzchok allowed himself to be offered as the akedah. At that moment Sarah felt that he had indeed become the son she had dreamed of. At that moment her soul left her and she died a happy lady.

Avrohom related all this in his eulogy for Sarah. He wanted Ephron to hear it so Ephron would be inspired about the lady he was burying.

Parshas Chayei Sarah

Imagine if I walked into a school and said that I wanted a class to teach that will have no disturbances. They would tell me that I should find a different school.

Part of teaching includes fixing.

In England there was a book (which later became a movie) about a teacher who joins a school and teaches for a year. At the end of the year he is invited to join another school where he will be respected and appreciated. As he is holding the paper and contemplating what to do, his next year's would-be students enter the room. They act rude and rambunctious and taunt him about being their upcoming teacher.

He looks up at them and tears up the letter.

It may be an uphill battle, but that teacher was there to inspire and fix.

I want to speak to you about fixing a tree, ground, and dirt.

Adam Harishon was in Gan Eden. He ate from the tree, the dirt became cursed, and he was informed that he would return to the ground.

Adam was so punished. Who came to rescue him from that punishment?

Avrohom Avinu.

Despite his pain on the third day after his milah he invites guests and has them sit on the ground, under the tree, after they wash their feet of the dirt that was on them.

Hashem makes it hard for Avrohom to do this chesed – he has to chase one of the cows and it runs all the way to *me'aras hamchpeilah*.

At that moment Avrohom discovers the cave and realizes Adam and Chava are buried there. [Medrash says Shais buried them.] After discovering their burial places Avrohom decides he will fix the tree, dirt, and ground which they tainted with their sin.

When Sarah dies Avrohom pledges to buy the cave no matter the cost. Ephron tells Avrohom that he can have the cave for free. But Avrohom insists on buying it, and he purchases the cave with the ground, dirt, and tree.

The greatest people will be buried here alongside Adam and Chava, the people who fixed what they damaged when they sinned.

Things don't come easy. We are here to fix what we can.

Avrohom buys the cave from Ephron the Chitti, one of the sons of Canaan.

Dovid Hamelech too buys Yerushalayim from Aravna HaYevusi.

Our mission isn't just to take, but also to fix.

Parshas Toldos

Let's imagine that we have a problem in school concerning kids bringing snacks from home, and too many times a boy comes over to me complaining that another boy took his snack. Sometimes a boy is really excited about his snack and puts it in his locker, and he comes back at recess that his snack has been taken.

Let me tell you what we are not going to do:

There was a thought that someone who does such a thing should have an in-school suspension. We have many seforim discussing the laws of interpersonal responsibilities. The perpetrator could write a long essay, in perfect spelling and penmanship, all about why his actions were wrong.

Another idea was to no longer allow anyone to bring snacks to school anymore. Instead of worrying about who was stealing snack, we could eliminate the problem in advance. We would set up a 'snack detector' at the door, and every student would pass through it as he entered. If he was carrying a snack the sensor would detect it and an alarm would go off, and the snack would be confiscated.

This strange account is something like that happened in this week's parsha.

The law was passed that if you take what's not yours you get killed. But then the law was changed to just getting rid of the temptation altogether.

Rivka and Yitzchok arrive in Pelishtim. Avimelech remembers himself, or perhaps his father, taking Sarah and being approached in a dream by Hashem and warned that if she wasn't returned they all would die. Then they all contracted this terrible disease. So Avimelech is trying to figure out whether Rivka is Yitzchok's wife or his sister. When he discovers she's really Yitzchok's wife, Avimelech becomes fanatical and warns that if anyone touches her he will be put to death.

Good job Avimelech.

So Yitzchok and Rivka continue to live there. Yitzchok starts a farm, and Yitzchok has the most incredibly successful season a farmer can have. Suddenly, Yitzchok is a multi-millionaire. So what's Avimelech's next decree about Yitzchok living in their town?

Get out! You have too much money! Get the snacks out of here because we can't handle it.

Every time Yitzchok dug a well the Pelishtim dug it up. The Pelishtim kept taking what wasn't theirs.

When Yitzchok finally dug a well that wasn't dug up and stolen he named it *Be'er Sheva*. Medrash Hagadol says Be'er Sheva is a celebration of the seven mitzvos of b'nei Noach which were finally being observed by the goyim for a short time.

These mitzvos include not stealing.

A boy in high school, not having the best time, tells me that he is being bullied non-stop. He can put down his food, turn around, and his food is gone, surrounded by giggling. He is then put in the humiliating situation of having to contemplate how to best handle it - does he pretend to laugh along, does he ignore, does he respond, etc.

Let's check which of the seven mitzvos have been violated: Stealing, breach of justice, embarrassed in public which is like murder, and where is G-d? Four of the seven have been violated!

Too many times people think it's funny to touch things that don't belong to them. First step to being decent person and a good Jew is not to take what doesn't belong to you.

When Avrohom finally felt that people in Canaan understood the lesson of not stealing he named the well Be'er Sheva. This way everyone who comes there will ask about the name and will be informed that there are seven mitzvos that everyone is obligated to keep, including not stealing.

Parshas Toldos

Two boys grow up together from preschool through high-school. We could imagine that they will have certain similarities. If they grow up on the same block and daven in the same shul, they would be even more similar. If they were twin brothers and had identical voices they would be even more similar.

But then when these two twins are fifteen years old a traumatic/tragic event occurs. They both have vastly different reactions, which cause a great shift in their futures.

Yaakov and Eisav are twins growing up in their little world with their father, mother, and holy Zaide, Avrohom Avinu.

But then the unexpected occurs and Avrohom Avinu dies. Avrohom could have, and should have, lived a few more years.

Yitzchok is quite wealthy and has many servants in his home. Yaakov thinks to himself that this Zaide's whole life was about chesed and so Yaakov decides that he will personally cook a mourner's meal for his father. The servants move aside and Yaakov begins to cook.

Yaakov also thinks that his father's whole life is dedicated to having a personal and deep connection with Hashem. Yaakov reminds himself that he will yet see his Zaide again at *techiyas hameisim*. Yaakov furthers his study of Torah and becomes an even more devoted student. The food he cooks contains a Torah lesson; lentils are round to remind the mourner of the cycle of life.

With the passing of his Zayde, Yaakov is even more focused on Torah, avodah, and chesed.

His brother Eisav however, went off the deep end.

Eisav looks at his Zaide's death very differently. He reasons that what's life about anyway? If Zaide's life can end so abruptly, so can the life of the person whose coat I want.

That coat had been in the Taivah of Noach. It was taken by Chom and given to Nimrod. The coat had the ability to control people and Nimrod used it to manipulate others. Eisav desperately wanted to control people. The only way he could get the coat was by getting Nimrod out of the way. Eisav out duels Nimrod, kills him, and takes the coat.

But Nimrod had men who take up pursuit and Eisav has to flee. When he arrives home he sees Yaakov is cooking and he calls out: "FOOD! ME! GIVE!"

Yaakov explains that it's for their father, because their Zaide has died. Eisav counters that he should just pour it down. Yaakov replies that if he behaves in such a manner how can he be the bechor who will perform the avodah of Hashem? Eisav answers that life is only going to end in death anyway so he needs to live for the now, and doesn't want the *bechora* and its responsibilities. He then sells the *bechora* for some food.

Yaakov gives him bread and now Eisav is full but he still agrees to sell the *bechora*.

Eisav responds to his Zaide's death in the most embarrassing manner to his Zaide possible.

Yaakov responds to his Zaide's death in the noblest manner to his Zaide possible.

Two children raised in the same home – similar people, and yet so different beginning with their reaction to one tragic event.

This morning in Har Nof, people gathered to daven. There were two Eisav's waiting with axes and guns until more people gathered. Then they did what they were taught was "the most wonderful thing", an act for which they will be praised by a billion people. They ran into the shul firing guns, and wielding axes and meat cleavers at the Jews armed only in their tallis and tefillin. There have already been four funerals, and there are others in critical condition.

The terrorists have been killed but that's like killing roaches – there are plenty more.

Now we must deal with the trauma. How will we react?

Some will say we need to improve and come closer to Hashem. Others will say what's the point anyway? How much longer should we be passive and allow this to happen?

What is our reaction?

Do we stop for a moment to stop and think what we can do better or are we just concerned about breakfast? Are we just worried about how we can get what our friend has?

It's like on Holocaust Day when there was a presentation here in the shul and one boy asked if he can get his snack.

We make our decisions accordingly.

Let's follow the way of Yaakov, who was promised that when he does what's right he will overcome his brother.

Moshiach is at our doorstep, let's prepare properly.

Parshas Toldos

For ten years they davened for a child together – over 3600 tefillos, to merit having a child. They woke up each morning and davened, they went to sleep each night after davening – but they never gave up.

A column later in the Torah we are informed that Avrohom Avinu dies. Yaakov cooks lentils which are round and resemble the circle of life. His Zayde is gone and life begins again.

1 column later in the Torah it tells us that the Pelishtim sought to erase the memory of Avrohom Avinu, like the Palestinians want to do to us today. Yitzchok returns to the place where those wells were and he digs them up.

It looked like the end of Avrohom's efforts, but Yitzchok tenaciously ensures that his father's legacy continues.

Yitzchok didn't give up when the wells were stuffed.

Yitzchok didn't give up when he and Rivka had no children.

Yitzchok didn't give up when his father died.

Yitzchok didn't give up when he was blinded as a young man, and remained blind for 2/3 of his life. He remained full of simcha, which is a perquisite for prophecy. We know Yitzchok had prophecy because he was aware that Yosef was still alive, even when his son Yaakov had no idea.

At the end of the parsha Yaakov, now 63 years old, has received the blessings of prosperity from his father and is a wealthy man, is attacked by Elifaz as he is leaving home and is left destitute.

At 63 without a penny Yaakov returns to Yeshiva. He'd been in yeshiva before, but now returns to start anew, because he needs to prepare himself for a new stage in life – the stage of Lavan.

All of the stories just mentioned are all examples of people in situations where they could have given up. In fact, Gemara says there are four who are considered like they are dead – one who has no children, a destitute person, a blind person, and a metzora. The previous stories include people in almost every one of those situations.

The question in life always is – how do you react?

Those great people did not lose themselves in despair because they were *mechazek* themselves.

When confronted with disaster we have to be ready to start anew and go on.

Yesterday's tragedy in Har Nof was shocking. Four holy men wrapped in tallis and tefillin were butchered to death by two Arab terrorists. We want to not think about it. We want to return to our entertainments and other diversions and pretend it didn't occur. But the painful reality is that it happened. There is a teacher here in ASHAR who has a daughter in seminary where three of the four victims *by'd* taught.

What do you do after such a tragedy?

Life is a circle; where one life ends another begins.

We pick ourselves up and we move on.

There was a student here who had every reason to be discouraged about his ability to learn. He was pathetically incapable and had every reason to give up. But with some encouragement and inner desire he picked himself up and went from the bottom to the top.

In death, when we pick ourselves up and start again, and when we fail, we pick ourselves up and start again.

Parshas Vayetzei

I went to get a beracha from this incredible tzaddik, who could look in your eyes and see exactly what you need to fulfill your purpose in this world. His blessings were known that they always came true and his wisdom was incredible.

I was third on line. The first person walked up to the tzaddik, and the tzaddik looked at him and said, "You have a great power to daven. Always daven for others and daven with all of your strength." He then opened his drawer and pulled out a siddur and wrote an inscription in it, and handed it to him and wished him well.

The second person came up and the tzaddik said to him, "You have a great ability to give tzedakah in a most special way and to give chizuk to poor people. He opened his drawer and pulled out a wad of bills. He wrote a beracha on the outer bill and handed it to the man. "Give this money to the first poor person you meet, and then continue to give tzedakah."

Now it was my turn. I stepped up in front of the tzaddik nervously as his warm penetrating eyes looked at me. Then he opened his drawer and pulled out a gun and a grenade. "When people annoy you, you should use this. And if a lot of people annoy you, you should use this." Then he inscribed the gun and handed it to me and wished me well!

Does this story make any sense? Would a tzaddik give someone a beracha to kill others and use weapons? Yet that is what Yitzchok seems to tell Eisav. He blesses him "You shall live by the sword."

Yitzchok saw that Eisav didn't want to live his life's mission properly, and that he wanted to live wildly. So he blessed him as he wanted to live.

All the blessings in the world can only help a person achieve higher greatness in the path he himself chooses to follow!

Parshas Vayetzei

The morning brought rain which quickly changed to snow during shachbris. There was an early dismissal.

The gemara relates that the best way to lose money is to hire workers and not supervise them.

Every summer I hire workers to clean my camp after hours. Around 5 p.m. I noticed that the workers have been cleaning building 8 for a very long time. I got into my golf cart to investigate. As I neared the clickety-clanking of my golf cart announced my approach. Suddenly like ants chasing a cookie all the workers emerged from different surrounding buildings and rushed back to resume their work.

I realized that they aren't concerned about stealing from their employers; they just don't want to get caught.

There was an incident in Ferguson, Missouri this week, where the jury made a decision that wasn't very popular on the streets. All of the evidence pointed to the police officer's innocence. But the friends and those who identified themselves with the victim claimed that he had to be guilty. After three weeks of deliberation however, the jury concluded that he was innocent.

The result was rioting in the streets. There was one Jewish man who owns a store there. He was wise enough to hide his expensive wares. His store was looted and destroyed. The storeowner had absolutely no connection with the crime. But their expression of anger caused the destruction of the whole area of town.

I thought to myself that maybe that is what anger does to a person.

But then I also remembered when there were major celebrations after a great victory of a hometown team in any sports. The same story occurred with people looting and destroying.

I thought to myself that maybe that's the result of celebration, not just anger.

But then there are also stories of parties happening with teens when parents are away. There is drinking and drugs and who knows what else, and then there is often violence and damage.

I thought that perhaps that is the result of people feeling crazy in the head.

But then like a good detective I put all the pieces together and realized that it's not anger, celebration, or parties which are at the root of such behavior. Rather it's a lack of *yiras shomayim*, no fear of G-d and remembering that He runs this world. What causes these events to occur is anytime there is any sort of breakdown.

Yaakov Avinu is the first life-long shepherd. He is incredibly faithful. He gets frostbite in the winter and sunburned in the summer. Lavan is getting rich while Yaakov is being completely taken advantage of.

After 14 years Yaakov finally approaches Lavan and says that he needs to start making money for his family, and so begins six years of Lavan constantly changing Yaakov's salary.

Yet Yaakov prevails and becomes extremely wealthy. Lavan's sons accuse Yaakov of stealing; they have no other explanation for how he can be making money.

But in truth Hashem ensured that because Yaakov was careful with Lavan's property, Hashem blessed his property.

When a person is careful to pay others on time and is careful with other people's money, Hashem blesses him.

We must always be faithful. A Jew does not go crazy – ever! This includes if there is a substitute teacher in the classroom. Torah and *derech erez* can NEVER be compromised. We are not hoodlums or thugs; we are b'nei Torah and we must act appropriately, even in loose situations.

Today there is white stuff coming down from the sky. I had two bar mitzvah boys who testified about this while wearing their tefillin. So now it is official – snow is falling. You probably know that there are powerful agencies that make decisions and you and I don't know what they'll decide. But until then I won't steal from my employer, and I will teach. You too shouldn't steal from your parents who pay for you to come here to learn.

Perhaps we will have a *genlah* soon!

Parshas Vayetzei

Yaakov leaves his father's house.

Rashi states that when a tzaddik leaves it makes an impression, and the loss is noticeable.

Yaakov leaves for 37 years. He would never see his mother Rivka again.

I attended a bar mitzvah towards the end of this past summer. It was for a boy who was unable to be educated; he was extremely special needs. There was no facility in the Jewish world that had the means to accommodate him.

If he would maintain eye contact with someone for three seconds it was an accomplishment. He lived in a world of his own.

The boy himself could only come for the last half hour of his own bar mitzvah because he couldn't sit longer. But the father wanted to do something in honor of the bar mitzvah.

The boy couldn't learn but the father could. So the father would learn mishnayos and whenever he got to the last word of the mishna, the boy would repeat the word. That much he could do.

At the bar mitzvah the father announced that when his son would come he would say the last two mishnayos and his son would repeat the last word of each.

To say that everyone was wiping their eyes is an understatement.

The father made the siyum, and then proceeded to say kaddish.

The father was also a very talented ba'al korei. He couldn't teach his own son the parsha, so instead he taught another boy in the neighborhood for free. He taught that boy Parshas Ha'azinu, and when that boy lained and was called up to the Torah the father felt as

if it was in place of his own son. The whole family of the boy went to hear the other boy lain Parshas Ha'azinu.

It's not only about what we actually do, but what we cause to happen. Even if we can't do a mitzvah we can help and encourage others to perform mitzvos.

When Yaakov left Be'er Sheva his presence was missed. The inspiration of a tzaddik and his effect on the atmosphere is very powerful.

Parshas Vayishlach

“My father was injured in a fight so I am no longer eating steak!”

Where in this week’s parsha do we find a similar idea?

We do not eat the *Gid Haneshe* of an animal.

Why should the Children of Yaakov not eat the *Gid Haneshe* because that’s where Yaakov was injured during his struggle with the *malach* of Eisav? What did they do wrong?

Yaakov was left alone and that’s why he was vulnerable and attacked. The complaint against the sons of Yaakov was why did they allow Yaakov to travel alone? Why didn’t they accompany him?

It is our responsibility to ensure that a Jew is never left alone (especially in regards to his personal struggles against the *Yetzer Hara*, symbolized by the *malach* of Eisav).

Therefore we have to refrain from eating the *Gid Haneshe* to remind us that we must never allow a Jew to be left, or to feel, alone!

Parshas Vayishlach

When I was in elementary school I had a fifth grade rebbe, Rabbi Spielberg, who would put on plays using the Chumash story. [It's a risky thing to do because in efforts to be humorous sometimes the kavod of a character in the chumash can be compromised. But this rebbe was an incredible director, and his plays were extremely powerful.]

Once he did a play of the struggle between Yaakov and the angel of Eisav. The play was incredible as the two characters acted out the struggle, first Yaakov on top, and then the malach, and back and forth. Then at one point the malach strikes at Yaakov's leg and injures him, causing Yaakov to limp as he arose. But finally as the excitement builds Yaakov overpowers the malach. The struggle was performed in almost complete darkness with a strobe light flashing, dramatizing the scene.

But at this point Rabbi Spielberg has a light off stage slowly becoming brighter in a brilliant demonstration of the rising sun, as the malach then looks at Yaakov and begs him to send him off. Yaakov insists that he will not do so until the malach admits that he (Yaakov) is worthy to receive the blessings of Yitzchok, even though he procured them through trickery. The malach asks Yaakov "what's your name?" When Yaakov replies, the malach answers that the name Yaakov has a connotation of trickery (eikev). Therefore, he is changing his name to Yisroel to symbolize his victory over the malach and his deservedness to have received the berachos.

Then Yaakov asks the malach "what is your name?"

In the final moment of the play the malach looks at Yaakov and responds, "Why are you asking my name?" And with that the curtain dropped and the crowd was left stunned in their seats trying to figure out what that meant.

Why doesn't the malach answer what his name was?

I had a younger teen that I learned with. A few years ago after Pesach he approached me nervously and said "What do I do, I ate chometz on Pesach?"

I sat down with him and asked him to tell me the story. He explained that he was outside on Yom Tov night when a few of his friends pulled up in a car and told him to get in for some fun. Without thinking about it he got in and they drove to the mall. As they walked through the mall and passed an eatery they stopped to eat and told him that he had to try the cheeseburger special and that they would treat him. Without giving much thought he ate it.

I told him 'Let's break this down: Getting in a car on Yom Tov, Malkus; eating basar b'chalav – kares; eating chometz on Pesach – kares; eating meat that wasn't shechted – kares....

I went to my rebbe and asked for guidance about how this student can rectify himself. I expected a response about fasting etc. He replied that he must do two things. Firstly, he must learn halacha so he is familiar with what he needs to do. Secondly, he must immediately get rid of his bad friends because when he is with them the peer pressure overcomes him and he acts without thinking!

When the angel replied "Why do you ask my name?" he was giving an answer. He was saying "My name is 'why ask questions?' That's my greatest tactic. That's how I work. I get people to act without thinking!

Parshas Vayishlach

There was a fellow who was very nervous about having all of his money in one bank. So he split his money and deposited it in two banks.

He then called the president of the shul and told him he wanted to make a big Kiddush in shul that Shabbos. When the president asked him what the occasion was, he replied that it was because he now had his money in two banks, instead of one.

“Do you have more money now?”

“No!”

“We always like a good Kiddush, but truthfully I don’t understand what you are celebrating.”

Imagine the challenge and pain of having to divide your family because of an approaching danger. Yaakov is afraid of the upcoming confrontation with Eisav and so he divides his family.

He then declares his gratitude that he had left his father’s house with only his staff and now he has two camps. Why is that an advantage? His family didn’t grow because he divided them?

When Yaakov divided his family he saw them spread out and was able to appreciate the blessings he had on a greater level. In fact, it gave him a good strategy to use in the gift he sent to Eisav. He spread out the animals that he sent him so that Eisav could fully appreciate how much Yaakov was giving him.

It’s true that dividing them into two camps didn’t increase his numbers, but it did help him realize how much he had been blessed with.

Yaakov then emerges from his confrontation with Eisav and continues on to a place called Succos. He remains there for eighteen months, before proceeding to Bais-El for another half year.

Targum Yonason relates that Yaakov set up a yeshiva in Succos where he taught his own family. In Bais-El he built a Mizbeiach and brought korbanos.

Why didn't Yaakov go home? He had already been away for two decades, why did he linger in Succos and Bais-El?

I do not have a source for this idea, but perhaps it's as follows:

Before leaving Yaakov declares that if Hashem will take care of his needs he will give ma'aser – 10% to tzedakah.

Yaakov remained in the home of Lavan for 20 years, and during that time Hashem blessed him with a large family and much wealth. Now he wanted to fulfill his pledge and so he set aside two years for Torah and Avodah to fulfill his pledge to Hashem.

When Hashem gives you so much you must realize how much you owe.

What's a good thing to think about when you have nothing productive to think about?

There was a great rabbi who said that when he was at a wedding and there was some open time he would contemplate all of the blessings that Hashem had bestowed upon him.

So far in my life I have never missed a meal. I know people who are 80-90 years old and have never missed a meal. That's not a small thing; there are others who may have missed many meals.

I also have shelter and family.

I have much to be thankful for.

Parshas Vayeshev

There's a car filled with children about to pull away. I stick my head in the car and ask "Where are you going?"

The first boy replies "We are going to the airport."

The second boy replies "We are going on an airplane."

The third boy replies "We are going to Eretz Yisroel."

The fourth boy replies "We are going to Yerushalayim."

The fifth boy replies "We are going to visit our Zaide in his home in Yerushalayim."

All five of them answered correctly. The difference is how much foresight their reply contained.

The shevatim take their sheep to graze in Shechem.

They travel from Chevron where Yaakov lived to Shechem. What were they doing in Shechem? The last time they were in Shechem they had killed out the city and were afraid of having to fight all of the neighboring cities. So why go back there? They obviously didn't just go overnight. If they traveled so far they were planning on staying for some time.

The answer is that that was the only land in Eretz Yisroel that Yaakov Avinu had legitimately purchased – the field outside of Shechem which he bought for 100 Kesitah. The brothers traveled all the way there to ensure that their sheep didn't graze from stolen property.

On the pasuk which says "They went to graze the sheep of their father in Shechem" (Bereishis 37:12) Sifsei Chachamim quotes a Chazal which says "they went to 'graze' (i.e. feed) themselves.

What does that mean?

If the brothers would have all been packed into one car leaving from Chevron to Shechem and I stuck my head and asked them where they were going, one brother might answer “We are going to Shechem”.

But what happened while they were in Shechem? Yosef arrived, and they sold him, which eventually led to him becoming viceroy, which led to their descent to Mitzrayim, and Yosef providing them with food during the hunger.

So if I stick my head in that car and ask where they were going, another one of the shevatim might answer “We are going to Mitzrayim”, and another might answer “We are going to ensure that we have food during the hunger” – since that set the process in motion which would result in Yosef providing for them.

If I were to ask why students like yeshiva,

One may answer because of recess,

Another might answer because he likes the challenge of studying,

A third might answer because he is preparing himself for life as a productive Torah Jew.

It all depends on your foresight and goals!

Parshas Vayeshev

A lady goes to the airport in Israel carrying a heavy suitcase. To her disappointment she finds out that her flight is delayed.

The last thing she wanted was to spend money at one of the overpriced concession stands. But she is really hungry. After some time she purchases a package of wafers.

Shortly after buying it her flight was called and she scurried into her seat on the plane.

At one point during the flight, she was eating her wafers while reading a book. Suddenly, she noticed that the elderly gentleman sitting next to her was also eating her wafers. She couldn't believe it. What a chutzpah! But she was polite and didn't say anything. The entire flight they both kept taking wafers. Every time she took one, he took one too. He smiled at her politely and ate it.

At one point there was only one cookie left. The first woman waited to see what her "chutzpadik neighbor" would do.

There was a tremendous disagreement between Yosef and his brothers.

Yosef felt the brothers were doing things wrong – eating meat they shouldn't be eating, acting unfairly with sons of Bilha and Zilpa.

Yosef did not judge the brothers favorably.

The shevotim felt Yosef was trying to ruin them.

They said "Zayde Yitzchok had two children, and one was pushed out. Great Zayde Avrohom also had two children and one of them was pushed out. It seems Yosef is trying to push us out too."

The brothers do not judge Yosef properly.

Who is correct?

What does the Torah want us to do?

The Torah wants us to Judge Yosef favorably *and* judge the brothers favorably.

Because look what happens when people don't judge each other favorably!

If Yosef would come here and speak to us and tell us his position we would swear that he was correct. But then if Shimon and Levi would come and speak to us and tell us their position we would swear that they were correct too.

The lady in our story was shocked when the elderly gentlemen broke the last wafer in half, smiled, and handed her the other half. But then, as the plane was about to land the woman reached for something in her bag and pulled out an entire closed package of cookies.

She couldn't believe it! SHE was the chutzpadik woman and the elderly gentleman had been sharing with her the whole time!

She learned to judge people favorably.

Parshas Vayeshev

What marks the geographical center of Eretz Yisroel?

Yerushalayim is a very important city but it's not in the center

Chevron is 25% up from the southern border

Tzefas is 95% of the way up

Tel Aviv is on the coast.

The surprising answer is that the city of Shechem is exactly at the midway point.

The proof is that the gemara in Makkos says that there are three *arei miklat* in Eretz Yisroel and they are exactly proportionately distant from each other: Chevron was 25% of the way up, Shechem was 50% of the way up, and Kedesh was 75% of the way up.

The brothers of Yosef traveled from Chevron to Shechem to graze their sheep. That means they walked 25% of the country to graze. Why did they go so far; sheep travel very slowly?

Avrohom Avinu purchased Chevron from Ephron.

Yaakov purchased land outside Shechem for 100 kesita.

The brothers wanted to make sure their animals only grazed from land that was definitely theirs. So when they finished in Chevron they traveled to Shechem.

Avrohom Avinu arrives in Eretz Yisroel and the first place he arrives at is Shechem. He looks at the place with a deeper vision and sees that it is a place ripe for terrible things, but also for wonderful things. Avrohom Avinu davens there.

Years later when Yaakov Avinu meets up with Eisav and survives the encounter he arrives back in Eretz Yisroel and goes to learn. Then he travels to Shechem, even before coming back home. Yaakov wants to demonstrate to his neighbors how wonderful he and his family are and they purchase land, give gifts, mint coins, and build bathhouses.

Yaakov Avinu recognized that Shechem was a risky place, but he did not foresee the extent of it.

Soon Dinah was taken by Shechem and then Shimon and Levi wiped them out.

Later Yosef meets up with the brothers in Shechem before they sell him into slavery.

When the nation enters Eretz Yisroel the first place they come to is *Har Gerizim* and *Har Eival* where they hear curses and blessings and promise to keep Torah.

After Shlomo Hamelech died they wanted to strengthen his monarchy so they went to Shechem. Within a short time the nation was divided in Shechem, never to be united again.

Shechem is a place where possibilities and risks lie. From the center of something one can look out in all directions. From the vantage point of Shechem one can see control of the land or its destruction.

When the shevotim went to Shechem it was to create a new beginning. Yaakov was concerned about their going to Shechem so he sends Yosef to see what they are doing. That was the cause of the disaster and tragedy of Yosef.

In the center of a city should be its shul, and in the center of the shul is the bimah. The shul should also be at the highest point of the city.

In this building the shul is in the center. Everything centers around the Torah.

In this shul – as in every shul – we have the greatest opportunity and possibility to create a Kiddush Hashem or a chillul Hashem. We can honor Hashem or we can disgrace His honor.

Think about it! The *Ba'al Tefilah* is representing us. We have the chance to say *amein* and create wonderful things. We should be wise enough not to squander those opportunities.

Chanukah

As we prepare to enjoy the Yom Tov of Chanukah and light the first candle tonight we need to ask the important question: Where did the oil come from?

The gemara relates a shortened version of the story which states that they found a jar of oil that was “*munach*” resting with the seal of the Kohain Gadol on it.

My Rebbe in High school explained that the word “*munach*” means that it was placed there purposely, and it wasn’t just a random find. Who put it there? We have no record of a Kohain Gadol stamping jars of oil?

The wording of the gemara is that they found “one jar of oil”. The Gerer Rebbe explained that the miracle involved condensed oil. They poured oil in the jug but it didn’t fill, there was still more room. So they filled it with enough oil for eight nights and only then did it fill. So they sealed it and marked it. When the Chashmonaim found the jug of oil there was already enough oil miraculously in that little jug to light the Menorah for eight days.

Who was the Kohain Gadol who placed his seal on it?

The Torah (Parshas Vayishlach) relates that Yaakov re-crossed the river and was left alone. Medrash says that Yaakov went back to retrieve little jars of oil.

Where did those little jars come from?

Another Medrash (*Yalkut Reuveini*) relates that when Yaakov Avinu left his father’s house and was heading towards Charan and slept upon *Har Hamoriab*. When he woke up from sleeping on *Har Hamoriab*, he poured oil upon the stones which he slept on and made them into a *matzeivah*. Where did he get the oil from? He found it underneath the stone. Yaakov poured oil on the stone but the jar from which he poured did not empty, and it kept pouring. Yaakov saw that it was a special jar of oil, and it was that jar which Yaakov forgot on the other side of the river.

In other words, Yaakov experienced a taste of the miracle of Chanukah with the jar of oil that he had.

What was the symbolism of Chanukah for Yaakov Avinu at that time?

Yaakov had left home laden with riches but had been robbed by Eliphaz and was now destitute. He was going to live in the home of Lavan. How can Yaakov survive against the odds? He has nothing and will have to deal with such difficult challenges?

The message of Chanukah is that physical limitations can be defeated by spiritual greatness – the many in the hands of the few, the mighty in the hands of the weak, the impure in the hands of the pure.

Who placed the oil under the rock?

Perhaps we can say that it was placed there by the person who was in charge of the area at that time. At that time Yerushalayim was under the governance of Shem ben Noach, also known as *Malki Tzedek*, the King of Shalem. The pasuk relates that he was a kohain to Hashem.

Medrash says that when Noach gave a beracha to Shem it was that he would be Kohain Gadol.

If so, it could be that he hid that miraculous jar of oil on the *Makom Hamikdash*, and that was where Yaakov Avinu found it.

Where did Shem get it from?

Medrash says that Noach was in the teivah and he wanted to know if the waters had receded enough for them to leave. He sent out a dove and it returned with an olive branch clutched in its beak. Where did he get that branch from? *Har Hazeisim* – next to *Har Habayis*.

Noach gave that branch to Shem and Shem eventually takes the oil from that branch – the first oil produced from the “new world”. (*It could be that oil was extra potent, just as the grapes which produced the wine which Noach drank right after exiting the taivah was extra potent, and Noach didn't realize it and he became drunk...*). Shem brought the oil back to Har Habayis and buried it there.

Noach himself had survived and he was few compared to the masses who died. He was pure in contrast to the masses who were impure, he was weak in comparison with the masses who were far more powerful than he. Yet he persevered.

After the flood ended Hashem promised Noach that he would no longer destroy the sinning masses. Instead Hashem gave the holy few the ability to survive against the odds.

When Avrohom Avinu defeated the four kings that too was a Chanukah miracle – few, pure and weaker defeating the more, mightier, and impure.

Shem saw it in that the fulfillment of the promise Hashem made to his father after the flood ended.

This perhaps is the history of the oil and the great miracle of Chanukah which reminds us that Hashem controls the world and can always perform miracles.

Parshas Vayigash

Yosef accuses Binyamin and wants to imprison him. Yehuda approaches – *Vayigash eilav* – and Yehuda asks Yosef to please hear him out “Because you are like Pharaoh.” What does that mean? Rashi offers a few explanations.

Let us think about whether the following ideas sound friendly or hostile:

1. You are as great as Pharaoh --- *That sounds Friendly*
2. Pharaoh abducted Sarah and got hurt. If you hold Binyamin you too will suffer! – *More hostile*
3. “You’re a liar! You said you only wanted to see Binyamin, and now you are holding him as a prisoner!” – *Even more hostile*
4. “I will kill you and Pharaoh together!” – *Quite hostile*

Rashi presents his explanations in a certain pattern. It begins friendly and continually increases its tone of demand and warning.

A few years ago I took my family to the circus. One of the star attractions was the lions. Lions spend most of their time sleeping. They were trying to get as many shows in as they could and when our show began the lions were sleeping. A circus man jumped into the cage and boldly announced that he was going to take on the lions. He stuck his head into a lion’s mouth; the lion wagged its tail. He did it again, and suddenly the lion began to wake up. The circus man made a hasty retreat.

A lion can go from mild to dangerous in very little time.

Yehuda is compared to a lion. Yehuda’s name contains the four letters of Hashem’s Name. When Name of Hashem is involved, i.e. when there is Kiddush/Chillul Hashem involved Yehuda rises like a lion to defend the glory of Heaven. Yehuda instantly can become fierce like a lion when he is roused.

When Yehuda realized what was transpiring with Binyamin he rose like a lion and confronted Yosef. He began with a more 'mild' approach but quickly included more confrontational messages as well. He would not back down and he was ready to stand up for what was right!

At times you see some boys who have the desire to do what's right. Amazing things have been accomplished when a boy gets his momentum going.

Sometimes a student can appear to be sleeping and not accomplishing, but when his inner lion becomes aroused he can suddenly 'jump into it' and begin to accomplish great things.

We as Jews are all called *Yebudim*, and we are all charged to begin our day strengthening ourselves like a lion. We need to gather our wits about us and courageously ready ourselves to tackle the challenges of the coming day.

Parshas Vayechi

I admit that it hurts to hear that in the Mideast the Arabs claim that our land is theirs and that we are lying, and even when the world agreed to give us the in 1948, and even though according to the rules of war which hold that captured land becomes spoils of the victor, we are still hated and called liars.

When Yaakov prepares to bless Menashe and Ephraim he crosses his hands before he places them on their heads. We have a mental image of Yosef poised to reverse his father's hands, with Yaakov adamantly refusing, insisting that he is doing so purposefully.

Why didn't Yaakov just ask Yosef to ask them to switch places? Why does he want to bless them with his hands crossed?

When Yaakov has his hands outstretched he is intimating to Yosef that this is not the first time in his life that his hands have been outstretched. In his first moments of life, in fact as his life was beginning, his hand was outstretched grasping the heel of Eisav. From that moment onward it became a given that Yaakov would always be accused of grasping at what is not his. Forevermore his children would be accused of taking what is not theirs.

But there is more. When Yaakov stood before his father, Yitzchok stretched out his hands and grasped the hands of Yaakov and proclaimed "*Hakol kol Yaakov* – The voice is the voice of Yaakov but the hands are the hands of Eisav." From that moment onward Yaakov was destined to be accused of cheating and employing deceitful tactics to achieve his goals.

Yosef feels very comfortable and secure in his position. He was appointed by Pharaoh himself and there could be no accusations of deceit or unlawfulness involved in his position.

Therefore, when blessing Yosef's sons Yaakov reverses his hands to symbolize to Yosef: "You will see that we will yet be accused of the worst things. They will accuse you and our people of being corrupt, of being untrustworthy, and of being rebellious. They will

go from loving us to hating us in record time. That is exile. We do everything as we are supposed to, we are loyal, we are faithful, we are dependable, we are contributors to the betterment of society, we earn our keep, and yet things rapidly become switched and we are transformed into deceitful pariahs, shunned and hated by the society we so believed in.”

With those hands crossed Yaakov blesses them, symbolizing that despite our enemy’s efforts to turn everything around in their efforts to malign and ostracize us, we will prevail and we will emerge triumphant over the exile.

It must be added that there is one more situation of hands being crossed in these parshios – those of Peretz and Zorach. One stretches out his hands as the *bechor* and the other emerges first. That situation too contains the unexpected. Dovid and Moshiach descend from Peretz – that is the surprising twist of the hands, a twist of fate, as well. The hands of Yaakov also symbolize that in redemption too the opposite of what we expect occurs. In every facet of life – exile and redemption – the hands are often crisscrossed.

We have only our faith and the Torah to guide us.

Parshas Vayechi

I know for a fact that there is a certain boy who cleans up the paper towels on the floor of the bathroom whenever he is in there. I know because I walked out and there were paper towels on the floor, and when he came out they were all cleaned up.

This is the same boy who straightens up his classroom after everyone rushes out.

This is the same boy who, when finding your basketball in the hall, will place it by your locker, and not do what other boys might do.

Chesed without advertising!

It's been said that if you really want to be a great person do chesed without other people knowing about it. Do chesed for the sake of chesed!

One who does that, after 120 when he goes up to heaven will hear the sweetest words you could hear: "I know my son, I know!" In other words, "I know what you did. I know all those kind deeds you did that no one else saw and you think were unnoticed and forgotten. I knew and I don't forget!"

Yaakov crosses his hands to Yosef's surprise. Yaakov tells Yosef "I know my son, I know." The sweetest words anyone can hear.

After being reunited with his father Yosef avoided being alone with him so that Yaakov would never ask him what really happened along the way. Yosef never wanted to shame his brothers.

Yosef knew his brothers voted to kill him. He knew Reuven directed them to cast him into a pit with snakes and scorpions. He knew Yehuda advised that they sell him. He knew that they heard his cries and pleas that they not sell him and they ignored him and allowed it to happen.

But he didn't want his father to find out, and so he ensured to never be alone with him, although he surely wanted so badly to be.

And now when Yaakov is ready to bless Yosef's sons he tells Yosef "I know my son, I know!" There is a Medrash which says that Yaakov was telling Yosef here "I know the whole story my son. I know everything that occurred to you and how you rose from the ashes to become and to achieve all you have. I also know that the brother's intention was for the best."

When we have the zechus to do chesed – to offer some snack to another boy, to help another student with his work, etc. – we shouldn't look for compliments. Keep doing it quietly, because one day you too will hear the voice that says those sweetest words "I know my son, I know!"

Asarah B'Teves

On Asarah B'Teves we include in the Selichos the tragedies of the 8th of Teves and the 9th of Teves.

Is there a connection between these seemingly random events?

The common theme is that all have to do with lack of foresight, not realizing the consequences of what happened.

On the 8th of Teves when the seventy elders translated the Torah and a great miracle occurred, they didn't realize the great breach in *Kedushas HaTorah* occurred, and the far reaching effect that the event would have on the Jewish people with the founding of Christianity.

On the 9th of Teves Ezra Hasofer died. They did not appreciate the greatness of his leadership, which is second only to that of Moshe Rabbeinu. They failed to realize how much they had lost with his passing.

On the 10th of Teves when Nebuchadnezzar began his siege they didn't comprehend that this was the beginning of the end. Although it would be another two and a half years before the Bais Hamikdash was destroyed, practically the root of the tragedy was on the day the siege began.

Mishna (Avos) says "Who is a wise man? One who anticipates what will occur."

To have foresight so one can anticipate and prepare for what will occur.

[-It is appropriate that the parshios of Yosef as king coincide with these tragic days. Yosef was the epitome of foresight. In fact that is one of the points Pharaoh was so impressed with, when Yosef immediately instructed him to prepare for the seven years of famine. Yosef set the tone in Egypt – he paved the way for his brothers and father, and eventually for all of Klal Yisroel to survive and endure the Egyptian exile. He is the middah of Yesod, the foundation upon which the entire structure rests. The foundation is built with great

planning and foresight – one must anticipate the entire construction before he can lay the foundation. That is the antidote for the tri-faceted tragedies of Teves.]

Asarah B'Teves

Children heading off to school. They used to go without any fear, until a few weeks ago. These are the children of Har Nof. Now if you look at their faces you will notice the fear in their eyes.

There is a moment that arrives when the dream is shattered and the comfort level drops. In this country it happened September 11th when everything changed forever. From that point onward everyone became suspicious and concerned whenever they saw a plane flying.

On Asarah B'Teves the Jews saw the "lights going out". When the armies of Bavel surrounded Yerushalayim they felt their comfort level drop, and they knew it was now only a matter of time.

When the 72 elders were compelled to translate the Torah into Greek the spiritual comfort level of the nation dropped.

During the second Bais Hamikdash era the caliber of leadership that had been present before that time came to an end – Mordechai, Chaggai, Zechariah, Malachi. When Ezra Hasofer died it was the end of that era - their comfort level again dropped dramatically.

While World War II was raging in Europe, the Jews in America didn't really know what was going on. When the Concentration Camps were discovered after liberation and the atrocities were publicized, our faith in humanity dropped.

When wicked people walked into a yeshiva in Yerushalayim and opened fire on young men studying Torah, our comfort level dropped.

When there was a shooting two years in a Connecticut elementary school and young innocent children were killed, our comfort level dropped.

The fact that in the front of our school now there is a security guard stationed is directly connected to that horrible event.

Asarah B'Teves is dedicated to commemorating events that shattered our comfort level, and shocked us into realizing a new tragic reality.

Those who fast and properly observe this day encourage and give chizuk to all of us to keep our faith even when we feel concerned and anxious. It strengthens our emunah that Hashem runs the world and our comfort level lies with our faith in Him.

Parshas Shemos

A young girl was lost for a long time. As time passed the danger of her situation grew. It was becoming increasingly more frightening and she was feeling more and more despondent.

Then suddenly someone came over to her and told her the secret, the secret of her return home. “Look at what you are wearing; your ruby slippers. All you have to do is tap them together three times and say ‘There’s no place like home!’ and you’ll find yourself back home.”

I used to wonder why she never figured out that secret for herself. Why didn’t she ever realize the magic that her ruby slippers had. Of course the answer is that if she realized that right away there would have been no movie.

A similar story takes place in this week’s parsha. Moshe asks Hashem “How am I going to take B’nei Yisroel out of Egypt? I’m not a speaker; I’m not connected; I’m not even physically in the country at this moment!”

Hashem replied to Moshe with two words *“Mazeh biyadecha* – What is in your hands?”

Hashem asks Moshe ‘Did you ever notice the strange letters on your staff? **דצך עדש באהב**.

That same staff has been used before. Yaakov Avinu declared “With my staff I crossed over the Jordan.”

That staff had the power to split water and initiate ten plagues, but Moshe was unaware of the power he was wielding. Hashem replied to Moshe “You had the power all along. I invested that staff with all the wonder you would need to fulfill your mission!”

Sometimes we wonder how we can accomplish something. We feel inadequate and unprepared to face the challenge.

I feel that one of the nicest phrases I can overhear – and I have heard it many times thankfully – is “Hey, I really could do this!” At first glance he was sure he didn’t stand a fighting chance, but then he threw himself into it and saw that he could.

He realized that he was wearing ruby slippers that work. He had the power all along, he just didn’t realize it.

A boy becomes a Bar Mitzvah and goes from 0-613 in a moment. Before he is not obligated in anything and then suddenly he is obligated in everything. He thinks to himself “How can I do this? How can I undertake this?”

But in truth he had the power all along.

[Our Ba'al Simcha today actually wishes he could tap his shoes together three times and be back in bed!]

When a student goes from 4th to 5th grade it’s a big step. When a student graduates 8th grade and enters High School it’s a big and sometimes daunting step - new teachers, new school, new culture, new expectations, etc. and inevitably the student wonders how will he be able to do it?

Then after High School things become more complicated. There are even bigger decisions to make and you have to figure out how to balance many things.

How can we do it? Because we all have the ruby slippers. Hashem has invested us with abilities we don’t realize our there. We have a Torah as a guide and we bear it aloft and it brings out our abilities and capabilities.

Mazal Tov to Yishai on putting on tefillin today for the first time. Tefillin are even better than ruby slippers. They invest us with an ability to become holy and elevate our soul...

Parshas Shemos

There was an Ashar family going to Eretz Yisroel last year for midwinter break. The day before the break the Ashar student spoke and I owed him a half dollar for doing so. I forgot to give him the half dollar after he spoke. But it was the last day and I wanted to make sure I fulfilled my pledge before the break. So I told him that after the last class he should come to my room and I would give it him.

He must have been very excited because after school was over he ran out of the building and left. I quickly sent an email that he had not yet received his half-dollar and perhaps could swing by the school on their way to the airport so I could give it him. The parents made it very clear to me that getting that half-dollar was not on their top ten list of things to do that night. So I ended up holding onto the half-dollar until after vacation.

It's interesting that throughout that last day, while he was in school, that student would have been happy to receive that half-dollar. But once he left he was excited and dealing with far more important things and no longer cared about it. At that point his receiving it would only be to make me happy so I could know that I fulfilled my pledge.

Hashem informed Moshe that when B'nai Yisroel would leave Mitzrayim they would ask the Egyptians for their wealth. In fact when the time came Hashem begs Moshe to ensure that B'nai Yisroel do so.

Wealth is nice but it is not the ingredient of happiness. At the point of the geulah they were so eager to go that they weren't interested in the wealth which would just weigh them down and give them more things to carry. But Hashem wanted to ensure that they left with the wealth, because He had guaranteed it to Avrohom.

Our taking the wealth was not as much for us as it was for the fulfillment of the pledge.

Medrash relates a secret conversation that took place between Pharaoh and his advisors. Bila'am said to Pharaoh: "Let me tell you some history. Let me tell you about the Jews.

Avrohom went down to Mitzrayim and deceived Pharaoh about Sarah. He left the country with great wealth from Pharaoh.

Yitzchok went down to Pelishtim and did the same to Avimelech. He too left a millionaire, so much so that they began to mock Avimelech 'better the fertilizer of Yitzchok than the gold of Avimelech'.

Yaakov outwitted Lavan and also left his home laden with much of what had been Lavan's wealth.

They go to Shechem and wipe out the city and pillage the city.

Coincidence? I think not! Wherever the Jews go they fool people and leave with their money.

So make sure we squeeze out all the money we can get from those Jews and don't allow them to have anything."

When we were leaving Mitzrayim, Moshe begged B'nei Yisroel to ask and take all of the Egyptian's wealth because the promise had to be fulfilled.

It was not for us – our joy was in the exodus itself, but for Avrohom.

We don't daven so that we can be given gifts, but it's our pleasure to present to those who are deserving.

Parshas Shemos

There are three Jewish women who play a significant role in the parsha. Truthfully they comprise two groups – two at the beginning of the parsha and one at the end.

At the beginning of the parsha we are informed of the heroic efforts of Shifra and Puah. They do their acts in secret and therefore their true identity is kept secret as well. They preserve the Jewish people and strengthen the secretly newborn boys.

Eighty years later there is another woman who plays a significant role. From the Torah itself you may not even know how important she was, but her contribution cannot be ignored. She is quite old. According to the Medrash she is one of the stars of the story – Serach bas Asher.

Serach knew the secret which was the key to everything – priceless information – the secret code: “*Pakod Yifkod*”

Serach knew the secret; Shifra and Puah kept their secret.

Leah named her third son Levi; she named her maid’s son Asher.

When the imahos named their children it was with ruach hakodesh.

She named him Asher and proclaimed “*ki isbruni banos* – because I am rich with daughters.”

Which daughters? Perhaps the daughters that descended from Levi and Asher – the three heroines of Parshas Shemos – Shifra and Puah from Levi, and Serach from Asher.

Parshas Va'era

Every action has a reaction.

The Egyptians react to the Makkos.

But there is one amazing miracle that takes place in Mitzrayim for which the Torah records no reaction. It takes place at the beginning of the excitement, just as the story begins.

When I heard the story the first time I was sure that this miracle would win Pharaoh over. When he saw it, I thought he would jump up and say "Go out!" But yet there is no such reaction. In fact, the Torah records no reaction at all.

Aharon throws his stick onto the floor before Pharaoh and it immediately transforms into a snake. Pharaoh is unimpressed with that for his advisors, and even children, can do it too.

But then, after the snakes all revert back into sticks, Aharon's stick swallows their sticks.

That's incredible! I'd vote for that one!

I'd love to see the magicians recoil in horror and Pharaoh's look of surprise.

And yet Pharaoh is stoic, completely unaffected and unimpressed by the wondrous miracle he witnessed.

Why is there no reaction?

Over a dozen years ago, a girl came to Ashar in 7th grade. At that time it was still very prevalent for children coming out of the recently ended communist U.S.S.R. to come to yeshivos in America.

This Russian couple had one child – this daughter and they wanted her to get a Jewish education, after not having had the opportunity to learn anything about Judaism in Russia.

Her parents took menial jobs which paid little, but they needed the money to afford tuition to send her to Ashar.

When she first came she barely spoke any English. She had a very difficult experience and it was completely an uphill climb for her. She didn't understand much of what was taught in English, and she didn't know one word of Hebrew.

She would go home each night after school and try to review and understand what was taught in school.

Her teachers offered her extra time and tried to help her along. She worked very hard and reviewed everything she learned, and worked on incorporating new words into her lexicon.

At first she had no friends, and no TV at home. She would review each night with her parents.

I had her the next year when she was in eighth grade. When I would teach she would stick her head out into the aisle and make eye contact with me and watch my every move. I felt like she was a sponge absorbing my every word.

In the middle of that year the faculty met about valedictorian. There was a unanimous agreement that she should speak at graduation.

At graduation when she got up to speak you could have heard a pin drop. It was one of the most moving speeches ever given in that old Ashar auditorium. She spoke about her parent's struggle to maintain Judaism in Russia. She lauded her parents and thanked them for all they did for her.

There was one thing she didn't share and that we only found out later. In student's lockers they often hang up pictures or mementos which excite (or rarely inspire) them. In her locker there was one small photo in the back of the locker of her parents. She said that every time she opened her locker she thought about how much sacrifice they invested to send her to a Jewish school where she could learn Torah. It would have been so much easier to send her to public school, but they accepted the challenge and added burden because it was important to them. Because of them I was inspired to do my utmost to be successful.

Aharon's stick swallowed the other sticks, but his stick didn't expand or change at all.

What is this pattern reminiscent of?

The dream of Yosef in which the skinny stalks swallowed the healthier sticks and yet they remained the same.

That dream symbolized Yosef himself – the greatest underdog story in the history of the world. A Jew alone in jail, cast away and abandoned, becomes second to the king overnight.

The miracle of Aharon's stick swallowing their sticks wasn't meant to scare Pharaoh and the Egyptians – although it almost invariably did. It was meant to symbolize to Moshe and Aharon themselves – don't think there's no chance here. Don't think the situation is beyond repair!

Remember Yosef's dream!

The Jews will yet swallow up all of Egypt. Former slaves will assume dominance over the country, and no one from ancient Egypt will remain.

We need to maintain a mental image in our metaphorical lockers of our parents, grandparents, and great grandparents who risked so much, who gave their blood, so that we could learn Torah today, so that we can recite berachos, so that we can wear tefillin and

tzitzis without fear, so that we can recite Aleinu together in unison. We need to keep that mental image in our minds; it need to inspire us.

Moshe and Aharon were encouraged by the dreams and saga of Yosef, and so should we be as well!

Parshas Va'era

I don't know about you, but I would have been very impressed by the miracles that Pharaoh saw.

Aharon transformed his stick into a snake. Then Pharaoh ordered his sorcerers to do the same, claiming that they can do tricks too. But then after Aharon's staff transformed back into a staff, it swallowed all of the sorcerer's staffs.

The Medrash adds one more detail to the story. When Aharon's staff swallowed all of their staffs it remained the same size. Pharaoh was so astounded by what he saw that he had to strengthen himself to ensure that he was not emotionally moved by it.

What does this event remind us of?

Pharaoh's dream in Parshas Miketz which Yosef interpreted. The thin cows/sheaves swallowed the more robust ones and yet remained the same size.

It was his correct interpretations of those dreams that catapulted Yosef to power. At the beginning of Parshas Shemos, Pharaoh "forgot" Yosef. Now Hashem was reminding him.

Before however, it was just a dream. Now it became a reality.

The pain of being struck by a stick is a very different form of pain than being bitten by a snake. The pain of a stick beating is on the outside; the pain of a snake bite penetrates internally. The stick is also an obvious danger; one sees it and knows they must avoid being hit by it. The danger of a snake is far more sinister. A snake sneaks up and attacks secretly.

What message was Moshe conveying to Pharaoh?

That Pharaoh was acting like a snake.

If Pharaoh was interviewed by CNN he would tell them that he was only doing his bidding. The Jews were supposed to be slaves as per Hashem's promise to Avrohom at the B'ris Bain Habsarim. Moshe counters – "No Pharaoh! You are acting like a snake - sneaky and dangerous."

Pharaoh presented himself as a stick on the outside – as if he was only seeking to maintain order and fulfill his responsibility as king. But on the inside he was a snake.

His name itself hinted to this. The outside letters pay and hai form the word peh – mouth. On the outside Pharaoh was a diplomat; he spoke nicely and politically correct. However, the inside letters – raish and ayin form the word ra- evil, for internally Pharaoh was evil like a snake.

Aharon throws down his stick to symbolize "Pharaoh, you're not a stick; you're a snake!"

Pharaoh summons his sorcerers and they also transform their sticks into snakes to symbolize to Moshe and Aharon that they too are evil on the inside – everyone is like that. We try to show that we are good on the outside but inside we are all bad.

Aharon turns his snake back into a stick and then his stick swallows theirs to symbolize that he and Moshe were like the stick of Hashem – no more and no less than Hashem's messengers. But if Pharaoh was going to act like a snake he was going to be swallowed up, even behind his false front that he is only like a stick.

I wonder why one boy would ever grab something that belongs to another boy. My first reaction is that it must be for fun. But the other boy wasn't having fun, so the fun wasn't harmless.

Such an action is like a snake. The first boy appears like a friend, but when the boy turns his head the second boy grabs his thing just to aggravate and annoy him.

I guess people sometimes do it because they are so focused on their own fun that they aren't thinking about the other person's feelings.

For one boy to touch something in someone else's locker is not allowed; it goes against the Torah.

A boy came to me yesterday at lunch to ask an innocent question so that he could divert my attention so another boy could make a quick getaway out of the lunchroom.

That boy who came over to me to ask me that question acted like a snake.

Instead let us use the tactic of a snake to do secret chesed for others, to snake up and do something nice for others that they may never know we did.

Parshas Va'era

Moshe tried to hide the evidence of what he had done, but it didn't help!

On a scale from 1-10 how much did the dirt help Moshe after he killed the Egyptian?

I would say between 1 and 0.

If so, why couldn't Moshe strike the sand during Makas Kinim? What's the message to us? The Torah has no shortage of sources that teach us the importance of hakaras hatov. Why learn it from here, especially when the sand didn't seem to help him at all?

Perhaps we can look at it in a different way. Moshe only killed the Egyptian because he knew there was sand there which he could use to conceal the evidence. Because he killed the Egyptian, he was later forced to escape, that in turn caused him to end up at the well in Midyan. Had he never ended up there he never would have met his wife, had his two children, and become the leader of Klal Yisroel, and led them out of Mitzrayim.

Moshe thus wonders – how can I remember this event, which seemed to me to be such a disaster and yet ended up holding the key to some of the greatest blessings in my life, and that of the entire Klal Yisroel?

That's why he wouldn't strike the sand.

There is chesed of Hashem all around us. Often we don't recognize how it's a chesed and how Hashem is running the world.

There was a great rabbi who died about ten years ago. His name was Rabbi Avigdor Miller zt'l. He gave Torah classes every Thursday night, and at the end he allowed people to ask him questions about any Torah topic they desired.

It was well known that he would have a bottle of water in front of him throughout the shiur each week, which he didn't touch.

When asked about the bottle he explained that he wanted the reminder to be constantly grateful for water, the most amazing substance in the world. He kept it in front of him to remind him every moment of the endless chesed of Hashem every day, every moment.

Parshas Bo

During the first nine makkos the Jews were protected simply by virtue of the fact that they were Jews. All of those plagues – lice, boils, hail darkness, etc. didn't affect them at all. There was no necessary qualification except for the fact that they were born as Jews.

Sometimes a student is interviewed for a school and he is accepted because of his great academic achievements and hard work. But other times he is accepted just because he's Jewish...

That was the way it worked during the first nine makkos.

But at Makkos Bechoros it wasn't enough to just be a Jew. If they wanted to be spared they had to prove their loyalty.

The first nine makkos were external; they were things that came upon the Egyptians. In order for a Jew to be spared from the makkoh it was enough that he was 'externally' a Jew.

Makkos Bechoros however, was an internal plague. Many of the Egyptians didn't even know that they were firstborns. There was no outside event that triggered the makkoh. It was Hashem Himself who removed their spirit of life causing them to die.

For the Jews to be spared from that makkoh they had to prove that they were Jews internally, i.e. that they were devoted and loyal in their hearts.

The merit of B'nei Yisroel to be redeemed from Mitzrayim even though they worshipped avodah zara like the Egyptians was that they didn't change three things: Their clothing, their language, and their names. Despite the fact that they served avodah zara the Jews stood out and were able to be seen among the Egyptians. They still looked like Jews.

The week of the incredible Project Inspire shabbatone, I was passing Seven-Eleven and saw three teens standing outside. I engaged them in conversation hoping that I might be able to convince them to join the shabbatone. After a few minutes of talking I steered the conversation towards religion. One of them then said "You know we aren't Jewish." Not knowing what else to say or put myself, I replied "Oh, because you look like such fine young Jews". Then I walked away.

On the night of Makkos Bechoros, the Jews had to exercise these three merits and prove that they really were different.

They didn't change their names – They had to register for the Korbon Pesach beforehand. They had to write their names down before to make themselves part of a group.

In addition, when they smeared the blood on their door it marked that their homes were Jewish homes, just as a Jewish name reflects one's Jewish identity.

They didn't change their clothes – Clothes mattered that night. They had to eat the Korbon Pesach with their shoes on, belts tied, and walking sticks in hand.

They didn't change their language – their speech that night was very important to fulfill the great mitzvah of retelling the story, the haggadah.

That night they showed how dedicated and loyal they were, using all three of the merits that they had proven themselves with throughout the exile.

In that zechus they were spared the internal makkoh of makkos bechoros and were zocheh to leave Mitzrayim the following day.

Parshas Bo

Yisroel Matzliach has a large home in Bergenfield with a nice family. His son in eighth grade, will be graduating with honors, and will get into the High School of his choice.

His twelfth grade daughter is also graduating and will likely be class valedictorian and will also get into the seminary of her choice in Israel.

Their older son just passed the Bar Exam and is about to be hired in a prestigious law firm.

It's just before winter break and the family is planning a super trip down to Florida. The older son will be joining as well. They are going to visit all the Theme Parks and entertainment areas that are in the vicinity. They have a deal with the hotel to eat breakfast there, pack up a gourmet lunch, and return for dinner. Every part of the trip is detailed and laid out. Yisroel is completely reliant on his wife. Every night at supper she tells the family another item on their packed itinerary.

Yisroel is in real estate and buys properties. Recently he bought a new property which has potential to earn him millions. The bank agreed to give him the mortgage and he couldn't be more excited. He anticipates some of his greatest gains from this latest deal.

Then the night before the vacation, Yisroel's wife sees him check his phone for a text message he just received. Then she sees and hears him break down and cry uncontrollably. She has never seen that before and she becomes very alarmed. "Is everyone okay?" "Yes everyone is fine." "Is something wrong with the trip arrangements?" "No, everything is fine." "Did the bank change their mind about the mortgage?" "No!" "Is there a problem with our son's job in the law firm or with one of our kids at school?" "No". "So then, what could possibly be the problem?"

There were six days of Makkos Choshech.

During the last three days the Egyptians couldn't even move. During that time the Jews were searching throughout the Egyptian home and looking at all of their riches (probably much of it was once Jewish owned anyway).

But at the same time, all the Jews who didn't want to leave Egypt were dying. Many Jews were buried during that time.

It's well-known that there is a slave-mentality. But how could any Jew not want to leave?

The answer is that something happened during that last half year. The slavery ended as the Egyptians were too busy trying to survive and salvage whatever they still had. So the Jews had a respite, they had vacation, and could do as they pleased. They were able to tend their gardens, go for walks, make money, and enjoy the exile.

When Moshe announced that it was time to leave and enter the desert they became nervous. "What will we eat?" Moshe replied that he heard something about Manna. "What will we drink?" Moshe replied that he heard something about a well accompanying them. "Where will we sleep? How will we be protected from the elements?" Moshe replied that he heard something about Protective Clouds surrounding them.

But many Jews were skeptical and hesitant. "We have fish here and cucumbers. Maybe it's better for us to stay!"

What was the news that Yisroel read on his cell phone? What upset him so much if everyone and everything was okay?

What was even stranger is that his neighbor received the same message and was dancing in the street while he was sobbing. He also heard that in Williamsburg, Boro Park, and parts of Monsey they were dancing too.

The message read: “Moshiach is here! The Jews have 24 hours to get to the airport and board the specially chartered planes for Eretz Yisroel. Forget your property. Just go now!”

Until 50-60 years ago Jews were slaves in so many countries. But in the recent past Hashem changed that. In the last time period before Moshiach we have money, plans, vacations (our vacations used to be a lunch in the woods...) When Moshiach arrives and we are told to hurry, what will our response and reaction be?

I hope we too will be ready to follow Moshe Rabbeinu. Remember what happened when Yosef went from forgotten inmate to viceroy overnight? Things can change very quickly. And when they do we have to be prepared to answer and to proceed.

Parshas Beshalach

It's like a comedic scene out of a cartoon. A character is holding onto a rope which is his lifeline. The screen pans out and you see that the string is attached to nothing. The character notices it too, and he looks at you with sad eyes and then with incredible haste he plunges into the abyss. The rope that the character had placed his hope in ended up being the cause of his downfall.

Sometimes the very thing that people place their trust in becomes the source of their downfall.

Pharaoh and his army had a great deal of trust in their cavalry. They had mighty white steeds that they took great pride in. They adorned them with diamonds and all sorts of riches when they went to battle. Pharaoh and his army were very confident in the might and speed of their horses. They led their horses on the chase after B'nei Yisroel ready for victory. But then "*Sus v'rochbo ramah vayam* – a horse and its rider He threw into the sea." Hashem caused the horses themselves to lead its arrogant rider into the sea where it was destroyed.

[The pasuk in the first perek of Shir Hashirim says: "To the horses in the chariots of Pharaoh are you compared, my beloved." Hashem tells B'nai Yisroel that we are like those horses. In what way? In that we would plunge ahead to serve Hashem even when it means personal risk, that's how drawn we are to serving Hashem.

Just as those horses plunged ahead into the sea despite personal risk, so do we yearn and guide ourselves to serve Hashem even when it's difficult and challenging. As the Navi says (and we say on Rosh Hashanah in Mussaf): "So says Hashem; I remember the kindness of your youth – your following Me into the desert, a land that is not planted."]

Parshas Beshalach

The Medrash relates that when the Jews were standing at the Yam Suf in a very dangerous situation with the Egyptians right behind them, the Angel of Mitzrayim complained “These are idolaters, and these are idolaters.” In other words, the Jews don’t seem any different than the Egyptians. Why are the Jews about to be saved miraculously, while the Egyptians will be completely destroyed?

The Meshech Chochma, written by Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, says a powerful insight. He says that the Malach saw that there was machlokes among Klal Yisroel and that was at the root of his complaint.

There is nothing like sarcasm that makes a statement harsher and more biting.

The B’nei Yisroel were desperate as they stood by the sea. However, instead of asking Moshe to please help them and save them they resorted to vicious sarcasm. “Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you took us out to die in the desert?” It wasn’t only a plea for help, it was intended to hurt Moshe personally.

It was also a painful reminder to Moshe of what happened some time earlier when he first came to Pharaoh and demanded the release of the Jews. At the time Pharaoh increased the work labor and things became more hopeless. When Moshe and Aharon left the palace they were met by Dasan and Avirom who said to them the equivalent of, “Thanks for nothing! Why did you have to come to make things worse?”

That itself reminded Moshe of the first time he met Dasan and Avirom. After he saved Dasan from being killed by the Egyptian, Dasan ‘thanked’ him by informing what he had done to the authorities, forcing Moshe to escape with his life, and live in exile alone for many decades. When that happened Moshe had thought “Now I understand why the Jews are in exile! How could they be so low as to do such a thing?”

Moshe had hoped that the process of Korbon Pesach and the ten Makkos and Yetzias Mitzrayim itself would have changed the nation. But now, when their backs were

against the wall literally, and they were desperate, they resorted to speaking with biting sarcasm. It was then that the Angel complained that the Jews are no different than the Egyptians! Hashem's not-verbalized response was that the Jews are still better, but the negative power of sarcasm cannot be ignored.

To use sarcasm to hurt the feelings of another, and to cause other people to laugh at another, is a very serious sin. We have to be very careful.

Parshas Beshalach

As a young boy I remember hearing an incredible thing. The Pri Megadim brings down from the sefer Eliyahu Rabba in the name of Rav Eizek Chaver that when Rosh Chodesh Shevat falls out on Wednesday - as was the case this year, 5775 - then Gimmel (the third day of) Shevat will fall out on Friday. When that happens there will be a great snow and cold. This is hinted to in the first letters of the word "Vayigash". It spells out "Vav Yihyeh Gimel Shevat" then read the first letters backwards, "Sheleg Gadol Yihyeh Vikor".

This week a great blizzard is forecasted. Last Friday was the third of Shevat.

On one occasion when I was in my teen years, a friend of mine invited me for Shabbos. I didn't know that the night before I came he told his father that I loved good divrei Torah. His father was a bit of a talmid chochom and he stayed up late the night before researching many divrei Torah. I do enjoy divrei Torah but not as much as my friend's father thought.

It was a long Friday night – the week of Parshas Beshalach, and I had been up late Thursday night, as many yeshiva bochurim are, and I was looking forward to getting some extra sleep. But he began speaking and continued on and on and on. My eyes were open and nodding, but honestly, my brain was only thinking about the bed.

Finally, after about an hour my ears perked up because he said "I'll end with this one thought", but he then added "and you'll never forget it as long as you live." This is what he said:

The pasuk at the beginning of the Parsha says, "And Moshe took the bones of Yosef with him" [13:19]. Why does the pasuk say that Moshe took the bones "with him"? If he took them it was obviously with him?

The pasuk is telling us that Moshe took the bones of Yosef **with him** to Olam Haba. While all the other Jews were taking the money of Mitzrayim which wouldn't last forever,

Moshe Rabbeinu, was busy doing the mitzva of taking the bones of Yosef. That Mitzvah would be his forever.

There is a famous expression that says, "You can't take it with you." When a person leaves this world he leaves all his wealth and possessions behind. But the mitzvos that he did and the Torah that he learned are his forever.

He was right. It is a Torah thought I have never forgotten.

Tu B'Shvat

Today begins a new year for the laws of terumos and ma'asros. All of last year's had to have been given by today.

The pasuk says "Man is the tree of the field". Man is compared to a tree.

Torah is also compared to a tree. "*Eitz chayim hi* – It's a tree of life for those who grasp it."

The luchos were made of stone. If I was making the luchos I probably would have made them from gold or silver. But the message was that even though the luchos may have looked cold and stone-dead, they were filled with life and vitality. In fact, the word 'luchos' has the word lach – moisture.

The Aseres Hadibros had 620 letters corresponding to the 613 mitzvos and the 7 mitzvos b'nei Noach.

Sometimes things that appear dead really are filled with life.

A tree in the winter seems dead and lifeless. Yet we know that the sap is beginning to climb the tree and will come back to life in a few weeks. This is the celebration of Tu B'Shvat, a celebration of potential. Things may seem dead now, but there is life hidden inside.

Torah is alive just as our neshamos are alive, and they are both eternal.

Parshas Yisro

Without question, the happiest moment in our national life was standing at Har Sinai. We stood there in complete unity. A few days later, the Jews said the most magical words that we all know – “*Na’aseh V’nishma*”.

Three days before the Torah is given Hashem gives a very stern warning: No one may go up the mountain. If anyone goes up the mountain they will die! Then Hashem tells Moshe to tell it to the Jewish people again. Moshe is surprised “Don’t the Jews already know that? Do you think they are going to go up the mountain now? They are so happy and so obedient they wouldn’t think of transgressing Hashem’s stern command now! They were all cured and happy.” But Hashem insisted and so Moshe told the nation again.

During World War II there was a famous entertainer in America. He went from army base to army base entertaining soldiers. He wasn’t necessarily a good person but he did live a long life and I always felt it was because of the chesed he did with the soldiers. He would perform short shows because he was a standup comic and how long could he do it for?

On one occasion he did his show but the performance dragged on much longer than had been planned. The crowd loved it and kept applauding, but he had another appointment that he was missing.

On the flight to the next performance he was asked what happened. He explained: “The truth is I did not really have the time, but when I got out there I felt I had to stay longer. But in the front row of the audience, two veterans were sitting there, each of whom had lost an arm in combat; one had lost his right arm and one had lost his left arm. Every time the crowd applauded the two soldiers did so as well...together! When I saw how they wanted to show their appreciation and did it together, I felt I had to entertain these great men a little bit longer.”

When we think we care about other Jews, that’s very nice. But what about thinking – you’re nothing without the other Jew. When they came to Har Sinai they were like one – *ke’ish echad b’lev echad*. Only together could they succeed.

When Hashem saw that unity He decided to do them a favor. 613 mitzvos may sound like 613 burdens, but we know that truthfully they are 613 opportunities.

When Hashem saw their “performance” on Har Sinai He said “I cannot stop! Here’s another mitzvah and another command.” They weren’t going to transgress it anyway, but every mitzvah fulfilled brings with it another chance to get reward, and Hashem felt they deserved every opportunity at that time.

Parshas Yisro

Yisro is watching as the nation lines up in front of Moshe. For hours and hours they stand there awaiting their turn to have an audience with their great leader to present their Torah question and receive his response and guidance.

Yisro is bothered by the scene. He has an idea – why don't we have more judges? Let the easy questions be brought to the "lower judges" and the harder questions to the "higher judges". Only the hardest questions should be brought to Moshe.

Moshe is enthralled with the idea. An entire perek in the Torah is devoted to explaining how Yisro's idea was implemented. Suddenly the idol-worshipping Yisro becomes a celebrity in Klal Yisroel.

What message is the Torah trying to teach us here?

There was an Ashar student who was quite difficult in sixth and seventh grades. He became very popular, but in a negative way. He always seemed to be a source of trouble. His dismissal was constantly an hour after everyone else. They were even thinking of calling the detention room in his name.

When he entered eighth grade, I was not so excited to have him. But then on the first day everything was good. In fact, when everyone else went out to recess he stayed behind to straighten up the room and collect the seforim. From that day he was the most helpful student I ever had.

It was fairly easy to get him into high school because there was so much good to say about him.

At one point I asked him why he was going out of his way to be so helpful. He told me that he was well aware of his reputation during the previous few years. He was not a very strong student academically. But he wanted everyone to remember him in a good way. He knew that this was his last chance to do that. So he took upon himself to do something he could do – be as helpful as possible.

He was able to get into any program he wanted after that because he was known for his good middos and helpfulness. He was able to literally turn himself around.

His words echo in my ears: "I'm happy I had a second chance!"

Eighty-six years earlier Yisro was an advisor for Pharaoh. Pharaoh had announced to his advisors “Come, let us make a plan about how to deal with the Jews.” Bila’am suggested that they make the Jews suffer, Iyov was silent, and Yisro said they should be nice to the Jews. But then Yisro escaped and never had the chance to actually fight on behalf of the Jews.

Yisro carried some level of guilt with him and always wanted to have the opportunity to do something that would help the Jews because he couldn’t stop Pharaoh from making their lives miserable. Now the opportunity presented itself and he jumped at the chance.

Yisro had the chance to make up for something he didn’t get to do decades earlier. Whatever weaknesses or shortcomings we have, sometimes we are given the chance to fix things. We should make sure we don’t miss the chance.

Parshas Yisro

It was the greatest event in history. The world stood in utter silence as Hashem's voice resounded with the *Aseres Hadibros* on Har Sinai.

The nations heard as Hashem told the Jews "I am Hashem your G-d..." When they heard it they thought that that's something a G-d would command.

Then Hashem said that you shall not serve idols! That too is logical for a G-d to instruct.

There cannot be any idols or images! You must keep Shabbos which testifies that Hashem created the world! Those also are things a G-d would say.

But when they heard the fifth of the commandments – Honor your father and mother, they were confused. That's not about G-d. In fact, that's about honoring someone else.

Then the nations realized that much of the Torah is about treating other people properly, and not hurting others.

When the nations realized that, they understood that Hashem is different from all of their manufactured gods. They realized that a Jew can serve G-d every moment of his life. At this moment as I speak to you I am fulfilling the mitzvos of Torah, wearing tefillin, and doing chesed by teaching you.

We don't even realize how many mitzvos we fulfill 'accidentally' as we go about our daily lives.

At Har Sinai there was jealousy created. Sinai is like the word *sinah* – hatred. We can have the best politicians, give the best speeches in the United Nations, and there will still be Anti-Semitism, because that jealousy still exists.

Hashem promised us that as long as we do what's right we have no reason to fear.

In a sadistic way they want us to be like them, because when we keep Torah properly and maintain our distance, that's what makes us special.

Parshas Mishpatim

There is a Rebbe named Shimon out on the west coast. He's a tall, impressive looking rabbi with lots of students. Many students try to get into his class. Students remain in his class more than one year, and he keeps up with his students after they leave his class. He inspires people and I'm always excited to hear about Reb Shimon's progress.

Perhaps the greatest day of learning for the Jewish people was a few days before the Torah was given, when Moshe gathered all the Jewish people and read the entire book of Bereishis and the first few parshios of Shemos.

They knew the stories of the Avos and Adam and Chava, but they didn't know how Hashem would relate the story. They listened with fascination as Moshe described the way Hashem viewed the lives of all those great people. They listened intently as Moshe continued to describe the Jewish people's experiences in Mitzrayim and their redemption.

I'm sure during that day they had breaks as Moshe lectured about the lessons of Bereishis and the beginning of Shemos.

But there was more. Before Matan Torah, when the nation was in Marah they were given the mitzvah of Shabbos, Kibbud Av V'em, Parah Adumah, and other important laws. On this day of Moshe's greatest lecture those laws were reviewed as well.

Of the 600,000 men who were there, who was the greatest listener on that day?

I would guess that it was Yehoshua, because the Torah tells us that Yehoshua never left the tent of Moshe. It can't mean literally, so it must mean Yehoshua never stopped learning from Moshe.

When Moshe went up the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights, there was one Jew not camping with the rest of the nation: Yehoshua. He pitched his tent at the foot of the mountain. Hashem gave him the gift of manna outside his tent.

What was Yehoshua doing while he was camped there? He reviewed all of the Torah he heard from Moshe on that great day of learning. For 40 days he reviewed his learning.

A year later Moshe sends Yehoshua on a field trip to Israel – the trip lasted 40 days. What do you think he did every day then? He reviewed his learning.

And when the time came for Moshe to choose his successor, he wanted so badly to choose his own sons. But Hashem told him that the man who reviewed Moshe's teachings every day would be the successor.

Moshe was like the sun; Yehoshua was like the moon – because he reviewed his rebbe's learning each day.

I'm always excited to hear about Reb Shimon's growth and successes, because he learned here in Ashar, and when he was here he was an extremely weak student. He needed an extra rebbe to review with him what he had learned that day, every day after school. I remember how his parents struggled to have that rebbe available for him each day, always keeping in touch to know what he had learned so his private rebbe could learn with him each night.

In eighth grade he went from being a below average student to being an average student. But he kept reviewing. In high school he went from being an average student to being an above average student. He kept on reviewing.

He went off to Eretz Yisroel and there his rabbeim were so impressed that he remembered so much of his learning. It was because he kept reviewing and reviewing.

Today I am still excited about all the students learning from him!

Parshas Mishpatim

The Satmar Rebbe, Rav Yoylish Teitelbaum zt'l, was a saintly scholarly person. He had very strong personal views about many religious matters which were not always popular, but he never backed down.

In 1979 I attended his funeral. The mass number of people in attendance testified about his greatness and the respect with which he was accorded.

Recently, I heard an amazing story about the Satmar Rebbe:

At chassidish weddings they have a badchan, a person who entertains the crowds that are there. One such badchan asked the Rebbe for permission to imitate the way the Rebbe davens. The Rebbe replied that for *simchas choson v'kallah* he had no problem with it.

The badchan began his act and the crowd was laughing away. The badchan did an incredible job of imitating the Rebbe's facial expressions and the way he shuckled during davening.

At one point the badchan looked at the rebbe and noticed that not only was the Rebbe not laughing but there were tears trickling down his cheek.

The badchan was horrified. He ran over to the rebbe and began asking forgiveness. The Rebbe reassured the badchan that he had given permission and that he not was in the least bit offended by the humorous imitation.

Why was the Rebbe crying?

As eighth graders go for their high school interviews an interesting thing takes place. Their personalities change as does their behavior. They can put up a sign outside the door of the interview "And now presenting for the very first time, ME! In a way never seen before."

During davening, rebbe takes out a pen to mark down how well everyone is davening. Suddenly a change takes place and boys begin to daven better than they have davened all day.

When we think about it we realize that we are all professional actors.

We know politicians are really actors. Do they ever say what they really think? They would never get voted in if they said their real thoughts.

The most popular president in the recent past was Ronald Reagan – a professional, former Hollywood actor.

When a sports player is interviewed he doesn't say the truth. There was one person who did, Al Companas. When asked why there were no black managers he said what he thought – 'because the white managers are smarter'. That was the end of his career.

Four groups ascended Har Sinai – each went a bit further up Har Sinai than the next: Moshe, Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, the seventy elders.

While standing atop the mountain during Kabbolas HaTorah, they were able to see above them a clear open sight of the heavens as had never seen before. It included the angels and the Throne of Glory.

The seventy elders thought to themselves "we were chosen because we are so great, so let's act the part." They looked up and gazed at the incredible celestial sight in a way they should not have.

Nadav and Avihu too thought to themselves that they are even higher than the elders because they are so great, and they too looked up.

Aharon however would not look up. In his incredible humility he felt he was unworthy to do so.

Aharon was unharmed by the ordeal and lived another forty years. But the seventy elders, as well as Nadav and Avihu, did not live out the year.

Why did the Satmar Rebbe cry?

He told the badchan that when he saw how the badchan imitated him he became afraid that perhaps when he davened each day he was only imitating himself! Perhaps he only davens the way he does because he knows he is the rebbe and everyone is watching him and he is only acting the part.

I know there are times when I am disturbed during davening and my focus becomes trained on what it is that is disturbing me. But I may keep on shuckling and davening the way I was because I have to act the part of Rabbi Chaitovsky.

Often we only act in a certain way because we feel we have to act the part. But how wonderful would it be if we could be ourselves.

I am quite sure that the Chofetz Chaim never had to act. He was exactly who he appeared to be.

Aharon acted exactly as he truly was.

Moshe acted exactly as he truly was.

How great it is to not have to play the part of yourself, but to be who you truly are.

Parshas Mishpatim

Last weekend a Jewish woman was driving and the most traumatic and unthinkable tragedy occurred when her car became stuck at a train crossing. She probably watched in horror as the train that would end her life raced towards her.

In this week's parsha the pasuk says "*Va'asher lo tzadab*" – the tragedy wasn't planned, "*v'haElokim inab l'yado*" – Hashem directed it to occur.

It's impossible to appreciate one scene in a movie without seeing the entire movie.

It's impossible for us to understand things that occur in our own lives because we have not seen all 6,000 years of the 'movie of this world'.

One Friday night recently I was informed that Rabbi Paysach Krohn, the famous author and lecturer, was a guest two houses away from my home. I wanted very much to see him and so when I finished my seudah I went there. They welcomed me in and I sat down next to him.

I asked him when would be a good time for me to share something with him, and he replied that right then was great.

So while everyone was eating the main course I began telling over this story:

I told him about a fellow named Irv Lowenstein. After being married for ten years and not being blessed with children, Irv went to the Lubavitcher Rebbe for a beracha. Irv told the Rebbe that his wife's doctor had told her that he didn't think she would ever have children.

The Rebbe replied that he shouldn't give up, but he should seek out a good friend and speak to him.

Irv reported that he had never really discussed his issue with many people but he called a friend to discuss it. His friend told him, "I'm sure your wife has a good doctor, but here in Long Island there is an incredible specialist and it may be a good idea to visit him."

They went to the doctor and within a year their son Yehuda was born.

Irv and his wife were beyond excited with their son, but from the challenges involved in his birth they knew that they would not have another child.

Every decision they made was done meticulously and carefully as they watched their precious Yehuda grow, from elementary school through High School, and then College. He was a good sincere young man.

When he was in his 20s his parents wanted him to get married but he wasn't in a rush to do so. The years began to pass and Irv and his wife were becoming increasingly concerned.

Finally when he was 27 he met someone and became engaged. The parents were so excited.

I was invited to attend the engagement party and I drove to Long Island.

When I arrived there Irv introduced me to the kallah, a lovely young woman who was 26 years old. He then told me excitedly that he had a story to tell me.

Irv explained that the kallah was a friend of the family – a family they have known for many years, but they had not thought of the shidduch until now. Perhaps this too was part of the Rebbe's advice that they 'speak to a friend'.

The kallah had two older brothers who had been born shortly after their parents married. But after the two boys were born 10 years went by. They really wanted to have another child so they went to the Lubavitcher Rebbe for a beracha.

The rebbe told them that they shouldn't give up, and that they should seek the advice of a good friend.

They had called Irv who suggested the same specialist he and his wife had just used. The kallah's family contacted the specialist and was informed that their insurance would not cover that specialist's services. But they really wanted to have another child and so they bore the expense.

It emerged that when Irv gave the kallah's father advice he was also paving the way for the birth of his future daughter-in-law.

"V'haElokim inah l'yado" – Hashem directed it to occur.

Rabbi Krohn listened intently and then asked me how I knew the story. I told him that Irv is my cousin. I had witnessed the drama as it occurred throughout the years. I remembered Yehuda's bris. It was on Tisha B'av afternoon in Staten Island.

Only when you see the whole picture can you appreciate all of the details of all the parts.

But when you do you'll be amazed at how, "*V'haElokim inah l'yado*" – Hashem directed it to occur.

Parshas Shekalim

Shlomo Hamelech knew thousands of stories and parables concerning foxes. Gemara Sanhedrin says we only know three of them.

Here is one famous story with a fox:

A fox noticed that homeowners left their home for what seemed to be a long time. There was a fantastic vineyard surrounded by a fence. The fox always looked towards that vineyard hopefully, and he wanted nothing more than to eat some of those luscious grapes. The fox walked around the perimeter of the vineyard, but he couldn't find any way to enter. But he did find a little hole. To his delight he fit through the hole.

Now he was face to face with the vineyard he had dreamed of for so long, and the owners were away. So he eats and eats like there is no tomorrow. He is full and happy and is ready to go back to his fox hole. But to his surprise his stomach has grown too much, and now he cannot fit under the gate.

He realizes that his only solution is to not eat for a day. The next day he stands in the vineyard and stares at all the grapes longingly, but he doesn't eat any of them. Finally at the end of the second day he was able to fit back under the fence.

He came home and told his family what had happened – how he had enjoyed the luscious grapes the first day but had to deprive himself the second day. In the meanwhile the owners had come home and now he could not return.

The fox's wife told her husband that he was a fool. He had another option that not only would have helped himself but could have allowed all of them to enjoy the grapes. He could have torn off a branch and brought it under the vineyard, and then returned and done so again. He could have done it throughout the first day and then brought all the grapes home, where they all could have enjoyed them for a few days. Instead he ate himself sick and then had to fast and didn't help anyone else.

There are people who spend their lives eating and enjoying, squeezing as much pleasure out of life as they could. As they are being lowered into their graves, they don't have much put away.

This Shabbos is Parshas Shekalim. This weekend they used to make a great announcement that everyone should prepare their half-shekel. It wasn't a big deal to do so

but everyone ran to make sure he did. Everyone chipped in to give this mandatory tax to the Bais Hamikdash. From it they would buy korbanos not for me, or you, or him, but for all of Klal Yisroel together.

It's a good thing Klal Yisroel was excited to do this mitzvah properly, because many years later there was a wicked guy named Haman, and he offered Achashveirosh tons of shekels to kill the Jews. He said "look how generous I am in giving away all this money." A voice from heaven proclaimed "You're too late. The Jews already gave half shekels which trump whatever shekels you are giving."

The Jews gave those half-shekels not for now, but for the future, so that later that year the Bais Hamikdash would have the animals it needed for korbanos.

There was a rich queen named Helena who converted and came to the Bais Hamikdash shortly before it was destroyed. It's not clear where she was from but she made beautiful donations to the Bais Hamikdash including a golden menorah that would shine as soon as the sun went up.

At the end of the second Bais Hamikdash there was terrible famine; Helena's son Munbaz emptied his treasury to feed the starving Jews.

Munbaz's relatives said to him "your fathers and grandfathers saved money for their children, but you are giving it all away. Munbaz replied that his father and grandfather had saved money for this world, but he was saving his money for the next world. The money they saved is not guarded, but the money he saved will be his forever.

The difference between a child and a mature adult is that a child does something based on what's fun for now. Some of you are a little beyond that and are a bit concerned about tomorrow. But it's still mostly about now. There are adults who also only think about now. But a mature adult thinks about two futures – his future in this world and his future in the next world.

That is the difference between eating all the grapes now, or working a little harder to have the grapes in the future.

Parshas Terumah

During the eighth grade graduation trip each June, one of the places we visit is the Rotunda in the Capitol building. All of the graduates have their necks strained as they look up to stare at the ceiling. The tour guide explains, “You see that, that represents Adam, the first man. That over there represents Moses. That represents George Washington, our first president. That represents Thomas Jefferson, that represents Abe Lincoln, etc.”

The graduates listen with rapt attention. But they also wonder – “Last night in the room where we ate, there was no representation of Adam or Moses. The hotel we are staying in is very important to us, and yet the receptionist didn’t stop to show us representations of George Washington or Abe Lincoln in the lobby. So too when we traveled to the Mint, it was very interesting seeing the production of the money. But there are no symbolisms in the building?”

The tour guide explains: “Why are these representations here in the Capitol? Because here is where the laws of the country are created. Those creating the laws must always remember where we come from in order to chart our future.”

The tour guide then pauses for dramatic effect, and concludes with his well-rehearsed line: “And you here represent the next chapter of our future. It’s up to you to take the lessons of the past into the future!”

There was a very special room, where if I would lead you into there, you would see a representation of your elite past. If I was your tour guide, I would tell you that within this structure there are representations of Avrohom, Yitzchok, Yaakov, Yosef, and all of the twelve shevotim.”

You might say, “But I don’t see any such representations?”

I would tell you, “You have to know how to view what you are looking at here in the Mishkan. Look at the boards which surround the perimeter of the Sanctuary. They are constructed out of Shittim wood. But there is no such wood to be found in the desert?”

“Avrohom Avinu planted Shittim trees many centuries ago, so his descendants could have Shittim wood for the Mishkan. On his way down to Egypt, Yaakov Avinu stopped in Be'er Sheva to cut down those trees, to bring them down to Mitzrayim with his family and belongings. So when you look at those boards you are seeing a representation of the foresight of Avrohom and Yaakov.

“What about Yitzchok?

“Look at that *Mizbeiach*. You surely know a story of Yitzchok being bound atop a *Mizbeiach*; it was during the *Akeidah*, when Yitzchok was offered as a complete *olah* to Hashem.

“Look at the *shulchan* with its twelve fresh loaves atop, that represents the 12 shevotim who comprise our nation.

“The Menorah has flames dancing atop. The Navi relates to us that Yosef was the flame that had the ability to engulf and destroy the power of our enemy, Eisav.

“All of this contains representations of our past.

“You see where we come from, which has brought us to where we are now.”

As your tour guide I would then conclude, “Now it's up to you to write the next chapter. It's up to you to continue the legacy of the Avos and shevotim – the chessed and Torah they personified!”

Parshas Terumah

There were two vessels in the Mishkan that symbolized Torah. One was hidden, while the other was out in the open. The one that was out in the open was a form of *perumei nisa* – the menorah which miraculously remained lit.

The hidden one was the Aron. Once Shlomo Hamelech placed the cover on the Aron in the Bais Hamikdash after it was constructed the inside was never seen again – not even by the Kohain Gadol on Yom Kippur.

When the time of the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash came the revealed one was carried off by the Romans, and depictions of that tragic ordeal can still be seen engraved in the Arch of Titus in Rome.

But the hidden one was hidden away before the destruction and was never taken out of the *Makom Hamikdash*.

There are two parts of Torah – the physical and the spiritual. Our enemies can take away the physical components of Torah – they can steal away the grandeur of Torah. But the Aron – the hidden spiritual inner component of Torah can never be stolen away. It remains hidden, embedded in our hearts and souls forever.

Parshas Terumah

Who is the greatest Rebbe of all time?

Before you offer your responses, Rashi in the beginning of Parshas Vayikra tells us that it was Hashem.

And who was the greatest student of all time?

Moshe Rabbeinu.

Let me tell you what the greatest rebbe told the greatest student to do: Make a Menorah out of pure gold!

Moshe immediately sets out to do it but soon comes back to Hashem and says that he cannot do it.

So Hashem says: “Moshe, I will make it easier for you. Look at this Menorah made out of fire and copy it.”

Moshe again sets out but again cannot do it.

Finally Hashem tells him to just throw the gold into the fire and out came the Menorah.

Why would Hashem set Moshe up for failure? He knew that Moshe would not be able to do it so why did He instruct Moshe to even try?

The eighth graders are working on getting into High School. For some boys it is an easy process, for other boys it is a more challenging process. But in the end it always works out.

One year a boy went to check out a new yeshiva in a new town in New York called Effortville.

In Effortville they have a different way of looking at things – there everything is based on how much effort you invest.

This boy sat in on a math class. The teacher asked the class to solve a math problem. One boy immediately raced up to the teacher’s desk and showed her the correct answer. The teacher looks at his work and says “Good job. You get a B for this assignment.” Then the teacher proceeded with the lesson. About twenty minutes later another boy raced up to the teacher’s desk and declared “I finally figured out the answer to the problem you asked twenty minutes ago.” The teacher looked at his work and says “Excellent. You get an A!”

This student is thinking how different this is from what he is used to.

During lunch he accompanied a few students to the local pizza shop. There he saw that certain slices were more expensive than others. He asks the storeowner why there were different prices. The owner explained "Some of the slices had more effort and time involved in their making than others. Here we charge for labor too."

Wow! That was a strange concept too.

Later on the school took all the interviewing boys with the regular students bowling. This student was very excited because he was a very good bowler. He immediately got a strike on the first round but was only credited with 10 points and they were not cumulative.

There was another boy who finally knocked down 10 pins over 6 frames and was awarded 60 points. The interviewing boy was stunned. They explained to him that the second student was not a good bowler and it was much harder for him to knock down 10 pins and so he received the cumulative points.

The interviewing boy decided that he would never go to that yeshiva. It was too different from what he was used to. Where he came from you were awarded for results, not for effort.

If I leave my car at the mechanic and he fixes a problem with my car than I'll pay him. But imagine if the next year I bring my car back in and after three days he tells me he couldn't fix it, but still charges me a tremendous amount. I ask him why and he says because he spent ten hours working on it. I tell him I'm not paying him a dime. I don't care how hard he worked; I just need my car fixed.

All of the keilim in the Mishkan symbolized different things.

The Menorah represents learning gemara (*Torah sheba'al peh*). When it comes to learning gemara what matters is your effort. One person may have worked on a gemara for a half-hour, and in the end he didn't understand it, and he will get far more reward than the person who understood it perfectly after two minutes.

When it comes to *Torah sheba'al peh* we are rewarded for the effort we put into it. Hashem knew Moshe couldn't make the Menorah, but He told Moshe to try anyway. Moshe had to put in the effort, because that's what counts. The result Hashem will take care of.

In regards to the Aron the Torah tells us its height.

In regards to the Shulchan the Torah tells us its height.

In regards to the Mizbeiach the Torah tells us its height.

But in regards to the Menorah it doesn't tell us its height. That's because the height of what you can accomplish in *Torah Sheba'al Peh* – symbolized by the menorah – is without limit. It all depends on how much effort is involved.

[This also explains why Moshe had a hard time constructing the Menorah but we don't find that he had any challenge making the Keruvim which were also intricately constructed out of pure gold. Because the Keruvim were atop the Aron which symbolized Torah Shebiksav which doesn't require the same level of effort.]

Parshas Terumah

I am going to throw a few numbers at you. Let's see if you can figure out what they have to do with the parsha: 7, 11, 9, 17, 22.

In the Menorah there were 7 candles, 11 decorate knobs, 9 decorative flowers, it was 17 tefachim high, and had 22 decorative cups. Why is that significant?

The first pasuk in Chumash Bereishis has 7 words.

The first pasuk in Chumash Shemos has 11 words.

The first pasuk in Chumash Vayikra has 9 words.

The first pasuk in Chumash Bamidbar has 17 words.

The first pasuk in Chumash Devorim has 22 words.

The Menorah symbolized the light of Torah and therefore hints to the beginning of every chumash.

The Menorah also had one central stick from which six other branches emerged. The central stick represents the written Torah as taught to us by Moshe Rabbeinu. The six branches that emerge from it are the six Sedarim of Mishnayos, the Torah Sheba'al Peh, which teaches us how to understand the written Torah.

Purim

A number of years ago I accompanied the sports team of an organization I was part of (not Ashar) to a championship game. The home crowd was very hostile to us but it was an exciting game. In the end our team lost in overtime. It was a tough loss and our players exited quickly and went back to the locker room with their heads down while the raucous crowd and winning team celebrated.

As our team was sitting in the locker room there was a knock on the door. It was an important person with the organization of the other team. He asked that we return to the court. I thought to myself that they must want to present our team with a 'second place' gift, or something like that. But when our team returned the victorious team was presented with the trophy. They had wanted us to see the trophy being given to the victors. If the loss had not hurt enough until now, at that point it was really rubbed in our faces.

Achashveirosh announces a seven day party for all the residents of Shushan. The Jews came, against the warnings of Mordechai. When they walked in they saw a horrifying sight – Achashveirosh was wearing the *bigdei Kohain Gadol*. They looked at the tables set with very expensive vessels and noticed among them vessels from the Bais Hamikdash. They also noticed that Achashveirosh was sitting atop his newly constructed exact replica of the throne of Shlomo Hamelech.

For our ancestors it was a very painful sight. We were being teased again and again. What was the message that Achashveirosh was trying to convey?

Achashveirosh wanted the Jews to think that although they no longer have a Bais Hamikdash in Yerushalayim, they have a new "holy temple" in Shushan. They no longer have the Kohain Gadol of old, but they no longer need it, because Achashveirosh would be their new Kohain Gadol.

Rav Ovadia Yosef quotes a Medrash which says that the seventh day of the party was Yom Kippur. In other words, Achashveirosh wanted the Jews to enjoy his party and eat on Yom Kippur.

There was only one time in history when the Jews ate on Yom Kippur. That was when the first Bais Hamikdash was completed by Shlomo Hamelech, and he ordered that they eat out of simcha.

Here again we see that Achashveirosh wanted the Jews to celebrate his palace as being their new Bais Hamikdash.

At the end of the Megillah we read that Mordechai left from before the king with royal clothes. The following pasuk states “*Layehudim baysa ora v’simcha v’sason viykar*”. The gemara explains that ‘viykar’ refers to tefillin.

The beginning of the megillah discusses the clothes and riches of Achashveirosh and his attempt to impress the Jews. At the end of the megillah, Klal Yisroel demonstrates that their pride comes from the special clothing they wear in honor of Hashem, especially their tefillin. Achashveirosh is not our Kohain Gadol and his palace is surely not our Bais Hamikdash. They knew that the Bais Hamikdash would soon be rebuilt and they would again have a real Kohain Gadol.

The mitzvah of tefillin is not just another mitzvah. At the time of the Purim miracle the Jews saw in their tefillin the symbol that Hashem is our only true king.

Purim

There is never as much of a public gathering for a mitzvah as the reading of Megillas Esther on Purim.

Never do we make such an ordeal out of a mitzvah as much as we do about shalach manos.

Never is there such a communal emphasis over a mitzvah as there is about matanos laevyonim.

Never do we make such a big deal and focus so much on a seudah not on Shabbos or Yom Tov.

Haman presented Achashveirosh with numerous reasons to get rid of the Jews:

- *Dasayhem shonos* – they are always busy with their religion, and never want to be like us.
- They treat the king with less respect than an insect. If a fly would fall in their wine, they would spill out the fly and drink the rest of the wine. But if the king would touch the side of the cup they wouldn't drink the rest of it.

Therefore, Haman suggested *yikasev l'abdom*, they should be written for destruction, so that they will be regarded and treated less than insects.

- Haman then continued that if there was a concern about the loss of money, when they would kill the Jews they would take all of their money and possessions, and that would more than compensate for any loss.

How do we celebrate the holiday?

Haman wanted to destroy our religion so we have the greatest gathering of the year. Everyone gathers together and listens intently to every single word being read, detailing the miracle and great victory of their religion.

Haman wanted to destroy and decimate their bodies so we enjoy a grand seudah and indulge our bodies and souls at the same time.

He wanted to steal all of our money, so we give it away to the needy with great fanfare.

He wanted to demonstrate that we are worthless and so we give gifts to each other and demonstrate our respect and friendship with one another.

The mitzvos of Purim are all forms of revenge on Haman!

Purim

According to Targum Sheni 2:5, Mordechai was forty generations from Yaakov Avinu.

According to Targum Sheni 3:1, Haman was eighteen generations from Amalek.

The Torah discusses Amalek in two places in the Torah – Parshas Beshalach and Parshas Ki Setzei. If one were to count back from the end of Parshas Ki Setzei (which contains the discussion of Amalek) eighteen pesukim he will arrive at the pasuk: “*V’haya im bin hakos harasha* – And it will be if the rasha will be struck down”. The first letters of the first three words spell out “Haman”.

The next pasuk begins “With forty you shall strike him down”. Mordechai was the fortieth generation and he was the one who ‘struck down’ Haman. The one who was eighteen generations from Amalek is so hinted eighteen pesukim from the discussion of Amalek.

In Parshas Beshalach, if one counts back eighteen pesukim from the end of the parsha where Amalek is discussed, he will arrive at the pasuk which reads (Shemos 16:35) “*Ub’nei Yisroel achlu es haman arbaim shana... ad boam el k’tzei Eretz Cana’an*”- B’nei Yisroel “ate” or consumed, the same letters as Haman, forty years, a hint to forty generations. It happened just before Ezra gathered the masses to return to Eretz Yisroel for the construction of Bayis Sheni.

“*V’yayn malchus rav k’yad hamelech* – And a great quantity of wine like the ability of the king.” (Esther 1:7)

During his grand feast, Belshazzar donned the clothing of the Kohain Gadol. As punishment that night the Babylonian monarchy was completely destroyed, with one notable exception, a young daughter named Vashti survived, and later married Achashveirosh.

Now at the next party, the party of Achashveirosh, he also violated the *bigdei Kohain Gadol*, and at that point the last remnant of Bavel was destroyed, when Vashti was killed.

Belzer Rebbe noted that this is hinted to in the pasuk – “*v'yayn malchus*” the wine of the king , i.e. the feast of Achashveirosh, which was called the *mishteh hayayain*, “rav” was as great, “*k'yad hamelech*” like the previous feast which included the hand of G-d, i.e. the handwriting on the wall during Belshazzar’s party, which foretold the imminent destruction of Bavel.

At Achashveirosh’s feast what was not completely destroyed during the feast of Belshazzar, was finished off.

Purim

In our culture we have a seven day work week. The truth is that anyone who maintains a seven day week is giving testimony to the fact that Hashem created the world. As far as the natural world is concerned there is no such thing as a seven day week.

Achashveirosh had seven advisors and seven special servants, both of whom he summons in the first perek of the Megillah. The Me'am Loez explains that Achashveirosh had seven advisors and a different one served him each day. On the seventh day of his mass party, he sent all seven advisors to summon Vashti. Therefore, they all heard her harsh response to Achashveirosh's invitation.

Because Achashveirosh had seven advisors, Esther was provided with seven maids. That enabled her to keep Shabbos, because she had a different maid for each day.

Of those seven names, one of them seem to resonate – Charvona. We hear his name later in the Megillah. In fact, he is remembered for good because at a critical moment he gave the final key information to Achashveirosh which sealed Haman's fate.

If Achashveirosh had seven advisors and one served him each day, we can assume that the third mentioned – Charvona – served Achashveirosh on Tuesday.

If we analyze the pesukim of *Berias Ha'olam* we see that in regards to every day the pasuk states that Hashem "saw that it was good". The only exception is Monday when it was not said. However, on Tuesday it was said twice.

Perhaps this is an added significance to the final clause of Shoshanas Yaakov – "*v'gam Charvona zachor l'tov*" Charvona, the minister who served the king on Tuesday, the day of double *ki tov*, is remembered for tov!

Purim

We become very excited when we hear of a major blunder. It makes news because people love to discuss other people's colossal failures, especially if it's someone high and mighty.

[Tonight as the playoffs begin, the Asbar team is hoping that their opposing team will have some blunders. But they should also know that wearing a tie doesn't help their cause, although davening might!]

The Nazis decided that it would be a good idea to attack Russia. The Russians had a secret weapon that the Germans had not taken into account – the Russian winter. Within a few years the Nazi regime was destroyed, and their failed attempt to conquer Russia was a major contributing factor.

The Egyptian Kingdom of Nasser in 1967 decided to take on Israel together with his neighbors. From the very beginning he was already defeated but he lied and told everyone that he was scoring major victories, and based on his lies the other countries joined in. Together they formed the greatest landslide defeat ever in history of five armies against one.

In 1991 Saddam Hussein decided to annex the small country of Kuwait, figuring that no one would care. Within ten years his kingdom was destroyed as well.

Achashveirosh too made some colossal blunders. He sent out a decree which was so foolish and poorly worded. It ended up being one of the major factors in why the Jews were not destroyed before they had a chance to avenge themselves.

The decree stated that every man should rule his own home and that every woman must legally speak the language of her husband.

Amazingly, his officers agreed that it was a good idea.

What was the logic behind the decree? Haman was the author of the decree. What was he thinking?

The Chasam Sofer quotes his Rebbe, Rav Nosson Adler, who explained that Haman suggested that Vashti be killed. The problem was that it would have ripple effect because Vashti probably had supporters who would come out and protest her execution. How could they keep the masses from gathering and protesting?

The best way to keep people from uniting is to cause there to be internal problems. If people are so busy dealing with politics and fighting in their own homes they aren't able to unite and get involved in more global issues. By issuing this decree there was a virtual guarantee that there were going to be major familial disputes throughout the kingdom.

Furthermore, now that each country spoke its own language, people of differing countries wouldn't be able to unite. [We see this from *dor haflagah* where mixing up languages caused there to be disunity because of the inability to communicate.]

Achashveirosh heard this idea and passed the decree.

Furthermore, Bigsan and Seresh discussed their plot to kill the king in earshot of Mordechai. They never dreamed that he spoke their language of Tarshish because he now only spoke Hebrew, his mother tongue.

The Amalekim too spoke their own language. [In Parshas Chukas the Torah relates that Amalek used a trick to attack Klal Yisroel. They dressed like Amalekim but spoke the language of the Cana'anim.]

Because all of the Amalekim were now careful to speak their home language, when the time came for the Jews to take revenge and kill the Amalekim, they knew exactly who their enemies were because of the way they spoke.

So what was the blunder of Achashveirosh? That he made such a big deal out of it, with proclamations. The average person heard the decree and thought about how strange it was. It was because of the skepticism that the first letters caused that the nations did not immediately start attacking the Jews when the second letters were sent out.

Purim

The last words one says are very meaningful and very powerful. They make a lasting impression and it's what people remember. We often hear someone repeat "the last words he ever said to me". Surely when it's the last moments of life, people lean over to hear the final words.

So I would like to share with you Hashem's final words to us – the last words we heard from a Navi. It was right around the beginning of *Bayis Sheni*. Let me share with you one of G-d's parting messages, one of His "goodbye speeches" which He instructed to be written. We call it 'Megillas Esther', written by Mordechai and Esther.

The story is a perfect last message because it included someone who wanted to destroy us, when in the end he ended up destroying himself. He was the one who suggested to the king that anyone who disgraces the king should be able to be executed by order of the king immediately, and he was the one who built the gallows upon which he was hung.

It seems that our enemies destroy themselves.

In our time we have many enemies and they have frightening weapons and ideas. Part of Hashem's parting words through the megillah is that we need not fear because they can use all of their ideas and weapons to destroy themselves.

But what is our reaction supposed to be now?

We must internalize the messages contained in the Megillah and live with them:

- The first lesson is that we must listen to the Torah leaders of our time. At that time the salvation came about because they listened to the instructions of Mordechai and Esther. Often it may not make sense to you - perhaps they wondered why the whole nation had to fast for three days, and why Esther had to jeopardize herself in the way she did. But we must listen to them even when we do not understand.
- One of the laws of the megillah is that we should not read it alone. It should be done in public. Jews gathering together to learn Torah in public is always a positive thing.
- Give gifts to the poor.
- Sharing gifts with friends, and increasing friendship among Jews.

- Eating a meal together with family and friends in a state of blissful joy and singing praises to Hashem and sharing words of Torah.

These are all the parting messages through the Megillah.

There is one additional idea. What should our response be to our enemies who frighten us? Ta'anis Esther. We should gather together and daven.

The absolutely final statement that was conveyed to us through the Navi was through Malachi:

“Behold I am sending to you Eliyahu Hanavi...”

When we follow the lessons of the Megillah properly we will be zocheh to this final promise as well.

Parshas Ki Sisa

A boy came over to me yesterday and told me “I want you to know I made you the biggest and most wonderful shalach manos. You should have seen the stuff in there – candies, pastries, fruits, and other surprises. But when I picked it up to bring it to you it fell all over the place and was ruined.”

I thought to myself that’s one shalach manos I won’t be enjoying.

This seems to be what happens in parshas Ki Sisa. The Torah relates the miraculous amazing grandeur of the luchos. The letters dangled in the air, and could be read from all sides. Right after telling us how great they were, the Torah relates that Moshe shattered the luchos. Why tell us how incredible they were if they broke moments later anyway?

The Torah says the luchos were ‘*charus*- etched’.

Rashi notes that the word *charus* is used one other time in the Torah. When the nation gave over their gold to Aharon which ended up being used in the formation of the *eigel hazahav*, the Torah uses that same root-word. When the nation was gathered in excitement Aharon was ‘etching the gold’. (Rashi explains that the word *charus* and *cheret* both mean engraving.)

We can imagine how much pain it caused Hashem as Aharon etched the gold from the *eigel*, so soon after *kabbolas haTorah*.

While they were carving the *eigel*, Hashem was carving the *luchos*!

When Moshe shattered the luchos they weren’t gone forever. Chazal tell us that the letters flew away and were held in the air, even as the actual tablets broke. The essence of the luchos – the letters which contained G-d’s message, was never lost.

There was a boy here in Monsey who was an excellent student in elementary school. He went to high school and immediately things weren’t going well. He was always with the wrong crowd. This was at the time when texting was becoming more prevalent and he was using it inappropriately and was constantly getting into trouble.

He is the only boy I know who was kicked out of two high schools in one year. With much pleading and begging by his parents he was accepted into another school and somehow made it through high school.

A few months ago I was in Eretz Yisroel and I made a reunion for many of my former students at a particular eatery on a Motzei Shabbos. I called up this boy who was now learning in yeshiva there and asked him if he could come join us. He replied that he would love to come but he has a chavrusa right after Shabbos which he looks forward to all week. I asked him to please come afterwards, even if it was late.

He arrived and I told him to eat something. He told me that he first wanted to hear the d'var Torah I had said earlier. I told it to him and he enjoyed it. Then he shared with me a d'var Torah. It wasn't just what he said, but the passion and excitement in which he said it.

I saw the *luchos* carved within him.

In his old schools he had been breaking luchos but the letters were suspended in the air until he carved them into his heart.

Afterwards, I called his father to tell him how wonderful his son was learning. He asked me to wait a second, and then he called his wife to pick up the phone. Then he asked me to repeat what I said. When I told them they were both sobbing.

When Moshe broke the luchos they weren't gone. The letters were merely hovering in the air waiting for every Jew to gather them up. The miracles of those luchos remain wherever we etch them in our hearts.

Parshas Ki Sisa

Moshe asks Hashem to show him His spiritual world with all of its secrets. Hashem places Moshe between two rocks and covers him. Hashem then passes in between the two rocks and removes His cover and Moshe sees the knot in the back of Hashem's tefillin.

What that means, I have no idea. But whatever it was, it was the closest any human being ever came to seeing the glory of Hashem.

Perhaps the greatest day, the most proud the Jewish nation ever felt when donning their tefillin was on the twenty-fourth of Sivan during the year of the Purim miracle.

On the 23rd of Sivan letters finally went out from Shushan signed by Mordechai that the Jews had a right to counter-attack on the 13th of Adar. Until then the Jews were thinking of disguising themselves. But at that point the non-Jews began to think of disguising themselves. The Jews were then fiercely proud to be Jews. "*Layebudim bayisa orah v'simcha v'sasson v'kar*". The Gemara says *v'kar* refers to tefillin.

After seeing Mordechai garbed in his royal robes, the Jews wanted to wear their tefillin.

I want to relate to you the story of the most beautiful pair of tefillin in Ashar. *[There are only 3 or 4 people currently in Ashar that still remember this story.]*

Years ago the practice here in Ashar was that the sixth and seventh grades would collect money and purchase two pairs of tefillin. One was given to JEP here in Monsey for a boy learning about Torah and mitzvos. The other was given to a poor boy in Eretz Yisroel.

Every year when we presented that pair of tefillin to JEP, Rabbi Yehuda Schwab a'h would come to Ashar to thank the boys for their donation and for helping another boy perform this special mitzvah.

One year Mrs. Jacobson heard that Rav Dovid Grossman would be in Monsey. Rabbi Grossman is known as the 'disco rabbi'. He literally has gone into discos and convinced young Jews to become ba'alei teshuva. He is the Rabbi of a little town in Israel and helps many learn about Torah and mitzvos. He was in America raising funds for his wonderful programs.

Mrs. Jacobson called him and informed him that if he came to Ashar we would present him with a pair of tefillin.

Rabbi Grossman agreed. He came to Ashar and spoke to the boys. After he shared a d'var Torah with them, the boys came up to present him with the pair of tefillin. After they did so, Rabbi Grossman told the boys that he wanted to share a story with them. This is the story he told:

“There was a mother and son living in Russia. They were able to come to Israel, but soon after the mother died. The young orphan was about to be placed in an orphanage. I met him and saw that he was a bright boy and so I agreed to accept him into our yeshiva, and to adopt him. He was so excited to be part of my family.

This happened six months ago. Last week I told my family that I was going to America to raise funds. This young boy came to me teary-eyed and asked me if I had to leave him for so long. I told him that when I returned I would bring him a special gift.” At that point Rabbi Grossman looked at the boys and said “This is the special gift that I will give him when I return.”

Then Rabbi Grossman continued his story: “Even after I told him that I would bring him a special gift he was still crying and insisted that he didn’t want me to leave him for so long. He told me that he didn’t want a gift; he wanted to be with me! Finally I told him that just this one time he could come along with me.”

At that point, Rabbi Grossman motioned towards the door. The door opened and in walked a twelve year old boy. Rabbi Grossman motioned for the boys to present the tefillin to the boy directly.

When they did so he accepted it with tears in his eyes and said: “*Todah Rabbah!*”

That was the greatest pair of tefillin Ashar ever saw!

Parshas Ki Sisa

Appreciate what you *have*; otherwise you'll appreciate what you *had*!

Adam Harishon had everything – clothing, food, etc. but he was missing one thing. Before he knew it, it was too late. He was banished from Gan Eden, and was left appreciating what he once had.

“Oh! If only I had not eaten from the Eitz Hada’as!”

The Bn’ei Yisroel at Har Sinai had manna, Poland Spring traveled with them, and they lived in a climate-controlled environment.

The Torah was given and they witnessed the greatest revelations ever seen by humans.

40 days later they feared that Moshe wasn’t returning. They panicked and created a golden calf. The calf wasn’t an idol to them; it was a representation of Hashem to them. But they lost everything and were left appreciating what they had.

Recently there was a group of successful, rich, and famous people who made a foolish mistake. They wanted something they didn’t have and they tried to take too much. Now they are dead!

There are some noted athletes who are rich and famous. They had everything they wanted, but they felt like they were missing ‘something’. So they used performance enhancement drugs. Now they are stuck appreciating what they once had. (A-rod probably wishes he could do it again.)

What about us?

We have varieties of food – we can decide I want this, not this, but that. We have endless amounts of drinks; we have climate-controlled homes with one flick of a switch or button, even in the dead of winter or the heat of summer.

We can see the world in beautiful color, we have peripheral vision. We can hear so many different types of music; we can record and listen later. We live with freedom of religion.

Do we appreciate what we have?

We would be wise to appreciate what we have, so we won’t need to appreciate what we once had!

Parshas Vayakhel-Pekudei

It was the first structure the Jewish nation would be able to call their own – the Mishkan.

The nation gathered to hear who would be appointed to begin the sacred task of its construction. As they wait there are murmurs within the crowd “Yeah, it’ll be him!”

The first candidate was no shock, except that he was quite young. Betzalel was only 13, a bar mitzvah boy. But he was from Shevet Yehuda and his grandfather was Chur who had given up his life to defend the honor of Hashem.

The appointment of Betzalel came as no surprise.

But the second choice, the person who would be the assistant, that came as a shock. The final shevet to travel in the desert was Shevet Don. They were not exactly the most esteemed and honored in the nation. Don had only one son, Chushim, and he had been deaf and mute, a handicapped individual. In addition, there was only one woman throughout all the years that the nation had been slaves in Egypt that had been abused by an Egyptian man – Shlomis bas Divri, of Shevet Don. This was not a popular Shevet.

Yet the choice for Betzalel’s assistant was Oholiav ben Achisamach of Shevet Don!

He was the surprise choice of the year!

But the Torah wants us to get used to surprises.

No one expected Shevet Binyamin, who had been involved in the terrible story of *Pilegesh B’givah*, to be the hosts of the first king Shaul, and then to have the Bais Hamikdash in their portion.

No one expected Dovid Hamelech to be the son of Yishai that was chosen to become king.

We never know Hashem’s calculations, and we never know where greatness will rise from.

When I was a student in elementary school, almost all of my peers were not observant. I couldn’t eat from the food in their homes. If I went on a play-date I would bring food with me.

There was one kind in my elementary school class whose name was Howard. In my mind he was a bully. His elbow was always in my ribs, nonstop. His family was completely

irreligious. From looking at his family and hearing the negative condescending manner in which they spoke about Judaism I wondered why he was even in a Jewish school.

He was thrown off the bus because of his misbehavior, and his parents had to pick him up each day. He was a constant source of trouble.

After graduating I left town, and parted ways from Howard. I went to yeshiva while Howard went off to the army and eventually fought in Vietnam.

Years passed. I came to Monsey and began working in Camp Regesh. One summer I received an application from a talented young man. I was impressed with his application and was very eager to meet him. He was a young Rabbi in Westchester.

We met and in conversation his hometown came up. His parents had lived in Springfield, just as I did. Then they had moved to Seattle. His father's name was Howard.

This young Rabbi from Westchester - Howard's son - was a popular youth director with followers who loved him and adored him.

In the end this young Rabbi was so busy teaching Torah that he wasn't able to accept the job in Regesh.

Klal Yisroel is full of surprises.

Maybe one day you will be a surprise.

Who knows, maybe you will be surprised to find out that you are to be one of the builders of the third Bais Hamikdash.

Parshas Vayakhel-Pekudei

During the first battle against Amalek, Moshe ascends the mountain, and two people assist him by holding up his hands. The first one is an obvious choice – Aharon. But the other person is a bit more surprising. I would think it should be Yehoshua, but Yehoshua is from Ephraim who is from Yosef and therefore he is needed to lead the war at the bottom of the mountain. The second person is Chur.

Why Aharon and Chur? Obviously because they are the greatest individuals in the nation. The only problem is that Chur was the son of Miriam and Calev ben Yefuneh. Miriam surely wouldn't go up the mountain in full view during a war. But what about Calev? He was chosen as one of the *meraglim* to check out Eretz Yisroel, and he was the *Nasi* of Shevet Yehuda. So why did he not hold up Moshe's other hand?

Furthermore, when Moshe went up Har Sinai after Matan Torah, he told the nation that if they had any issues in his absence they should seek out the advice of Chur. Why Chur and not Calev?

Yesterday I saw an amazing act of *chesed shel emes* performed in this building. [*Chesed shel emes* means a *chesed* in which one expects nothing in return.] There was a whole group of boys busy doing their thing and they didn't notice this other boy perform this great act of *chesed*. He didn't do it for recognition.

Then it struck me why he did it – because his parents are people of tremendous *chesed*. They are always going out of their way to help others, without anyone knowing.

Perhaps Chur was selected because of the fact that he has such great parents, second to none. As great as his father was, his father didn't have as righteous a father as Chur had, and that added to Chur's greatness.

The truth is that Chur had a very tragic end, but that wasn't the end of the story.

How can we fix the damage done of Jews giving money for such an ignoble cause? Give money for good. To whom were the collected materials of Mishkan brought? To Betzalel, the grandson of Chur, who was killed by the construction of the Eigel.

Pesach

What is the connection between the following four things?

- Berachos each morning
- Dayeinu
- Steps of the Seder
- Steps in Bais Hamikdash leading to the Azarah

The answer is that they all have 15 parts.

The name of Hashem “*kal*” (*yud* and *bei*) is gematria 15. *Yud* represents *olam haba*; *bei* represents *olam hazeh*.

When the letters *yud* and *bei* are put together it symbolizes bridging both worlds. As the Leviim would ascend the fifteen steps in the Bais Hamikdash towards the *azarah*, they would stop after the tenth, blow shofar, and then continue ascending higher.

We begin davening each morning by reciting 15 berachos thanking Hashem for the gifts He grants us each morning. Each beracha is another step of our personal gratitude.

Dayeinu begins by thanking Hashem for taking us out, and continues by listing more and more impressive miracles that He performed on our behalf. Each stanza is another step of greatness as if climbing steps higher and higher.

When a chesed is performed by a tzaddik it serves as the bridge between this world and the upper worlds. How does chesed become a bridge between two worlds?

There was a young boy named Yisroel who was eating with his friends one day. He heard them discussing something mean they planned to do and it upset him greatly.

In those days when the sun set the day was over and everyone was home for the night. But after supper Yisroel begged his mother to allow him to go out for a few minutes. She agreed and he came back fifteen minutes later. She asked him where he was but he replied that he couldn't say. The same thing repeated itself every night.

An investigation done afterwards revealed the following: The young boys were sick and tired of being yelled at by the water carrier. So they decided to fill his buckets with water at night so when he came out in the morning they would be filled with ice. Then he would be forced to chip away the ice before he could begin making his rounds to deliver water.

Yisroel would sneak out each night to pour out the water so the water carrier wouldn't have to deal with that aggravation in the morning.

That was only one of the first steps of Yisroel's many steps up towards greatness. He climbed each step as he performed more chesed until he reached the height of greatness. The young boy's full name was Yisroel Meir Hakohain Kagan, better known as the great Chofetz Chaim.

When we daven, learn, wear tzitzis, say berachos, etc. each mitzvah is another step higher. It helps us climb towards the Azarah, towards greater kedusha.

Kamah ma'alos tovos lamakom aleinu – Every bit of growth is another ma'alah, another step towards our personal greatness.

Pesach

In the 1880s Rav Yehoshua Leib Diskin zt'l, the great Rav of Brisk, founded the first orphanage in Yerushalayim. That orphanage is still in existence today.

He also left behind a great amount of Torah, in his seforim – Maharil Diskin.

I want to share with you a teaching he taught over 130 years ago about what may have been the first record of someone eating matzah and wine on the night of Pesach:

Avrohom Avinu is informed that his nephew Lot was taken captive and he leads the chase against the Four Kings in what seemed to be a hopeless battle. What mitzvah was he committing that night?

The mitzvah of *pidyon shevuyim* – redeeming a captive, i.e. his nephew Lot. Avrohom didn't pay attention to the fact that he was badly outnumbered and under-armed. Avrohom believed and taught that Hashem runs the world and controls nature. So Avrohom leads the chase and miraculously the Four Kings, led by the evil Nimrod, flee. Avrohom is chasing them throughout the first part of the night. At midnight Hashem tells Avrohom to stop. Lot has been rescued and the job is done.

The Medrash relates that during the first half of that night Hashem performed the miracles of that war for Avrohom. The second half of that night was preserved for a few centuries until the night before Klal Yisroel left Mitzrayim. On that night Hashem completed the miracles of that night, because at the stroke of midnight the final plague – *Makas Bechoros* - began, and lasted through the night.

Soon after Avrohom was greeted by Malki Tzedek, who was his ancestor Shem. Shem gave him "bread and wine".

Maharil Diskin explained that Avrohom was informed about Lot on Erev Pesach and he dropped everything to save Lot. Throughout the first half of Seder night he pursued the enemy, and finished at midnight. Now, as Avrohom was returning, Shem greeted him with "bread and wine" referring to matzah and the Four Cups. Shem realized that because Avrohom was preoccupied with the battle he didn't have matzah and wine to fulfill those mitzvos so he provided them for him.

In a few nights we will perform those mitzvos too. We hope on that night we will merit the final payback from a night of miracles dating back thousands of years.

Pesach

One afternoon recently, I was walking past the office on my way to the gym when an elderly woman I didn't recognize called my name. She told me who she was and even then I only vaguely remembered her as an Ashar parent from many years prior. But when she told me who her daughter was I suddenly recalled that she was a very fussy mother, always calling and inquiring about every detail about her daughter. She called incessantly and made all of her daughter's teachers a little crazy.

The woman explained that her parents had both been killed in Auschwitz and she had survived as a young girl. She said that every few weeks she would come to Ashar to deliver a check in her parent's memory. She wanted to support an institution which taught Torah, in a way that her parents were never able to do. When she told me that it became clear why she was the type of mother she was. She never had a parental upbringing and so she wanted to make sure that she was doing her utmost for her daughter.

We do many things to evoke memories, and keep memories alive.

On Purim, which just passed, we gave shalach manos. When someone comes to your door to deliver shalach manos and you reply 'wait I have something for you too' and race into the kitchen to put together a few things from other packages received, it's nice but it's not the real meaning of shalach manos. The mitzvah is called shalach – sending. If I send someone else to come to you and give you shalach manos that shows that I was thinking about you, and that truly increases feelings of friendship.

In the middle of the Seder table we place the ka'arah. The mnemonic of the 5 things placed upon the ka'arah – *maror*, *zeroah*, *beitzah*, *charoses* spell out the word "*mizbeiach*" and with the *chazeres*, it reads '*mizbeiach chazeres* – return the mizbeiach' for when we have the *mizbeiach* we will be able to perform the Seder properly with the Korbon Pesach. The Seder plate thus serves as a reminder of the Bais Hamikdash and the components of the special avodah of Seder night which we lack.

The Gemara relates that when Klal Yisroel came to be *oleh regel* during the triennial pilgrimage to the Bais Hamikdash, the Kohanim would remove the *Lechem Hapanim* from upon the *shulchan* and show the assemblage “See how beloved you are before Hashem, for the bread is just as fresh now as it was when it was placed here a week ago.”

Rashi (Shemos 25:29) relates that the Lechem Hapanim were made in special *ka'aros* which is what gave them their unique shape! How intriguing that the *ka'arah* we have on Seder night reminds us of how much we miss being close to Hashem in the Bais Hamikdash, while the Lechem Hapanim which was a symbol of Hashem's love for us was made in *ka'aros*.

[The only other time the word *ka'aros* appears in the Torah is by the offerings of the Nesi'im. Rashi there (Bamidbar 7:19) relates that the Ka'arah of silver was symbolic of Adam Harishon. We see that the concept of ka'arah in the Torah is symbolic.]

Rabbi Avi Barrish added:

Gemara Megilla relates that the name Memuchon (who was really Haman) hinted to the angel's complaint to Hashem that how could the Jews be destroyed, is there any other nation that prepares (memuchon) the Lechem Hapanim?

Amalek and Haman try to cool our emotional connection to Hashem. They were the antithesis of the Lechem Hapanim whose implicit message was: See how beloved you are before Hashem!

[Seforim also say that after Parshas Hamoadim in Parshas Emor, the Torah relates the mitzvah of lighting menorah – a hint to Chanukah, and then the mitzvah of Lechem Hapanim – a hint to Purim.]

Pesach

You can't write a book about the history of great baseball teams without mentioning the Yankees!

How could it be that Moshe Rabbeinu, the one who orchestrated all of the miracles before Pharaoh, and led us out of Mitzrayim is not mentioned in the haggadah?

After years of learning in Yeshiva Torah Vodaas I finally made it. I was able to join the shiur of Rav Elya Chazan zt'l. This is before the age of tape recording shiurim, and his shiur was very complicated. There were many steps and it was a challenge to follow the logic of Rav Chazan's laser-sharp mind.

Rav Chazan was a prized student of the great Rav Baruch Ber Leibowitz zt'l in Kaminitz, who was also legendary for his high-level and challenging shiurim.

Before the shiur I prepared tremendously, learning through the topic as much as I could. But after the shiur was given when I was reviewing it, there was one point I just couldn't grasp. I waited on line to speak to Rav Elya. He spoke Yiddish but could understand English; I spoke English but could understand Yiddish. That combination posed a challenge from the outset.

After a few tries of explaining it to me, Rav Chazan asked me if I would like to see the points written in a text. I said I would. He told me to go to the yeshiva's library and find the 4 volume set of a sefer called *Divrei Eliyahu*. He told me which page in which volume to look at, and said I would find this point written there. I found it exactly where he said. I reviewed it carefully and after some work was able to understand it. My joy knew no bounds.

Before I put the sefer back on the shelf I curiously checked to see who the author of this brilliant work was. The name in front read Rav Eliyahu Chazzan!

Rav Chazan wore a plain simple hat, and no rabbinic distinguishing attire. In the shul he davened in he sat in the back. To most of the outside world he seemed like a simple pleasant person.

It was only we in yeshiva who knew the truth, that he was a giant in Torah, and that it was an incredible merit to be able to say “I am/was in Rav Elya Chazan’s shiur.” On one occasion I was speaking with Rav Elya Svei zt’l and when he asked me whose shiur I was in when I learned in Torah Vodaas and I replied Rav Elya Chazan, there was a gasp of admiration.

There was only one Seder that Klal Yisroel observed while they were in the Midbar. The Torah describes that Seder in Parshas Beha’aloscha. It was the second year after they had left Mitzrayim. (Bamidbar 9:1-8) "וידבר משה אל בני ישראל לעשות הפסח" - Moshe instructed B’nei Yisroel about how to make the Korbon Pesach and the entire process.

If Moshe was the one who instructed them about what to do and what to say, we can understand that Moshe left out one important component of the story. We know that Moshe was the humblest of men – *anav mikal adam*. In Moshe’s own account of Yetzias Mitzrayim we can be sure that he didn’t mention his own involvement.

We learned from Moshe, from that first post-exodus experience, about the format of *Sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim*. Therefore, when the text of the haggadah was written it maintained that style which Moshe had conveyed and omits Moshe, despite the significant role that he played in the story. Thus when we realize the glaring omission of Moshe’s name in the haggadah during the Seder, it is a reminder of the greatness and extent of his humility, which is what made him worthy of being the leader who would be able to teach us that everything is only Hashem!

Pesach

It's practically the end of the Seder. We have drunk 4 cups of wine, eaten matzah and marror, afikomen and bentched. We said *Shefoch Chamoscha* with our doors open, sang hallel together, and have sang most of the songs of *Nirtzah*. We are feeling happy and tired. And now we come to the second to last song – Who knows One?

What a strange way to end the Seder! We count to thirteen and in question and answer form discuss the symbolism of each number. But why these things? Why can't we say that 2 are the *Mizbeichos* in the Mishkan, 4 are the exiles, and 7 are the braches on menorah?

A social experiment was done, where they invited students to a classroom. Once in there they told the class that 2 plus 2 equals 5. One student, who knew about the experiment and had arranged this beforehand, raised his hand and argued that 2 plus 2 is 4. At that point he was asked to step outside the room. Once outside the rest of the class heard that student scream and beg for mercy. To those in the room it sounded like he was being beaten mercilessly.

The same thing happened with a second student, and then a third. After that, when the students were told 2 plus 2 equals 5 no one argued. But afterwards when they gave a written test, some of the students still wrote that the answer was 4.

It seems that when the truth is so deeply ingrained in a person he can't undo it even with social pressure. He can be pulled into acting a certain way, but what he knows to be true in his heart cannot be changed too quickly.

Seder night is all about coming to one major truth: There is one Hashem who created and runs the heaven and earth.

When we arrive at the end of the Seder we announce to all that 'One is Hashem!' Then we mention different symbolisms of every number up until 13 which remind us that Hashem is one. Each of those examples are things that testify to the oneness of Hashem.

The two luchos given at Sinai when the nation saw a revelation of Hashem.

The 3 Avos and 4 Imahos lived lives of Kiddush Hashem.

The 5 books of Torah and 6 books of Mishna teach us about the truth of Hashem.

The 7 days of the week count up to Shabbos, which testifies that Hashem created heaven and earth.

The 8 days of milah which remind us to control ourselves because we are part of a treaty with Hashem.

The 9 months leading up to birth, creation of a new life, are the greatest testimony of a living G-d.

The 10 commandments were given at Sinai.

The 11 stars in Yosef's dream was a form of prophecy orchestrated by Hashem to begin the process which would lead Klal Yisroel down to galus. Hashem runs the world, and He caused the whole exile and redemption.

The 12 tribes bear testimony to the oneness of Hashem.

The 13 attributes of Hashem are the way Hashem runs the world.

As we set to end the Seder we remind ourselves and everyone at the table that the most important lesson we have learned tonight is that everything that happened and happens is all in the Hands of Hashem.

Pesach

The ultimate exciting story has the narrowest escapes.

In the world of entertainment they add as many narrow escapes that they can. The story becomes less believable but the excitement level increases.

There was a boy in Bait Shemesh who wanted very badly to join his parents on a trip, but they adamantly refused. They pulled out of the driveway while he was throwing a tantrum.

Local story. A young fellow was running after a bus desperately trying to catch the attention of someone in the back of the bus. But no one hears, and despite his great attempt he is left there.

Family at the border crossing trying to cross from Poland into Germany in 1939. They were hoping to pass through Germany to get to Italy. The border policeman told them that he can allow them in but he couldn't guarantee they would ever arrive at their destination. They had a tormented decision to make.

We love a narrow escape but only when it's a success story.

We know that there were quite a few narrow escapes at the time of B'nei Yisroel's redemption from Mitzrayim. At the foot of the sea with the Egyptians behind them, the angel in heaven argued that the Jews should not be saved. In the end we were saved; it was a narrow escape.

Another narrow escape happened on the night of Makas Bechoros.

Perhaps the most frightening thing to hear in the middle of the night are the sounds of terrified screams coming from around you, or even across the street from you.

They were told that every firstborn was going to die that night. The Jews smeared their doorposts with blood, and waited in great fear. Suddenly at midnight the cries begin from all over Egyptian. Many didn't know that they were firstborns and they died; there was no home where someone didn't die.

The Jewish firstborns all survived. A dramatic narrow escape.

The boy struggling to get into his car – that story does not have a happy ending. No one in that car lived. I know the story personally.

The man running after the bus – that story happened on the morning of September 11, 2001. The bus was to take him to work at World Trade Center. His missing the bus saved his life.

The family at the border who had that agonizing decision to make decided to cross the border and try to get to Italy. That decision saved my father's life.

How do we celebrate a narrow escape on Pesach?

The simple way is that we eat a food which when taken properly grants us a tremendous mitzvah, but when not made properly would cause us to transgress the serious sin of chometz. Eating matzah which was made properly is itself a narrow escape.

But there is another narrow escape. Imagine you wake up one morning and didn't eat anything. You arrive at school and find out that you will not be allowed to eat anything for the rest of the day unless you attend a party. Would anyone not want to attend?

All bechorim on erev Pesach begin the day fasting. But they attend a siyum and then they can eat for the rest of the day.

Attending a siyum is also a narrow escape. It gives us a slight glimpse into the feelings the bechorim felt when awaiting the moment of midnight on that fateful night in Mitzrayim.

Pesach

At your age you don't really appreciate the significance of an anniversary. When I got married I was told that there were two new dates I must never forget: My wife's birthday and our anniversary. Although logically, remembering your anniversary is a two-way street, and she should have to remember it too, as a man the main responsibility is on you. That's just the way it is.

Shortly before our marriage at the end of June, my wife and I enjoyed a special evening together. We drank champagne, looked at some pictures from our engagement, and celebrated our upcoming marriage. We went to an expensive restaurant and enjoyed our time together.

A few weeks before our first anniversary in March, I became very nervous that I was going to forget it. So I made a reservation at that same restaurant. I told my wife that we would be going back to that restaurant for a special evening. We would drink champagne, and look at pictures from our first year of marriage just like we did the year before. When she asked me what the occasion was I told her it was for our anniversary. She looked confused, "But that's not for two months." "I know but I am so nervous about forgetting that I decided to celebrate it now." She smiled "Oh, you're just joking."

I realized that it was silly to go so early so I cancelled the reservation.

At the beginning of June I became even more nervous about forgetting our anniversary. So I called up the restaurant and again made a reservation for that night. When my wife came home from work I told her not to bother making supper because we would be going to that fancy restaurant. When I told her we would be going for our anniversary she said, "But it's not for another few weeks. We can't go out for our anniversary now!" So I cancelled the order.

The night before our anniversary I was so nervous that I made the reservation and told my wife we were going that night. "But our anniversary is tomorrow night!" "I know but I think we should go tonight."

At that point she became upset.

“A few months ago it was a joke. A few weeks ago it was cute. But now if you want to go out tonight, it shows that you don’t value the meaning of the day. Why can’t you wait one more night and do it at the right time?”

Eating matzah today, before Nissan begins, is nothing. It’s just another form of bread. Even if I eat it in honor of Yetzias Mitzrayim it’s nothing; too far away from the anniversary. If I eat it on Rosh Chodesh or after it’s still not meaningful, because it’s too far away from the anniversary.

However, if one eats matzah on Erev Pesach that shows you don’t care about the date. It needs to be so special on the night of the Seder because that’s the night, that’s the anniversary of that great event.

On that night we take out champagne, four cups of wine, we take out the family pictures, the haggadah which tells the story, and wrapped up in a special wrapping is the highlight of the evening – the matzah.

That’s how we celebrate our anniversary of becoming this great nation.

This d’var Torah is expressed in the haggadah in different words. “*Yachol MeRosh Chodesh*”. You might think we should begin commemorating the anniversary already on Rosh Chodesh, maybe you’ll think on the day before. The haggadah tells us it can only be fulfilled on the night of the fifteenth, the proper time to celebrate the anniversary.

Pesach

Every year the preschool has a mock trip to Israel. They give out tickets and discuss their journey. They set up the chairs to look like a plane and they all board. One of the teachers dresses like a stewardess and helps them find their seats.

It's a very exciting event for them and they discuss what they saw and how much fun they had. When they finally "return" they announce "Next year in Yerushalayim again!"

The root-word Seder appears in various places: 6 Sidrei (Orders) of Mishnayos, the parsha of the week is called the *Sedra*, on Rosh Hashanah we refer to "*Seder tekeyoseinu* – the order of our Shofar blowing", before the Kohanim bless us we pray to return to Seder ha'avodah – the Order of the Divine Service.

But before Rosh Hashanah we don't speak about "doing or having a Seder". That terminology is only found in regards to the first night(s) of Pesach. Why?

What does Seder mean? When there are various things that all seem to be random and not connected, and you're able to place them in a definite order that shows how they are all connected and make sense, that is Seder.

The order of Mishnayos has a Seder, which parsha we read on Shabbos is based on a Seder, how we blow shofar, and how/when the Kohanim bless us has a Seder.

But the highest level of Seder was achieved on the night when we left Mitzrayim. All of the events of the previous two centuries in Egyptian exile, many of which seemed so difficult to understand, finally came together. On that night they saw some of the patterns of Hashem's plan and how things had unfolded exactly how Hashem wanted. It was truly a night of Seder.

On one occasion Moshe was allowed to do something against that plan. Moshe complained to Hashem when he saw an innocent baby being placed in the wall instead of a brick. Hashem allowed Moshe to save that baby. That baby grew up and became the one who caused the terrible sin of the *eigel hazahav* to happen. That sin cost 3,000 lives and a terrible punishment that we continue to suffer from.

The Seder has an exact path, even when we cannot understand it.

At the end of our Seder on Pesach night we pray “*Ka’asher zachinu l’sader oso* – Just as we have merited to ‘arrange’ the Seder, so we should merit to perform it.”

Just as all of the random events of the long exile came together on that night so that they were able to recognize some of the patterns, so should we merit that happening again with the coming of Moshiach and the end of this exile.

“Next year in Yerushalayim!”

Isru Chag Pesach

It's the last week of Nissan. Pesach is over, and yet we are not reciting tachanun. The reason for it is one of the strangest in halacha. Since we did not recite tachanun throughout the first two thirds of the month, we finish the month in the same way.

I am blessed that even after the Seder in my home had concluded on Pesach night, some of my family members remained at the table discussing matters of Yetzias Mitzrayim. At that point one of my sons related to me the following Medrash which I had never heard before:

After Kerias Yam Suf when the Egyptian's dead bodies were washed ashore, every Jew saw the dead body of the Egyptian who tormented him.

So it comes out that right after they emerged from the sea the nation sang the great shirah in which they declared "*Zeh Keli* – This is my G-d"; they were literally able to point to the shechina which they witnessed on an incredible level. At that point even the simplest Jew enjoyed a revelation which we are never privy to in this world – they were able to see the entire picture. All of their suffering and pain, along with all of the miracles and wonders – it all now made sense.

If we had that type of revelation it would be incredible, although it would also be a bit scary.

So after singing shirah and feeling such a surge of faith in Hashem, they looked to the shore and each Jew saw his former oppressor. And when they saw their oppressors they noticed that his pockets were bulging with gold and silver, there was expensive jewelry on his body. He was still attached to his horse which was also laden with all sorts of valuables.

The Jew looked and thought – "That stuff should be mine! I'm entitled to it! That was the guy who beat me almost to death; now I am entitled to his valuables." They went and scooped up all the gold, silver, and diamonds.

Moshe had a hard time prying them away because they were so busy with their newfound wealth.

The problem is that one starts grabbing greedily, he tends to forget about Hashem – the one who is providing him with everything. So the nation which had proclaimed their faith in Hashem just moments earlier had now veered away from that faith and became absorbed in themselves.

This morning during davening one boy took out a small mirror from his tefillin bag and began looking at it. As if on cue, not to be outdone, everyone around him took out their own mirror and began looking and playing with it. So the mirror which is there to help us fulfill the mitzvah properly suddenly becomes a distracting toy.

Therefore, at the sea when we were so easily distracted and so quickly lost sight of the lofty levels we had reached just moments earlier, we learned about the extreme importance of *Isru Chag* – binding up the holiday, trying to hold on to all we gained and accomplished during the Yom Tov, so that it doesn't get lost quickly after it's over. We recognized the need to stay connected!

Therefore, more than any other chag we need to hold onto the growth of Pesach. Perhaps that's part of the reason why we continue to omit tachanun even after Pesach is over, for the balance of the month. The spark of Pesach must not be allowed to fizzle out.

At this point of the year the sun has come out. It has become warmer and more beautiful days have arrived. When that happens we feel a desire for more playtime, which leads to a greater focus on ourselves.

Our job is to keep our focus on Hashem, and make sure we keep the lessons of Pesach – especially our emunah in Hashem – at the fore of our minds.

Yom Hashoah

I recently read an article written by the well-known singer R' BenZion Shenker. In the article he tells the story of the tune to the words Ani Maamin which was written by a Modzitzer chasid named Rabbi Fastag in a cattle car headed towards Auschwitz.

The composer taught the song to the people herded in that cattle car with him and wrote down the notes. He then promised part of his share in the World to Come to whoever would teach the tune to the Modzitzer Rebbe. One of the people in the cattle car jumped off the train from an escape hatch on the roof and survived the war. He later taught the tune to the Modzitzer Rebbe in America.

I was amazed with the story. I looked up BenZion Shenker in the phone book. Three names came up. I called them until I got through to him. I asked him which tune it was. He sang it to me. It is the same tune that we sing here on Yom Hashoah.

Imagine that we are singing a tune composed by someone who knew he was on his way to die. *"And even though it may take long, I still believe with complete faith that Moshiach will come!"*

Sometimes we worry about being late to an appointment or a meeting. We go to the airport and we are concerned that we shouldn't miss our flight. One of the most painful things one can hear is- "Sorry, you're too late! You should've come earlier!"

Recently President Obama went to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in *Bayit Vegan* in Yerushalayim. Afterwards, he was addressed by a Rabbi in front of the press. This Rabbi is one of the greatest success stories. He was an eight year old boy rescued from Buchenwald, liberated by the Americans. He was a poor orphan, who somehow made his way to Eretz Yisroel, learned in yeshivos, became a scholar, and eventually became the Chief Rabbi of Israel. Today he is the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv. His name is Rabbi Yisroel Meir Lau.

I was very interested to hear what message this great Rabbi would give to the United States president in a brief speech. Rabbi Lau told about the time he was in Seattle in a small Holocaust Museum:

"At the front stood a brigadier General, an old man, very handsome, uniform with all the medals of the United States. He welcomed me with tears in his eyes. He knew that I am a Holocaust survivor a child from Buchenwald. He shook my hand and said "Rabbi, I

was one of the liberators of Buchenwald, I served with General Patton. When I heard that you are coming to Seattle I asked for permission to meet with you. Before I give back my soul to the Lord of the universe, me Leo Hymas am asking from you forgiveness... for being late, we came too late. I saw what we have seen, I understand we were late, forgive me.”

“I told him, “67 years you have in your heart, in your consciousness this worry that you have to ask forgiveness, you must be a great man.”

“Yesterday, Mr. President you have promised us that we are not alone... don't be too late.”

Moshiach will come very soon. Let us make sure that we are waiting and ready. We want to make sure that we aren't late!

Yom Ha'atzmaut

There was a Jew I knew who had an amazing sense and order of importance. I personally never met anyone else who had his level of dedication to his priorities and values.

He was born before 1900. There was terrible poverty in his country. Then World War I broke out. Everyone was sure that it was the war before Moshiach that Chazal had spoken about, and as a teenager he was convinced that it was Moshiach's coming. He told me how they would make calculations based on the words of the Nevi'im to prove that it really was the war before Moshiach.

At that point living in Israel was only a fantasy for most Jews. [The country of Israel wasn't even a thought then.] He heard of few Jews who made the very difficult trip there. They were met with many dangers, struggles, hunger, and terrible poverty. But for him it was still only a fantasy. He dreamed - "*if only I could once in my life see the land of Israel*".

During the 1930s he had the chance to come to America. He was then able to bring the rest of his family over. It was in the nick of time. World War II then broke out and destroyed our people. Again the words of the prophets came to life, and now even more than before people thought about Moshiach.

At that time Israel was still a very dangerous land to live in, but for this man it was still his ultimate dream.

In 1947 there was an unusual vote in the United Nations. The story behind the vote was nothing less than miraculous. The world agreed that Israel could have a state.

This Jew was extremely excited and would say that it was a glimpse of Moshiach. He didn't feel that way because of any political leanings or feelings, but out of sheer excitement and from his personal experiences until then.

It was still extremely hard to go to Israel at that time. One would have to travel by boat on a two week journey to get there. For this Jew it still remained a dream. He had a family here in America and there was still much that he needed to take care of in America.

1967 was the icing on the cake. Now Yerushalayim was in our control. At that point his excitement could no longer be contained. He was insistent that he would go to visit no matter how hard it would be.

His family was concerned that if he would go he wouldn't want to come back. Their fears were indeed confirmed. Once he arrived he refused to leave. He told his family, "My whole life I have dreamed of this. For 70 years this is what I wanted. I have finally arrived; I'm not leaving!"

He lived there for the last 15 years of his life. He never again left the country. That excitement and deeply rooted feeling which I witnessed in that Jew – my grandfather – I never saw in anyone else.

There are boys from this school and in this town who have gone to Eretz Yisroel and have said "I'm never leaving. This is my home and this is where I belong."

Although they have not been dreaming about it for 70 years, they have inherited that feeling of longing and yearning from those who have dreamed about it for far longer than 70 years, or even 700 years.

Today is the day when the Jews announced to the world- "We are a state and Jews from around the world are welcome here!"

Any nation which contained Jews who were no longer welcome there, now had and have a place to go.

That may not mean a lot to you. But if you lived in a place where you were scared to walk out of your home, and you were scared to daven or do a mitzvah it means a lot.

There are some boys who look at a siddur like it's the heavy stone atop the well which all the shepherds together couldn't move. But Yaakov Avinu came and rolled it off with ease.

For some boys they can eat and text and that comes easily. But davening is very challenging. It's worth remembering that for Jews living in countries like the Soviet Union they couldn't even be caught holding a siddur. We don't realize how privileged we are.

After 1948 Jews have a place to go and be accepted. For that reason we in Ashar are celebrating today.

Parshas Acharei Mos-Kedoshim

This week's parsha contains the mitzvah of *V'abanta l'reiacha kamocho* – to love your friend like you love yourself. How often do you really have the chance to let your friend go before you?

There was an orphan boy in Israel living with his mother talking about preparing for his bar mitzvah. In his shul, every week the same ba'al korei lained. The young boy told his mother that he would like to lain the week of his bar mitzvah. It was very hard for the mother but she arranged and paid for someone to learn with her son.

The week of the bar mitzvah he walked into shul and noticed that there were more guests than usual. The gabbai had made a mistake. A wealthier family in the shul was hosting a bar mitzvah that same week and were making a big Kiddush. The bigger issue was that the other boy had prepared the parsha as well.

The orphan's mother suggested to her son that he split the parsha with the other boy. But the orphan told his mother that he would forgo the whole thing.

"But about all the work you did to prepare?"

"He has so many guests who came for him. It's more important for him."

"But you need an aliyah"

"So I'll get an aliyah, but that's all."

The whole Shabbos centered on this other boy.

As his fourteenth birthday approached the boy thought that perhaps that year he would be able to lain his bar mitzvah parsha in shul.

But then just before his birthday his mother became very sick and had to be admitted to the hospital and he went to be with her. At the same time, Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv zt'l was sick in the hospital and on Shabbos his attendants were looking through the hospital for a ba'al koreh who could lain for the Rav. When the orphan boy heard he excitedly agreed to lain for Rav Elyashiv.

Rav Elyashiv was impressed with the excellent laining and asked why the boy was in the hospital. When he heard that the boy's mother was sick, in appreciation for laining he sent his personal doctor, a top specialist, to examine the mother. When the doctor came in to the mother's room and reviewed her charts, he noted that she was on the wrong

medications. If she would continue to take them, she would be dead in two days. He quickly ordered that her meds be switched and adjusted and she had a *refuah shelaimah*.

Maybe the mitzvah of letting a fellow Jew go first helped save his mother's life.

Parshas Acharei Mos-Kedoshim

There's a story that you probably know 95 percent of:

The gemara Shabbos relates that a convert once came to Shamai and asked that he teach him the entire Torah while he was standing on one foot. Shamai pushed him away. Then the convert came to Hillel with the same request. Hillel told him "Don't do to others what you wouldn't like to be done to yourself!" The convert asked if that was all, to which Hillel replied that everything else was just an explanation of that rule, and that he should go learn.

When we hear this story we think Shamai wasn't tolerant enough. We also think that Hillel's answer is a bit strange. We know that the mitzvah of "*V'abanta l'reiacha kamocho*" is a fundamental mitzvah, but not that it is the "entire Torah" and everything else is merely an explanation?

There is one point mentioned in the gemara often overlooked. The gemara says that Shamai brushed him away with a yardstick. Rashi explains that such yardsticks were used to measure bricks. When constructing a building every brick must be exact; if even one brick is off by a millimeter it can offset the entire building.

Why did Shamai specifically use that?

I am teaching a class and a boy approaches me and asks me to teach him Torah while he is on one foot – listening with one ear, looking with one eye, while talking to a fellow student. In other words, he is asking me to teach him Torah while his attention is compromised. When someone is standing on one foot he is concentrating on trying to maintain his balance. He needs endurance and focus for that. That means if I am teaching him Torah at that same time he won't be able to be totally focused on what I am saying.

During the year we often have no choice but to teach in that manner. It's the way it is. Students have a lot on their minds and we have to try to teach while their focus is on many things.

On the first day of school however, students come to school with tons of supplies, all ready and prepared to learn. On the first day they bring every conceivable tool or supply they might possibly need. They have a plan and are all measured out for success. At least for

the first few days they have ideas of what they need to be successful and are completely focused on achieving that.

If a student walks in on the first day however, asking that I teach him Torah on one foot, I would not want to have him as a student in my class. If he's not even focused on the first day than I know it's going to be a very big challenge to teach him.

When the convert came to Shamai and asked him to teach him Torah on one foot, Shamai pushed him away with that measuring stick to show that the initiation must be measured and balanced. You cannot begin to study Torah if you aren't focused completely, at least at the beginning.

Hillel had a different idea.

Let us imagine that the boy who comes to me on the first day and asks me to teach him Torah on one foot was an eighth grader.

I reply to him that later that year he is going to want my help to get him into high school of his choice. When he comes to me for help will he want me to be completely focused on his issue or will he want me to deal with it "on one foot"? Will he want me to be ready to make phone calls on his behalf and pull any strings I can, or will he be happy if I listen with half an ear?

Undoubtedly, he will want me to do as much as I can for him.

Hillel told the convert – be considerate of others. You want others to give you their full attention, so then you should serve Hashem in that same manner.

The convert asked if that was all. Hillel replied that to him that that point is his main focus. That's the way he must start to learn Torah – with complete focus, the same manner he would want others to relate to him.

When a person starts learning that way, then hopefully he can continue to grow and learn more and more.

Pesach Sheni

Those who were tamei and could not bring the Korbon Pesach with the rest of Klal Yisroel had a second opportunity to bring the korbon a month later on Pesach Sheni.

This was an even bigger deal because this was the only opportunity to bring the Korbon Pesach in the desert, as there was no korbon Pesach brought during the remaining thirty eight years in the desert.

The Korbon was eaten with matzah, and therefore many have the custom to eat matzah today to remind us of the Korbon Pesach Sheni brought today.

I was assured that my first grade daughter will be bringing my matzah when she comes. I was not assured that it will be in one piece. I will share it during lunch today.

There is a fantastic series of museums in Washington called the Smithsonian. If we would visit every Smithsonian when we go on the graduation trip to Washington it would take us three weeks. But we only have three days, so we only visit some of them.

In one of the museums there is a stuffed bird. It's called a passenger pigeon, and it's preserved from 1917. There is something very unique about that passenger pigeon in that it is the last one.

Before this country had its laws about not overdoing hunting this was a favored bird. It was used to deliver messages because it could be trained to fly from point a to point b. But because it was so trainable it was also very catchable. It was a favorite food, and was hunted with uncontrolled passion. They were caught by the thousands until they became extinct. This was the last one preserved from 1917.

People walk by that exhibit with an aura of sadness – it's the last one. It's over for that bird.

The matzah that they ate today with the korbon Pesach was not new matzah. They didn't have to bake it. Why? Because when they left Mitzrayim the matzah was one of their treasured possessions. (The leftover meat from the Seder had to be burned.) They loaded all of their possessions onto their donkeys. But the matzah was carried on their shoulders, because this was a memory from that special Seder and was very dear to them.

The amazing thing about that matzah was that they ate a little bit of it and they felt satisfied. It lasted for a whole month and then ended today.

Everybody was eating matzah today, with or without the Korbon Pesach. Tomorrow is the anniversary of the day when they complained to Moshe, "We have nothing to eat". That was because their food supply – matzah – was now gone. Soon after that the manna began to fall.

When it's the last one, not only is there a sense of nostalgia, but there's also a pressing feeling to appreciate the moment, because this is it.

There are so many adults today that fantasize and wish they could be back in school when their life's pressures were far less. Were it that they could only have the opportunity to do it again, to learn all those things they didn't learn well the first time.

As the clock begins to wind down on the school year, and especially for an eighth grader who knows he's only weeks away from the permanent walk-away and can't wait for high school, he begins to look towards the future impatiently. Then when in high school he can't wait for post high school. And then the next step. But after a while he realizes it wouldn't be so bad to do it again.

It's not as dismal as the last passenger pigeon. But we shouldn't always be thinking it's already summer, already Yom tov, already graduation, etc. Life will pass all too quickly. Let's make today the best that we can, so we never have to say we didn't do our best. Let's savor it as if it was a last opportunity and appreciate every moment.

Parshas Emor

In Parshas Emor the Torah relates the mitzvos that apply to the fields – *leket*, *shikcha*, and *pe'ab*. The strange thing is that the Torah tells us about these mitzvos right in the middle of its discussion of the Yomim Tovim of the year. Right in the middle of the Torah's discussion about our times of joy it warns us not to forget to take care of the poor people.

I want to share with you a story I heard this week from Rabbi Betzalel Ridinsky:

In Eretz Yisroel, Wagshal caterers is a very well known and reputable caterer. On one occasion they were about to serve meat at a wedding when someone in the kitchen noticed that the meat looked off. They quickly and quietly dumped all of the meat that had already been prepared into the garbage. Wagshal planned to complain to the distributor but in the meanwhile he took out a new shipment of meat and served that instead. It was a very costly move but thankfully he was able to prepare the new dishes in time.

It was later discovered that the first shipment of meat had food poisoning, and anyone who ate from it became very sick. Imagine if he would have served the meat – his whole business could have been destroyed. Instead he made money from the company.

Wagshal went to his rebbe, Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch shlita, and told him that this miracle happened because of his beracha, for he had blessed him that he would have hatzlocho. Rav Sternbuch replied that it wasn't because of his beracha, but because of something Wagshal had done about a year earlier.

A year earlier which he was catering a wedding, Mr. Wagshal stepped outside of the hall for a moment and saw a young boy crying uncontrollably. Mr. Wagshal asked him what was wrong. The boy could hardly stop crying. Mr. Wagshal sat down next to him and waited until he calmed down a bit. Then the boy explained that he was nine years old and lived alone with his mother. His mother couldn't make a living and they were very poor. They have almost no food in the house, so whenever there was a wedding in this hall near their house, she sent him to eat there. In Eretz Yisroel many weddings are less formal than here and so most of the time it was not a problem for him to walk in and eat without notice.

The boy explained that he was eating but wasn't dressed for the wedding and a waiter kicked him out. He didn't want to go home and tell his mother that he didn't have supper because she had nothing to give him. So he was sitting and crying.

Mr. Wagshal's heart melted and he told the boy to follow him into the kitchen. They always prepared many more meals than were necessary. He took 25 Styrofoam cases and filled them up with as much food as could fit. He asked the boy if he had a refrigerator and the boy said he did. So he gave the boy 3 or 4 and told the boy the rest of them would be in the freezer. He then told him what nights there would be a wedding, and he should come back and he would give the boy supper for his entire family. The boy left thrilled.

After the wedding ended the caterer sat down with the *ba'al simcha* to figure out how much was owed. The *ba'al simcha* began writing a check for all the meals ordered. The caterer told him that he only had to pay him for twenty five less than they had agreed upon. The *ba'al simcha* asked why. When he was informed about what happened he insisted that it was his mitzvah and that he should be able to pay for it. Mr. Wagshal insisted that it was his mitzvah and he should shoulder the cost.

They brought their case to Rabbi Sternbuch. When the Rabbi heard the case, he asked the *ba'al simcha* "If the caterer told you he was only serving the amount of meals minus twenty five, would you pay him the full amount?" The *ba'al simcha* replied that he wouldn't pay him for the extra twenty-five. "If so, you're not paying for the meals in the kitchen. You're only paying for the meals being served. So the meals inside belong to the caterer and it's his mitzvah."

After the *ba'al simcha* left Rav Sternbuch told him "because you took care of an orphan, Hashem will take care of you."

Now a year later, Rabbi Sternbuch told Mr. Wagshal, "It wasn't my beracha, but the chesed you did which saved you."

In the middle of the Torah's discussion about Yomim Tovim, the Torah interrupts to tell us about the gifts that must be given to the poor. Hashem says "You have family and I have family. My family is the widow, the orphan, the convert and the poor. You're family is your spouse, children, parents, etc. If you take care of my family than I will take care of yours!"

Parshas Emor

The kids are boarding the bus for the trip which they have waited for so long. It's a multiday trip with all of their friends and they couldn't be more excited. The teacher in charge is watching as the students begin to board. This same teacher is also in charge of the schedule and he is looking at his watch. The timing is perfect. They are almost finished loading and if they could pull out in ten minutes they will be able to go to this major surprise stop that they all will love but don't even know it's on the agenda. Extra money had been collected for this exciting event without them realizing it.

The only problem was that one boy had not yet shown up, and he was one of the star students of the class. There were two boys sitting on the bus who realized that the one student had not yet arrived and were laughing about it.

The day before this star student was telling them about his cell phone which he used for everything, including as his alarm clock. The two boys asked if they could see it, and when he turned around they disabled his alarm clock. It had been set to go off at 5:45 a.m. so he could be at the bus with plenty of time, but now it had not gone off.

These two boys found it hysterical that this star student was now late.

Everyone finally boarded and the teacher realized that that student was missing. She called his house but no one answered.

The trip was now ten minutes late. The teacher looked at his watch sadly – five more minutes and that whole special surprise would not be able to happen.

Fifteen minutes later the mother called and apologized. She didn't understand what happened, but they would be there as soon as they could.

The two students on the bus were laughing even harder.

Forty five minutes later the student showed up very red-faced, and quickly boarded the bus. Everyone was annoyed. Everyone on the bus had not been allowed to get off and it was hot and uncomfortable.

As the bus finally pulled out the teacher noticed the two students laughing. The teacher sat down next to them and asked them what happened. They told him the whole story. They admitted that they "might possibly have turned off the alarm."

The teacher replied, “You know that really does sound like a really funny prank, but you’re now also late. Do you realize that you ruined your own day? What did you really gain from doing this?” He then told them about the special surprise which now wouldn’t be happening.

There is an unusual halacha not so well-known about this time of year: It is forbidden to begin doing a work-project from sunset until after you count Sefiras Haomer.

The Mishna Berura explains that it was at that time that the students of Rabbi Akiva were buried. They died late in the day and that was when the funerals took place. Therefore, until we count Sefirah we cannot get involve in any major projects.

24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva died during this time.

Chasam Sofer explains that there are 48 days until Shavuos, and the mishna states there are 48 steps needed to acquire Torah. The students of Rabbi Akiva were missing one of them “*Ohain es habriyos* – to love people”. Those students were too focused on their own hatzlocho, and didn’t think about the hatzlocho of others.

A boy gets a 98 on a test. He looks around the room and asks everyone else what they got on their test. Why does he do that? Because even though a 98 is good, it feels even better when it’s the best grade in the class.

We become too focused on our own success and don’t think about the success of others.

Sefiras Haomer is a count up to Torah. On Pesach night we said that if Hashem had brought us to Har Sinai and not given us the Torah it would have been enough. Why?

Because at Har Sinai we achieved complete unity and for that alone it was worth coming there. “Like one man with one heart”. That means that if your left hand is happy your right hand is happy too, because it’s part of the same body.

Every night as we count Sefiras Haomer we should think about loving others too.

The students of Rabbi Akiva thought first about themselves and only then about others. Everyone else was second place. But if second place doesn’t make it on to the bus, nobody is going anywhere.

Tonight before we count we cannot begin any major project – we cannot be focused on anything other than Omer. Counting the Omer includes caring about everyone, as much as I care about myself.

It's not always easy to do, but it's our responsibility. This morning I saw it happen. One boy helped another boy with such care it was as if that other boy was himself. For some time afterwards the first boy was changed for the better.

When you care about others that way, everyone gets on the bus together and has a great time.

Parshas Emor

A few days ago Yoni approached his parents holding his calendar in his hand. He asked them “When is my big day coming?” His parents replied “When you count seven weeks seven times and don’t miss any days counting, then it will be your big day!”

Why did they have to tell it to him that way? Why couldn’t they just tell him the calendar date of the big event?

The same question could be asked about Kabbolas HaTorah. The Torah never gives a date for when it would happen, only that it would be after counting seven days seven times.

The number seven symbolizes the need to prepare and plan. The whole world has a seven day week.

In communist Russia in the early 1900s they said that a seven day week proves G-d and the biblical story of creation. So they wanted to change it to a six day week, but it didn’t work. Everyone else in the world uses a seven day week so they couldn’t change it.

Seven day week proves that G-d planned and then created the world. Shabbos is the result of that planning.

Sometimes you see boys on Shabbos afternoon and you can see the difference whether there was planning for Shabbos or not.

We know when we sit down to eat our Shabbos meal on Friday night, if we planned we will have halachically permitted hot food. Otherwise the meal will not be as good.

Similarly, those who plan before Shabbos can have a beautiful and productive and enjoyable Shabbos afternoon, even during the long Shabbos afternoons during this time of year.

For those who don’t make plans however, they can end up aimlessly wandering the countryside all Shabbos afternoon, and sometimes end up not even looking like they are members of the Chosen Nation.

What makes the Yom Tov of Shavuos special is totally dependent on how much you plan for it. This year Shavuos is after Shabbos so it will be three straight days. The difference between preparing and not preparing is the difference between wandering aimlessly around

the countryside hardly looking like a member of the Chosen Nation or strengthening your commitment to being part of the Chosen Nation and having an amazing experience.

A Bar Mitzvah too is only as great as the amount of planning that went into it.

The tefillin grant the almost Bar Mitzvah boy his first experience in spatial planning. He has to wrap the tefillin seven times around his arm. Older people don't even think about it because it's such a habit. But the Bar Mitzvah boy struggles to figure out how to put on the tefillin and wrap them seven times around his arm.

The seven time wrapping also symbolizes the need for planning; the commitment that he will plan his actions, especially in regards to his tefillin, from that day onward.

The more you plan for something, especially spiritual things, the more enjoyable the experience will be.

Yoni expressed great joy and planning over the last few days. May that be a sign of times ahead. May the excitement of his tefilin last him until 120.

Lag Baomer

Why do we celebrate today?

The students of Rabbi Akiva stopped dying. At that point Rabbi Akiva took five students and taught them Torah and they continued the transmission of Torah to future generations.

On this day the great Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai died. Before doing so he revealed many of the secrets of kabala.

There is also a connection of bows and arrows to Lag Baomer, because a rainbow never appeared in the sky during the lifetime of Rav Shimon bar Yochai.

Is there a common theme that unites all of these ideas?

There are occasions in life that in one sense can be viewed as an end, but if looked at from a different vantage point can be seen as a beginning.

The end of every school year – especially the time of graduation – surely fits into this category. It is the end of a grade, but at the same time marks the beginning of the next grade. In fact, at the end of the year they often introduce the classes as the new members of the next grade up.

There are many examples of things which the world sees as an end, but from a Torah perspective we view as beginnings:

The flood was an end, but at the same time it was the beginning of a new world order.

Death is surely such an example. A cow, a chicken, and a person all die. Two of those are gone forever, but the third has been elevated to a new level. To those of us in this world it seems like an end, but that's only because we aren't able to see how it's really a new beginning.

Sunset is viewed by the world as the conclusion of the day. Halacha sees sunset as the beginning of the next day. Shabbos and Yom Tov begin and end at sunset.

One of the messages of Lag Baomer is that every end can also be a new beginning.

The death of the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva was a painful end. Yet it also marked the beginning of the greatness of the five students, including Rav Shimon bar Yochai, who kept the teaching of Torah going.

The symbol of a rainbow is that Hashem is angry with the world and wants to destroy it. But it also symbolizes a beginning in the sense that Hashem is keeping His promise not to destroy the world and to give the world a second chance.

Rav Shimon bar Yochai's death marked the end of his illustrious life. But it also was the beginning of the study of the great secrets of Torah he revealed just before his passing.

It is widely known that if one accepts upon himself to improve in any area of personal growth and he takes a first step in that direction, he will have enormous success.

On Lag Baomer endings become beginnings. Even if one has failed in many things until now, it is a day when one can strengthen himself to try again.

Like a withered *log* that comes back to life...

Parshas Behar –Bechukosai

At the beginning of parshas Bechukosai, the Torah relates the tremendous blessings that we will enjoy when we fulfill the will of Hashem and keep the Torah properly.

The most effective sefer written in the last 150 years is the Mishna Berura. It was written by the Chofetz Chaim and all halachic authorities since it was published agree that even if they do not rule in accordance with the Mishna Berura they at least take his rulings into account.

The Chofetz Chaim spent years and incredible effort writing this masterpiece.

On one occasion the Chofetz Chaim was sitting with his son-in-law trying to understand one particular law. They were working through the sources for a long amount of time, trying to establish one line in a footnote. After a long time and great effort they finally deciphered it.

The Chofetz Chaim's son-in-law then turned to the Rav and asked him if he thought anyone would appreciate how much time and effort they had invested in that one detail.

The Chofetz Chaim told him a story about a father and son who were working to build a railroad in Czarist Russia. Every piece had to be laid down perfectly. It was exhausting and painstaking work under the scorching hot sun.

At one point the boy turned to his father and asked "Dad, will anyone appreciate all of the effort we put into constructing this railroad so perfectly? Of the thousands of people who ride the train over this point will anyone know what we did here today?"

The father replied "Son, we are doing the work of the Czar and that is all that matters!"

The Chofetz Chaim then told his son-in-law, "We are toiling in the Torah of Hashem and that is all that matters."

The greatest chesed one can perform is when the recipient doesn't even know about it. The more subtle and hidden the chesed is the greater the achievement.

Yesterday, you participated in painting bunkhouses for a local campground that houses blind children during the summer. Most of the campers won't be able to even appreciate what you did on their behalf. They won't be able to see it.

But helping to make an environment nicer adds respect to the place and is therefore a wonderful chesed.

We do it for Hashem!

The greatest recipient of the chesed we do for others, is ourselves!

It was a difficult situation. The weather wasn't great and we spent a lot of time there doing difficult work. Yet it was amazing how well behaved and cooperative everyone was.

That's the outcome of *mitzvab gorerers mitzvab*. When you do something good for others you become a better person.

Shavuos

During the summer, in camp I have one of the most coveted toys; a toy which only the heads of camp have access to, i.e. a golf cart. For campers there are different levels of privilege in regards to the golf cart. The lowest level is if I give a ride to a camper who is sitting on the passenger seat.

The golf cart can zip across camp and the passengers enjoy a soft breeze as it moves, while pedestrians watch and hope for a turn as well. The next level is achieved if I allow the passenger to push the accelerator on the golf cart while I maintain control over the steering wheel. It's exciting to be able to make the golf cart move, even if someone else is steering and making sure it doesn't crash into a tree. The highest level is if I actually allow the passenger (who at least has his driver's permit of course) to drive the golf cart while I sit in the passenger seat and allow him to chauffeur me.

There are three levels of special times we enjoy on the Jewish calendar. The kedusha of Shabbos Kodesh is, in the vernacular of Chazal "*kevia v'kayma* - set and established". Its holiness embraces the world on Friday evening, and our role is only to accept it, like a passenger.

Succos and Pesach are days fixed on the calendar, both beginning on the fifteenth day of their respective months. However, when the Sanhedrin, the great Jewish court was still in function, the sanctification of the new month, Rosh Chodesh, was done by them. Although the holiday itself began on a fixed date, the rabbinic court had a say in when the month would begin. The holiness of those holidays is analogous to one pushing the pedal while someone else is steering.

Shavuos however is unique in the sense that it is wholly dependent on us. The Torah strangely doesn't even give the holiday a calendar date. The holiday begins on the fiftieth day of the OUR counting, which we began on the second night of Pesach. [There is an opinion in Halacha that if one crosses the International Date Line during the days of Sefirah and does not cross back, he should continue to count Sefirah according to what night it is for

him, despite the fact that everyone around him is one night ahead.] Shavuos is celebrated at the culmination of one's personal count. It's an incredible concept; the holiday of Shavuos, the anniversary of the most seminal event that ever transpired, is based on our count.

More so than any other holiday, on Shavuos we are in the driver's seat. We push the pedal and we steer, and G-d is our passenger, as it were.

The Kotzker Rebbe noted that we refer to Shavuos as "the time of the giving of our Torah", as opposed to "the time of our receiving of the Torah". G-d gives the Torah on Shavuos, but it's our prerogative whether we want to accept it, and how well we will accept it.

The relatively brief holiday of Shavuos affords us the chance to be in the driver seat, but it's up to us to take advantage of that opportunity.

Shavuot

A great poet always needs to have a something to write with and something to write on so that when inspiration hits and he has a sudden flash he can immediately write it down before he forgets it.

The greatest words are the words of Torah. When the Torah was given on the sixth of Sivan, Klal Yisroel did not hear the words of Bereishis first. They received Chumash Bereishis as a scroll, but what they actually heard was the Aseres Hadibros.

The words were written with the “writing of G-d”. The letters could be read miraculously from any direction in which one looked at them. Gemara says that the *mem sofit* and *samech* hovered miraculously in the air because the ‘inside’ of those letters was completely carved out.

Those incredible words were recorded on tablets of stone. I could think of nicer materials that those words could have been written on. Perhaps gold and silver would have been more appropriate.

It comes out that these greatest of words written with the greatest writing was etched into the lowliest of materials.

Stone represents the basic physical world. Stone has no life.

When were the stones of the luchos prepared? The Mishna in Avos perek 5 relates that they were created towards the end of the day on Friday of creation, just moments before the beginning of the first Shabbos.

It was one of the final things created.

When were the words ‘created’? Chazal relate that they were written 2,000 years before the world was created.

I don’t know what this means but Chazal also relate that the Torah was written as black fire on top of white fire.

If we combine all these days we can understand the following:

When Moshe brought down the luchos it was a combining of two worlds. The most spiritual commodity in creation – the very writing of the words of Hashem Himself, were carved into the most physical commodity in this world.

What was the message to B’nei Yisroel?

Our role is to elevate this world and raise up this world to 'touch' the upper world of spirituality.

The whole idea of Torah is to elevate the physical world and make it holy.

The luchos also contained 5 mitzvos that relate to our relationship with Hashem, and another 5 which relate to our relationship with others.

When dealing with others there is a spiritual part.

When 'dealing with Hashem' there is also a spiritual part.

Everything in this world has a connection with both worlds.

In a few moments we will go to eat breakfast. That can either be an animalistic experience, for animals also eat, or it can be a spiritual experience too when we recite berachos before and after we eat.

The Yom Tov of Shavuot celebrates our accepting the Torah and being able to live an elevated and holy life.

Parshas Naso

There are five topics that are discussed in the parsha in succession: Sotah, Nazir, Birchas Kohanim, the wagons donated by the nesi'im, and the korbanos and donations given by each of the nesi'im.

There is an interesting action-reaction dynamic that happens in the order of these five topics.

Sometimes we on earth can 'force' Hashem to do certain things; we can change Hashem's plans.

A Sotah woman is given a mixture of water from the *kejor*, dirt, and a secret ingredient – the ink from the writing of the Torah's account of the Sotah. She is then forced to drink it. If she is guilty she has a terrible end, but if she is innocent she merits great blessings which she may not have originally been destined to receive.

On Friday night I recite Kiddush on wine, and doing so is a great mitzvah. But if I accept upon myself a status of Nezirus than making Kiddush on wine would be a great sin. Who would hold me accountable for that sin? Hashem!

The Kohanim stand in front of the shul and bless the congregation. Hashem says that when they do so "I will place My Name on B'nei Yisroel and bless them." Through the blessing of the Kohanim Hashem blesses us.

The Nesi'im gave a surprise donation to the Mishkan of covered wagons. It wasn't asked for but Hashem accepted their donation because they wanted to give it.

When one wants to 'donate' to Hashem, Hashem accepts those efforts.

The 12 Nesi'im were also granted great inspiration by Hashem. Each one decided individually to give a special gift, which included a spoon weighing 70 shekel, and a bowl weighing 130 shekel, etc. Each Nasi had a different reason for giving what they gave, but in the end they all gave the exact same thing. *(Imagine a group of women coming together for a special gathering and when arriving they all realize they have the exact same dress. That would be a disaster. But for the Nesi'im it was a good thing.)*

There is a prolific author named Rabbi Yechiel Spero who has a series of books called "Touched By a Story". In one of his books he relates a story about a woman who had a dream on the night of her mother's yahrtzeit, in which her mother appeared to her and

told her the following numbers: 6,4,8,8,1,0,1,0. She woke up and thought nothing of the dream. But then she fell back to sleep and had the same dream again.

She called her brother who had made aliyah and lived in Eretz Yisroel and they tried to figure out what those numbers meant. It couldn't have referred to their mother's concentration camp numbers which had been branded into her arm, because those weren't the correct numbers.

The brother realized that it sounded like a phone number from someone in his neighborhood. She called the number but there was no answer. She called the next few nights but there was never an answer. Finally her brother suggested that it may be a business and she should call during the day.

The next day she called and an elderly woman answered the phone. An awkward conversation ensued with both sides asking the other who they were. Finally the caller admitted why she had called.

The elderly woman explained that she worked in a store that sold linens but that the caller's mother's name was unfamiliar. She said that her husband was out on lunch break and she would ask him to call when he returned.

A little later the husband called back and said that he did recognize the name. He said that some time ago the woman's mother had purchased some linens. But then she had called back and upgraded her order. The man said that he heard afterwards that she had died so he put aside the order which had not been paid, even though she had received the order before she died. The mother owed a mere \$30-40. The daughter paid it off immediately. She realized that that must have been the message her mother wanted to give her.

What makes this more interesting is that I only read this story last night. At 3 a.m. I couldn't sleep. I remembered that I had to give this d'var Torah and I didn't have a story to add. So I went downstairs and pulled this book off the shelf (which we don't own, so I'm not sure who put it there). I opened the book randomly and it opened to this story.

I realized that the story fit with the message I wanted to say, and I closed the book and went back to sleep.

Hashem constantly sends us messages. But sometimes we also can cause Hashem to do or change things based on our actions and responses. That lesson is clearly demonstrated in the discussion of mitzvos in Parshas Naso.

Parshas Beha'aloscha

The following took place during a time when our nation was on a very high level and therefore was held to a very high standard:

There was an 88 year old lady (who would probably like us to refer to her as being 88 years young) who had a family conversation. During that conversation she expressed that she was very concerned about another relative of hers. When she expressed that concern Hashem was very displeased with her.

Who was this elderly lady that spoke to one family member about another family member?

Miriam, who spoke to Aharon about Moshe. Miriam was six years older than Moshe. During their second year in the midbar Moshe was 82, so Miriam was 88.

Hashem wasn't happy with what Miriam said to Aharon about Moshe, on her great level. She was punished with the most embarrassing sickness one could have – tzara'as. It's embarrassing because it cannot be concealed. She had to leave the camp and remain alone.

She leaves the camp and everyone is amazed – this is what happened to perhaps the greatest woman of their time.

Right before that occurred, the Jewish nation is taught that they would travel through the desert at the whim of Hashem's cloud and the fire at night. They would travel at a moment's notice. Yet now after Miriam was afflicted it became clear that for seven days they weren't going anywhere.

At the same time that she suffered this public embarrassment Hashem made a public demonstration that she was honored in Hashem's eyes. They would not understand why what she did was so bad, because she was held to such a high level. But they all understood that she was valued and special in Hashem's eyes because the entire camp remained in place for a week.

We know that this was payback because she waited for Moshe when he was an infant and was placed in the Nile to see what would happen. That story took place eighty years earlier.

When Miriam was behind the bushes watching Moshe's basket she had every reason to be worried that a Mitzri would find the basket and turn it over - that was after all the Egyptian policy at the time. But Miriam had *bitachon* that all would be okay. Because of that *bitachon* 80 years later it paid off when she was punished and yet honored at the same time.

In our tefillah that we said today we expressed that when one has bitachon he will never be embarrassed – even 80 years later:

Just before Shema, in Ahava Rabba we state “We will not be embarrassed forever (*va'ed*) because we trust in you.” The word “*va'ed*” is gematria 80 – even 80 years later we will not suffer embarrassment if we have faith in Hashem.

Parshas Beha'aloscha

*Please note that the following story is **not** true:*

Every year I accompany Ashar's eighth grade of Ashar on their graduation trip to Washington D.C. There is a tremendous amount to see there and we are limited in time, so each year we pick a few attractions to visit.

One year we decided to visit Mount Vernon, the birthplace of George Washington. Every place we visit has a gift shop and one of the highlights of the trip is spending money. So after we visited Mount Vernon many of the students were lingering in the gift shop. The place has my cell number on file from when I made reservations. I was waiting outside the gift shop when I received a phone call that I should come into the gift shop immediately.

I hurried in to find a very upsetting sight. Two security guards were holding the arms of one of our students. He had tried to sneak an "I visited Mount Vernon" sweatshirt under his shirt but they had caught him on the security camera. The boy was white and he was begging for them to allow him to pay for it and let him go. After a stern warning they relented. He paid for it and walked out. But the event was very humiliating for us. We tried to keep it quiet but, as these things tends to go, the whole school quickly found out about it.

Imagine our shock when that boy walked into school the following Monday wearing that sweat shirt! That sweatshirt was a reminder of a terrible event that embarrassed not only himself but the whole school. He should have taken it and burned it or at least hid it where no one would ever see it. How could he have the audacity to wear it in front of everyone and publicize his impulsive and damaging actions?

Rashi tells us that as Klal Yisroel traveled through the desert the Aron went three days journey ahead of them flattening the land and destroying any potential dangers.

What was contained in the Aron? The broken pieces of the Luchos. Those broken pieces served as a reminder of a terribly embarrassing and damaging event, for they were a result of the sin of the eigel. If it were up to me I would vote to bury those fragments in the ground.

Why was it specifically those broken pieces which helped and protected us throughout our travels in the desert?

The Medrash notes that that when Moshe saw the *eigel* the Torah states that he broke the luchos "*tachas habar*" at the foot of the mountain (Shemos 32:19). There is another place where it uses that same terminology. After B'nai Yisroel said '*na'aseh v'nishma*' Moshe built a mizbeiach constructed of 12 stones symbolizing the 12 shevotim. He then shechted oxen as *korbonos shelamim*, and half the blood he sprinkled on the nation and half he sprinkled on that mizbeiach. That mizbeiach was a symbol of their bond, the eternal covenant which B'nai Yisroel had now entered. The Torah says that Moshe built the Mizbeiach "*tachas habar*" at the foot of the mountain (Shemos 24:4).

Medrash says that Moshe shattered the luchos against that Mizbeiach which he had built at the bottom of Har Sinai after they said *na'aseh v'nishma*. It was as if Moshe took one sweatshirt which said "I was at Mount Vernon" and smashed it against the other sweatshirt which said "I was at Mount Vernon". Why?

During the years between 1948 and 1967 our people did not have control over the Old City of Yerushalayim. The Jordanians ruled the city and it was dangerous for a Jew to be there. In fact, it could cost him his life. *[A number of years ago during the Intifada a group of Israeli soldiers took a wrong turn and ended up in Ramallah. On French national TV they showed a video of the terrible things that were done to those soldiers...]*

In the book "All for the Boss" it relates a story that was recounted by the person it happened to:

"When I was 14 years old my family and I arrived in Israel. One day I decided to go to the Kotel. But I soon I realized that I was alone. I had taken a wrong turn and was in an Arab area.

"Suddenly a band of Arab youths surrounded me and began to beat me mercilessly. My cries echoed through the stillness. I wondered if I was going to be killed then, after having survived the Nazis? Suddenly, out of nowhere, an elderly man with a gray beard appeared. He ran over to where the Arab bullies had dragged me and in a tone of fierce anger, he scolded me: 'Why must you always be fighting? I am taking you home right now. You will receive your punishment.'

"The Arab hoodlums, taken aback when they heard the old man berating me so loudly, let go of me abruptly. He grabbed my hand, pushed me forward, and shielded me with his body.

“When we were some distance from the kotel, he took me in his arms and comforted me, as he quieted my sobbing and shaking. ‘I am very sorry I yelled at you,’ he said gently. ‘I knew of no other way to save you from their clutches. Had I defended you, they would, no doubt, have attacked me also, and what would have become of you?’”

That old man was Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Herman.

A few years ago I witnessed a similar event. There was a staff member in Regesh whose mother was the nurse. One morning he was late and drove into camp ridiculously fast. He pulled up in front of the infirmary, only to see police lights flashing behind him.

At that moment his mother rushed out of the infirmary and began screaming at him at the top of her lungs “I’ll never let you drive my car again! That’s how you drive?! Are you out of your mind!”

The officer heard her screaming and said “I think you got your punishment”. He then got back in his car and drove off.

As soon as the cop left the mother apologized to her son for embarrassing him in front of everyone. “It was the only way I could get you out of a ticket”.

When Moshe broke the luchos, Hashem said “*yasher kochacha sheshibarta*” it’s good that you did that. Hashem was so angry with Klal Yisroel and something had to happen. They needed to be jolted back into reality. Hashem was ready to destroy them. But because Moshe broke the luchos the nation was able to be saved.

The ancient Greeks thought they would be around forever, but they are gone.

The ancient Romans thought they would be around forever, but they are gone.

The ancient Assyrians thought they would be around forever, but they are gone.

The ancient Egyptians thought they would be around forever, but they are gone.

The Third Reich thought they would be around forever, but they are gone.

But we are indestructible – why? Because of those shattered fragments of the luchos.

They symbolize that Hashem will shatter His home, Yerushalayim, will send us into exile, etc. but we will never be destroyed.

It was that message that went ahead of us three days before we traveled, to level the mountains and destroy any potential dangers.

Parshas Shelach

At the end of Parshas Shelach, Moshe commands B'nei Yisroel about a very special mitzvah which we all have the opportunity to fulfill every single day.

In life, we often end up regretting things that we didn't take advantage of when we had the chance.

On one occasion I sat next to my grandfather for fifteen minutes, and he related to me fifteen minutes worth of family stories. Now I have such regret. I could've gotten fifteen hours worth of such stories if I would have taken advantage of the chance. But now it's too late.

So we always need to take advantage of the last opportunity, and since we never know when that will be, we should take advantage of every opportunity so we don't regret not doing so later.

My mother was with my family for the last days of Pesach. I always want to hear stories about my father. Every now and then she tells a story that I never heard before:

My father's family came to the United States from Europe in 1939. All of his brothers were soldiers in the army.

During World War 2,400,000 American soldiers died fighting. But there existed then a very strong feeling of patriotism and young men were eager to join and fight for the United States. The parents however were terrified. For a religious soldier the problem was doubled. Not only was their going into the army a matter of life and death but it was also a matter of soul. It was very hard to keep mitzvos in the army and a great struggle to keep Torah properly.

The Chofetz Chaim understood the great challenges that Jews faced in a foreign army, and he wrote a pamphlet for Jewish soldiers fighting for the Czar.

My father and his friends – who were all Shabbos observant – had to appear before the doctor for the exam which determined if they were healthy and fit enough to serve in the army. When the doctor administered the exam that was the person's chance to tell the doctor anything he thought which could convince the doctor not to send him to the army. Most people were found to be fit and left through a different door than they had come in and that began their induction process into the army.

My father sat in the waiting room watching as each of his friends went in and emerged a few moments later heading to the army. Incidentally, the doctor himself was Jewish, but that didn't seem to help any of his friends.

When it was my father's turn he entered nervously. He wasn't sure if it was even worth it for him to say that he was Torah observant and that he was therefore afraid to be sent to the army. But then he built up the courage and told the doctor that he kept Shabbos, Kashrus, etc. The doctor looked him in the eye and asked "Are you really observant?" My father nodded. The doctor told him to show him his tzitzis.

Sometimes I do spot checks here in Ashar to make sure boys are wearing tzitzis. The few boys who aren't wearing become nervous, even though if they are caught they will only lose some of their recess. There were even two boys who shared one pair of tzitzis. After I spot checked one, he passed them on to his friend who came in after...

In my father's situation there was much more on the line. My father's friends weren't able to produce their tzitzis and so they couldn't get a deferment. My father wore his tzitzis faithfully and so he did receive a deferment. He went to Yeshiva Chaim Berlin and didn't have to serve in the army.

I have spoken to many more people in my life than you have. I will tell you that never has anyone said to me "I regret that I wore tzitzis." But I have met those who have told me that they regret that they didn't wear tzitzis.

I stand here now speaking to you wearing my tzitzis and tefillin. While wearing tefillin I need to constantly think about them and focus on the fact that they are there. However, I put on my tzitzis this morning and can just forget about them. I get the mitzva all day, without even thinking about them.

In the 1960s there was an effort to get kids to take multiple vitamins. One company decided they would use TV to make themselves into millionaires. And so the Flintstone Vitamins were born. Suddenly all kids were eager to take these vitamins.

The gemara relates that wearing tzitzis is like performing all 613 mitzvos. It's a Flintstone vitamin. You take that one pill and it delivers all the vitamins you need without you needing to think at all about it.

Just beware that if you're bar mitzvah and your tzitzis are less than eighteen inches across give them to someone younger, because that means they aren't big enough.

Parshas Chukas

The boy speaking at graduation asked me, “How do I know the right words to say? It’s a big speech, everyone will be listening, and I’ll be so nervous. How will I remember what to say?”

I told him that he should write down the speech so that the only part of his brain that actually had to work was the part that helps recognize the symbols, so he could say the words.

When you read your speech which you practiced well, your eyes see but your brain doesn’t have to think about what you’re saying. You only have to decode what is written there.

When you say it well the people listening are amazed by the beautiful ideas. “Wow! Such passion and feeling!” They have no idea that the person giving the speech has no idea what he is saying, that his mind is numb and he’s only repeating the words that he practiced?

In the preschool here they train the students for Father’s Day to make a card and prepare a small present. They copy the words for their card from the board.

When the preschooler hands it to his father, one would think the father knows it’s copied and that his preschooler has no idea what it is saying so it’s meaningless. Yet it is still very meaningful to the father. Why? Because the words are well chosen, and if the right words are said/written it has an effect.

When Aharon Hakohain died, a group of people attacked. The Jews could see them coming in the distance but they had no idea who they were. It was a planned trap. They looked like Amalek but they sounded like Cana’anim.

This was a problem because we have to give a speech – tefillah - to Hashem but we have to say the right words in our speech. So if we say save us from the Amalekim and they are Cana’anim, or vice versa, the tefillah won’t work.

They came up with a brilliant solution. They said vaguely “Hashem save us from these people”.

The speech has to be perfect even if your mind may not have the right idea.

How can we daven if we don’t really understand everything we are saying?

The Anshei Knesses Hagedolah did us a favor. They wrote down a speech for us – the Shemoneh Esrei. It's the perfect speech to read.

I may not know what it all means and my mind may wander, but I know it's the perfect words and the perfect speech. When we have a siddur and say the words that are before us, even though we may not know or understand many of those words, it's a perfect speech.

If the speech is said correctly, especially as part of a minyan, Hashem accepts our speech.

Parshas Balak

There were two boys growing up in a town. One boy was unusually gifted. In fact, this non-Jewish boy had an insight into what was happening in heaven.

One day he tells a friend that one day he was going to become a king - not even the king of his own country, but a number of countries.

Years went by and eventually the prediction came true.

The king's name was Balak!

He became king when two countries, Midyan and Moav, merged. They hated each other but there was one thing they agreed upon - they hated Jews more.

Balak was appointed king over the combined countries, and now had the most important job of his life, to get rid of the Jews?

Balak was smart enough to know that we have a power of prayer and that we know how to use it to get answered. We have the chain of tradition from the Avos and know how to do it.

Balak wondered who could combat our power of the mouth? Then he remembered – the kid he grew up with! He has the power of mouth also; he predicted I'd become king. His name was Bila'am.

Bila'am only cared about one thing – money! He charged money for his words. He was called to use his gift and talent to break the chain of prayer that the Jews had. But Bila'am found out that he would be unsuccessful.

Hashem showed him that his power of the mouth was useless. It was no better than a mule beginning to speak.

Bila'am reasoned that he couldn't break the chain of prayer, or use his mouth to harm them, the only thing he could do was to get them to sin.

Bila'am misused his talents. He could've been the star of the world, definitely in the world of the non-Jews. Instead he suffered a terrible end.

As the summer continues we shouldn't waste our daily opportunity. We have an incredible power of our mouths with which to connect to Hashem. We should make sure we always daven and daven well.

Shiva Asar B'Tamuz

Some time back, when the students would walk into Ashar on Rosh Chodesh they would see a box of fresh donuts on the office desk. But when they would come out of shachris the donuts were already delivered to the girls. It was an extra treat for the girls because women have an extra share in the celebration of Rosh Chodesh. And so every Rosh Chodesh I had to deal with a group of angry boys who wanted donuts, and felt unjustly deprived.

Women have an added connection to Rosh Chodesh because they did not participate in the creation of the Eigel Hazahav, even though their husbands were very excited to do so.

Why do we assume that the women not participating in donating their jewelry to the Eigel was out of righteousness; maybe they were simply cheap?

Furthermore, the Eigel was constructed on Shiva Asar B'Tamuz. If the women did not participate in that terrible sin, why not have the men fast that day, while the women eat? Why should they have an extra share in celebrating Rosh Chodesh?

True story, though some details have been changed to protect identity:

The story is about the grandmother of someone in this building – I'll call her Mrs. Schwartz. The boy knew one thing about his grandmother, that she was very cheap! She wouldn't spend a penny on anything unless she really needed it. She was the type of grandmother who made a huge ordeal out of any bits of food that weren't eaten at supper. She was always looking for bargains. She would always telling everyone not to throw things out. "You may be able to use it for something someday." So there was a lot of junk stacked away in her house.

He had an opinion about his grandmother – nice lady; but a real cheapskate. He figured it had to do with her upbringing and life experience; after all she had been born in Europe and had lived through very hard times.

There was a yeshiva near his home called Heichal HaTorah (not real name) in Brooklyn. The school was legendary that if a boy couldn't afford the tuition they would accept him anyway. As long as a boy wanted to learn Torah they would take him. They pledged to raise the money to keep him there on their own.

This young man visited the yeshiva and was very impressed with it. A few months prior the yeshiva had nearly closed its doors because of financial issues. But at the last moment the yeshiva received a “miracle donation” – a tremendous gift of enough money to keep the doors of the yeshiva open.

There was a plaque on the wall thanking the person who had bailed the yeshiva out in their neediest hour. The young man looked at the plaque with shock – it was his grandmother, Mrs. Schwartz. She had given an incredible amount of money to ensure that the yeshiva would not close its doors.

We know that the women in the midbar weren't cheap, because when Moshe asked for donations for the construction of the Mishkan, they couldn't run fast enough to donate their jewelry. That showed that when they didn't give for the eigel it wasn't because they were cheap, but because they were incredibly loyal to Hashem.

What day did they donate their jewelry and valuables? On Rosh Chodesh! It is for that reason that women have an extra simcha on Rosh Chodesh, because it was on that day that they demonstrated their righteousness and connection to Hashem.

Parshas Matos-Masei

At the beginning of Parshas Matos the Torah instructs us to be careful with our words, especially with oaths. The Torah warns “*bal yachel devaro* – one should not profane his words.”

On Shavuot we read the story of a righteous convert who had an effect on the whole future of our nation – Rus.

There was a time in our history when our nation was led by two converts. During the second Bais Hamikdash era, the rebbes of the great Shamai and Hillel were Shmaya and Avtalyon. It was to hear their shiur that Hillel climbed up on the roof in the snow and pressed his ear to the window, oblivious to the snow falling upon him.

Shmaya and Avtalyon had a very undistinguished ancestor – Sancheiriv, the evil King of Ashur who first exiled the ten tribes.

They obviously had a unique perspective of things.

The Mishna in Avos tells us that Shmaya taught that one should keep a distance from the government. At that time Eretz Yisroel was led by the Romans and they were evil.

Avtalyon taught that one must watch his words because he can never know where his words will end up.

There was a great Tanna during the end of the second Bais Hamikdash named Babba ben Buta who was set up to speak negatively about the king at that time – Herod. The wicked Herod had killed many chachomim and had blinded Babba ben Buta. But Babba ben Buta refused to speak badly about the king, claiming that no one can ever know who will hear his words. When Herod heard his wisdom he regretted what he had done.

Every phonecall one makes, every text message one sends, is permanent evidence. When people are suspected in the real world and their cell phones are forcibly checked there is always a common theme – vulgarities, disgraceful conversations. They are exposed and appear like low-lives. This includes famous and formerly respected personalities.

There was one fellow who preached morals and they compared his own speeches with the things they found he had said and done – he looked like a fool.

How great would it be if we never had to worry about anything we said or wrote because it wasn't shameful or embarrassing.

The Chofetz Chaim wrote a sefer on loshon hora. After it was published there were people who tried to set him up to see if he would falter and speak loshon hora. But they couldn't get him to slip up. We speak about him now, ninety years later, with such reverence and respect. Imagine what would have happened if he slipped even once.

Rav Pam zt'l related that the Chofetz Chaim never made birthday celebrations for himself. But when he turned eighty he made a l'chaim in honor of his birthday. In Europe living to eighty was like a person in America living to a hundred. He explained that he was always concerned because the pasuk says "Who is the man who desires life, loves his days to see good? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from bad." If he didn't merit longevity perhaps people would question the pasuk or question him (even though Hashem has many calculations why things happen, and it wouldn't be a valid question). But now that he merited longevity it was clear to all that the pasuk came true.

During the 1970s I was in Eretz Yisroel and I visited an old lady in Me'ah Shearim. She was the mother of my rebbe, Rav Nesanel Quinn zt'l. He was in Eretz Yisroel at the time and I accompanied him to visit her. She was close to 100 years old. She was well known in Me'ah Shearim for being extremely careful not to speak loshon hora. She lived until she was 107.

Avtalyon said that one can never know where his words will go. Always be comfortable with what you say and then you'll never have to worry.

Tisha B'av

The gemara tells us that the second Bais Hamikdash, the cause of the galus we are still in, was sinas chinam. There was a lack of care and love among Jews.

The great Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai asked his students to tell him what was the best path of life that one should seek. Each of the five students replied with a different answer. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai then told them that of all their answers he found Rabbi Elazar ben Aruch's answer to be the best answer- to have a good heart. He felt that no answer can *beat* that answer, for having a good heart includes all of the other answers. What does it mean to have a good heart? A heart is a pump that starts pumping even before a person is born, and continues to do so throughout his life. How can one have a good heart?

Also, in Shema we say that one should not stray after his heart, and yet here Rabbi Elazar said that having a good heart was most important?

The heart is an inner organ which you feel and sense whenever you become excited – whether positively or negatively. The heart's pumping faster is a signal that something unusual is happening – good or bad. When people are excited about something they often say “I'm pumped about it!” because they feel a surge of excitement in the heart as it beats faster.

A good heart means that you feel excited to do good things, not just because you were taught and told to do them, but because you're genuinely excited to do it.

Avrohom Avinu, on the third day after his b'ris milah, sees three strangers walking on the road, and he becomes very excited. He runs to greet them.

When Yitzchok saw the knife in his father's hand hovering above him at the akeidah, he was very excited to be offered as a korban to Hashem.

When Dovid Hamelech arose at chatzos to learn, he awoke with such excitement – his heart beat faster.

When Shlomo Hamelech was building the first Bais Hamikdash his heart beat with excitement.

That excitement filters its way down the generations all the way down to us here in Ashar. I see a boy who is excited to make the shul look nice – to arrange the sedurim and seforim, and to straighten out the chairs.

Another boy walks into shul in the morning excited to put on his tefillin for the first time – his heart is beating faster.

The first time they get an aliyah there is a special feeling of excitement.

Excitement in davening, learning, doing chesed – that's the meaning of having a *lev tov!*

I'm reminded of a lev tov I saw in this school:

At one point a few years ago, the eighth grade was going on a special trip. I needed some parents to volunteer to help with transportation. There was one boy in the class Reuven whose father agreed to come and help. Reuven was extremely excited about it. What Reuven didn't realize is that for the boys in the class the last thing they wanted was to be a passenger in his car. Sadly, Reuven didn't have many friends; he wasn't a very popular student.

On the morning of the trip the parents of the more popular boys pulled up. As the boys raced out of the building they raced into those cars. Reuven stood by the open back door of his father's car, but no one went in his direction.

I have a few options at this point. I could try the kindergarten approach, where I call a few boys together and say "Come on boys; let's make Reuven feel good by getting in his car." But that doesn't work with eighth graders.

I could use the mad scientist approach where I tell them that I need a few boys to go in the back of Reuven's car to make it safer if the car is more equally balanced.

But I didn't want to use either of those two approaches.

I saw Shimon about to walk out of the building. I know Shimon has a lev tov. He is always doing things to help others, and thinking about other people's feelings. I look at Shimon and I merely glance in Reuven's direction and say "Please!" I don't need to say another word. He immediately nods and heads directly towards Reuven's car. Shimon's friend who was behind him sees and is about to say something. So I tell him to be quiet. He bewilderedly follows Shimon into Reuven's car. Then they close the door and are on their way.

A terrible situation was avoided because Shimon has a lev tov.

If you are excited to do good things then the opportunity will present itself when you will be able to help others in great ways because you have a lev tov.

If we all work on having lev tov Moshiach will be here very soon.

Parshas Vaeschanan

The Torah tells us that we have to serve Hashem with all of our hearts. Chazal explain that this refers to tefillah. We say these words every morning and night in Shema.

A multimillionaire is rushed to the hospital. This is a man who could afford everything. When he is wheeled into the hospital he announces that he demands immediate attention. He is taken in right away. The top doctor rushes into his room and give him a thorough examination. Afterwards the doctor tells the man that he doesn't think his situation is too serious and advises the man to take some Advil and rest.

The millionaire is annoyed. "Listen doctor, I am a man of means. Money is not an object for me. I want the most expensive and powerful drug that you can prescribe." The doctor replies that he really doesn't think the man needs anything stronger than Advil. At that point the rich man gets angry and screams that he demands a better prescription otherwise he will have the doctor fired and the hospital closed.

The rich man is going to die. A person can't decide what medicine to take, and to take strong medicines just because he can afford it. Medications need to be regulated and taken at specific times and in a specific manner.

Davening is the medicine we take for our neshama. Every single part of davening is a vital medicine that we need. We cannot pick and choose which ones are more important than the others, and which ones are not necessary.

I once asked Rav Scheinberg ז"ל what is the most important masechta of gemara to learn. I thought he would say all of them. However, he answered that Masheches Shabbos is most important because there are so many important halachos in the masechta that apply so often.

Parshas Eikev

Moshe Rabbeinu tells Klal Yisroel: "What does Hashem ask of you? Only that you fear Hashem, your G-d, and go in His ways, and to love Him, and to Serve Hashem, your G-d, with all of your heart and all of your soul." (Devorim 12:10)

In Eretz Yisroel the greatest place to daven is Meoras Hamachpeilah in Chevron. The second to greatest place is Kever Rochel.

After that it's debatable.

One of the great places to daven is in the north of Eretz Yisroel at the kever of Shimon Hatzaddik. He was the Kohain Gadol for forty years, had a famous encounter with Shimon Hatzaddik, and was the first leader after the period of prophecy ended. For the first time Klal Yisroel would be led without direct prophecy. What was the great message that he wanted to convey to his nation?

It's taught to us in the second mishna in Pirkei Avos:

"Upon three things the world stands: Torah, Avodah, and Gemilus Chasadim."

We know that the second Bais Hamikdash was destroyed because of sinus china. People were too selfish, and didn't do chesed with each other. We also know that the time period we are in now, the days of safari, is a time of mourning for the loss of the 24,000 students of Rabbi Aviva. We know that they died because they didn't treat each other with enough respect.

It seems pretty clear that doing chesed and acting properly to each other is vital. If so, why isn't chesed listed first?

Also, we know Avrohom Avinu was the champion of chesed. No one did chesed better than he did. Yitzchok was the champion of Avodah, and Yaakov was the champion of Torah study. If so, the question is even stronger – why doesn't the mishna list chesed first if it corresponds to Avrohom who lived first?

You are sitting next to my classmate taking a New York State exam for math. You know the answer well and will be placed with the appropriate class level because you know you will do well. Your friend sitting next to you doesn't know the answers well at all. But he

has something you don't have – really good eye sight. You know he's trying to look at your paper, and all you need to do is move your hand and he will be able to see your answers.

What a great chesed! You would be helping your friend get into a higher level class which is what he wants. But the Torah warns that to do so is cheating and is not allowed.

You are walking by a store and you see a whole group of young boys and girls. One of them is your friend. He begs you to give him a few dollars. You know he's going to buy something highly inappropriate that will damage his body and/or his soul.

What a chance for chesed; to help a friend in need. But the Torah says that to give him the money in that case is not a chesed.

There's a forty five year old man who is miserable and feels that his life is not worth living. He wants to do something about it.

Someone may possibly think it's a chesed to help him. But the Torah warns that it's absolutely not a chesed.

There's another point that must be said about chesed:

Often I will help a student get into a high school that they wanted badly to go to, and the school may have not been so sure about accepting at first. I speak to the student during the first week and he is ecstatic with his new school. But then I speak to him and his parents a few weeks later and he's no longer attending the school. It didn't work out; it wasn't the right place. I did a chesed but it didn't last.

I organize a chesed organization that does food distribution for people who can't afford to buy all the food they need. I oversee the delivery of food to hundreds of families. But the food wasn't preserved well, and all the people who eat it become sick. My intentions were noble and the chesed I did was wonderful but it didn't happen as well as I planned.

So when one does a chesed he also must daven that his efforts are blessed and that the recipients really are helped by the chesed I did.

So now we can understand the wisdom of Shimon Hatzaddik. Chesed is vital, however, I need to learn Torah first to know what is considered chesed and when something is not considered chesed. Then, when I do the chesed, I need to daven that my chesed works out well. Therefore, the mishna lists Torah and Avodah (tefillah) and only then tells us chesed.

Parshas Ki Savo

Today is the thirteenth anniversary of the last day when I felt completely secure in America.

The next day that changed forever.

Recently someone played for me a clip of a three and a half minute phone call from a man on the 105th floor talking to the 9-1-1 dispatcher. Sometimes I play something for my students and tell them "You gotta hear this." But this one I couldn't play out loud. I told them they could look it up.

The conversation continues until the tower collapses.

I started listening and I know what's going to happen, but he doesn't. He's in a panic, and spells out his name numerous times, and states where his exact location is.

The first thing he says is that it's hard to breathe because smoke is filling the room. He then says that he should've kept his word. He told his wife he was leaving when the first tower was hit.

He continues begging for help. I'm listening to the conversation. The dispatcher asks "How bad is it sir?" He replies "I'll bet it's air conditioned where you are." "Don't worry; rescue units are on their way up." "They never come when you need them to." He starts choking from smoke. He starts identifying the other people in the room. As the room continues to fill with smoke he says, "I can't see. I'm by the window. I'm not ready to die. I got young kids."

It is a fulfillment of the words of the tochacha (Devorim 28:29) "And you will feel around at noontime like a blind person feels around in utter darkness, and your path will not be successful."

As I listen I begin shaking because I know he only has thirty seconds left. I want to hear what his final words will be, even as the dispatcher is assuring him that she won't abandon him.

With one second left I hear a scream. As a hundred floors begin to collapse in moments, he shrieks one last word just before the line goes dead and his life ends.

The one word was "G-D!"

He hadn't said it until then.

When someone wonders about disaster, he may not understand why. But the believer knows that it's Hashem.

Why should we wait for the last moment to mention His Name?

The parsha lists 98 frightening curses that will befall us, to ensure that we never forget G-d's Name.

Parshas Ki Savo

One year on Erev Shabbos Parshas Ki Savo, I took my class outside. There were two little hills in the yard and I had half the class stand on one hill, and the other half on the other hill. Then I had the Kohanim and Leviim stand in the middle and read out the blessings and curses as the pesukim say was done on Har Grizim and Har Eival.

It was a witty way to bring the parsha to life.

Two of the curses stated next to each other read:

“Cursed is the one who makes an idol.”

“Cursed is the one who hurts his friend in a secretive way.”

Is there any connection between these two seemingly very different prohibitions?

Sometimes one can hurt someone in a secretive way, without it being noticeable. He does it in a subtle manner.

A boy has just done something wonderful and the teacher praises him in front of the whole class. She then calls him up to the front for recognition. On the way back to his seat, another boy stretches out his foot, tripping him, and sending him flying downward face first, to the amusement of those around him. His moment of glory has instantly been turned into a moment of shame. It's a small measure of murder.

We think idol worship is a thing of the past.

During this past summer was the little leagues World Series, featuring the US against Japan.

The Japanese team won by a large margin, and it wasn't even a close game. The Americans weren't crying after losing because they had already realized they were being defeated much earlier on.

Someone showed me a video clip of what happened at the end of the game. When the Japanese officially won they threw off their gloves and ran into the outfield and prostrated themselves in front of an idol they had erected there.

The American players wanted to show sportsmanship so they followed the Japanese players lead, running out to center field, and bowing as well.

What an incredible thing! A group of people bowing to an idol in 2014 out of belief, and another group bowing out of a form of peer pressure.

It's so easy to serve an idol and commit this very serious egregious sin. And how easy it is to hurt someone's feelings and cause them pain without anyone really knowing what you did.

Last week a boy went to the bathroom and came back to his desk to find that someone had colored on the paper he had been writing his notes on. How easy it is to hurt someone if we aren't careful.

Parshas Netzovim-Vayelech

At a simcha this past week I ran into my friend, Larry the defense lawyer from Jersey.

Larry was telling me how there is never a shortage of people for him to defend, and there's always new cases coming his way. But he has three rules that he tells all of his clients that they must adhere to.

1. Once accused of a crime, keep your mouth shut! It's vital that the defendant not to discuss it. So many times a defendant has gotten himself into worse trouble or hurt his case because he opened his big mouth and said something without realizing it would hurt him.

2. As soon as the person is put on trial he is asked to gather as many letters from friends, neighbors, and family detailing the many nice and kind things he has done for others. [I myself have been asked to write some of those letters for people I knew who were on trial.] The judge may only peruse a few of those letters, but the bigger the pile of letters the better it appears for the defendant.

3. The defendant is told to bring all of his closest family members – wife, young children, elderly parents, etc. The jury is sitting and watching the case. One of the final defenses stating at the end of the case is that the court take into consideration the effect that incarceration will have on the rest of the family. If the children or elderly parents begin to cry at that moment, it is all the better.

Why don't we blow shofar on Erev Rosh Hashanah? To confuse the Satan.

Why do we blow shofar at different intervals on Rosh Hashanah – before Shemone Esrei, during Shemone Esrei, and after Shemone esrei? Gemara says it's to confuse the Satan.

Why do we end the blowing with a Tekiah Gedolah? Shulchan Aruch says it's to confuse the Satan.

These three ideas which confuse the Satan connect to the defense tactics Larry the lawyer from Jersey taught me.

Erev Rosh Hashanah we do not blow symbolizing our need to refrain from speaking much before the grand trial; to keep our mouths shut!

On Rosh Hashanah we blow repeatedly because each time is another mitzvah. We amass all those mitzvos which symbolize our desire to do good and to serve G-d, and we 'pile them up' before G-d.

We end with one last cry, symbolized by the elongated Tekiah Gedolah – our final burst of our emotion, in the hope that it will 'win over' the 'emotions' of the court.¹

We are on trial during these final days of the year. We need to be careful how we act during these days, especially towards others.

¹ [Maggid Mesharim writes that the three ideas of ערבוב השטן correspond to the three roles the Satan plays – as Satan, Malach Hamaves, and as Yetzer Hara.]

