

### Parschas Toldos 5772

## YITZCHAK, RIVKAH, AND VOLOZHIN

### THE BATTLE FOR EXISTENCE

The eternal struggle – and the strategy for victory – between Yisrael and its archenemy is outlined in the Mishnah in Rosh Hashanah. The Mishnah (3:8) quotes the Scriptural passage depicting the Jewish people's battle with Amalek:

וְהָיָה כִּאֲשֶׁר יָרִים מֹשֶׁה יָדוֹ וְגִבֹּר יִשְׂרָאֵל וְגו'. וְכִי יִדְּוֶי שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה עוֹשׂוֹת מִלְחָמָה אוֹ שׁוֹבְרוֹת מִלְחָמָה? אֲלֵא לומר לָךְ, כֹּל זְמַן שֶׁהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל מִסְתַּכְּלִים כְּלָפֵי מַעֲלָה וּמִשְׁעֵבְדֵי אֶת לְבָם לְאַבְיָהֶם שֶׁבַשְׂמִים הָיוּ מִתְגַּבְּרִים. וְאִם לֹא, הָיוּ נוֹפְלִין.

“And it was, that when Moshe would lift his hand, Yisrael would prevail (and when he would let his hand down, Amalek would prevail)’ (*Shemos 17:11*). Would the outcome of the war really be dependent on Moshe's hands? Rather, the episode imparts the following idea: As long as Yisrael would gaze upward and subjugate their hearts toward their Heavenly Father, they would prevail. If not, they would stumble.”

According to the Chafetz Chaim (*Michtevai Chafetz Chaim 63*), the aforementioned lesson is not limited merely to the specific instance of the fight with Amalek in the desert. Rather, this teaching contains undertones that are relevant for the very preservation of Klal Yisrael's essence for all generations. The great teacher Moshe is representative of the power of Torah, which is the life force for every member of the Jewish nation. When this power is “lifted” and utilized, Klal Yisrael can withstand assault and encroachment from impure forces. But if, G-d forbid, Yisrael's grip on Torah begins to slacken...

As the premier force guaranteeing Yisrael's existence, the

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fortress of Torah is constantly under attack by the enemies of the Jewish people. One notable instance when the forces of wickedness sought to weaken the Torah citadel occurred in the celebrated city of Volozhin, known for its pioneering and illustrious yeshiva.

### THE GREAT DEBATE AND THE FATEFUL DECISION

The ordeal of the Volozhin yeshiva is marked in the annals of Jewish history as one of the most heart-wrenching occurrences. From its inception, the yeshiva brought about a great awakening amongst the Jewish people. The preceding period had witnessed a steep decline in Torah scholarship and the accompanying deleterious effects throughout the Jewish world. As the spiritual state of the nation stood in tatters, Torah also stood on the precipice – of being forgotten.

And then, with the blessing of his principal *rebbe* the Vilna Gaon, R' Chaim Volozhiner established the Volozhin yeshiva at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The yeshiva developed into a premier Torah institution and produced some of the greatest scholars of recent times (R' Isser Zalman Meltzer, R' Shimon Shkop, among others). In short, the yeshiva succeeding in reversing the calamitous trend, and through it, the stature of Torah was raised and flourished.

The disciples of Amalek, however, raised their ugly heads once again. At that time, the world was not populated by numerous Torah institutions, Volozhin having been founded to fill that void. And so the enemies of Torah took aim at this venerable institution. This battle was manifest through the efforts of the Russian government (and spurred on, most unfortunately, by “enlightened” anti-Torah members of the Jewish nation themselves). They employed a strategy of

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יעטל רייזל בת אברהם ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no  
relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her neshamah.

dilution, seeking to weaken the power of Torah by involving themselves with the yeshiva's studies. They presented the yeshiva with an ultimatum: either they introduce foreign subject matter to the yeshiva's curriculum, or they close their doors.

The great Torah leaders at that time convened an emergency meeting in the face of this decree. While they all recognized the inherent threat and the insidious motives of the government forces, many were ready to capitulate. True, the new curriculum would invite harmful influences and possibly corrupt the pure Torah atmosphere that existed in the yeshiva, but better that the yeshiva should at least continue in some capacity than completely cease to exist.

But the tide turned through the impassioned pleas of R' Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik (the renowned Beis Halevi). With tears in his eyes, R' Yoshe Ber (as he was known) implored the assemblage not to give in to the regime's decree. "On the contrary," he exclaimed. "While we must follow His Torah, Hashem does not need us to be His 'caretakers.' We dare not compromise on the sanctity and purity of His Torah. What will be with the future of Torah and the nation? Hashem Himself knows how it will continue; our job is to follow His will." The decision was made: the sages would not accede to the government's demands. And the yeshiva closed its doors.

And while at the time this move seemed to signal the termination of an era of Torah, in fact, the opposite occurred. Soon, more yeshivas opened, and Volozhin's disciples spread Torah far and wide. The incredible proliferation of Torah institutions and attendant Torah scholars across the globe – following in Volozhin's footsteps – is testament to the fulfillment of the Beis Halevi's prophetic plea.

## THE "MACHLOKES" (DIFFERENCE OF OPINION) BETWEEN YITZCHAK AND RIVKAH

R' Shmuel Birnbaum perceived that the precedent for such action exists in the incident of the blessings in this week's parshah. Rivkah, of course, felt that Ya'akov, the righteous son, was more worthy of receiving the special patriarchal blessing, despite the fact that the wicked Esav was technically

the firstborn. Yitzchak's position, however, seems puzzling; he seemed adamant about granting the blessing to Esav, despite Ya'akov's more obviously meritorious behavior. What was his rationale?

In striking similarity to the Volozhin situation, it seems that Yitzchak took a principled stand. The ends don't automatically justify the means. Of course he was aware of Ya'akov's inherent righteousness; but the Torah guidelines state that the actual firstborn is slated to receive the blessing, which meant that it was Esav's right. Yitzchak felt that – despite the potential consequences – the protocol of Divine Will was not to be circumvented. He would follow the Law, and Hashem would "know" how to work out the rest.

And just as in the example of Volozhin, the best results were achieved without any recourse to improper circumvention. Yitzchak did his part, while Hashem issued Divine instructions to Rivkah to ensure that our father Ya'akov would be the one to ultimately receive the blessings.

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