

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Pinchas

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of

Zissel *bas* George *a"h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Counter-trends

R' Nosson Tzvi Finkel, known as "Der Alter," was the legendary spiritual dean of the prestigious pre-World War II Slobodka Yeshivah. He knew that so many of the outstanding young men who studied there were destined for greatness; thus, he cultivated a number of future leaders, *roshei yeshivah* and *gedolei hador*. He observed, prodded, taught, guided – and protected.

Stop the Mail

At the same time that spiritual attainment flourished within the *yeshivah*, a terrible storm engulfed the Jewish world without. This was the period of the *Haskalah* – "Enlightenment" – which wreaked unprecedented spiritual destruction upon the nation. A newfound spirit of permissiveness and rebellion swept over Europe, whereby countless individuals exchanged centuries-long loyalty to Hashem and His Torah for foreign mores and temptations. Even whole communities – not a few of them – changed their characters almost completely; overnight, a previously vibrant observant village would become a hotbed of communism or similar anti-religious sentiment. The mass movement to cast off the yoke of Heaven seemed to gain strength by the day, as the Evil Inclination's agents ever increased their reach.

Some families, unfortunately, capitulated completely. Others were torn apart. It was not uncommon for one sibling to be immersed in Torah, while the other attended theater on Shabbos.

One such young man, an orphan, attended the Alter's *yeshivah*. Through his talents and diligence, he thrived in the *yeshivah* atmosphere. But the Alter was aware of his personal situation: his older sister was an avowed communist, who could not tolerate the fact that her young prodigious brother would not join her atheistic crusade. R' Nosson Tzvi got wind of the fact that she was actively seeking to tear the young boy away from his beloved Gemara, in the form of regular letters imploring him to "get with the times" and leave the *yeshivah*.

It was not unheard of that *yeshivah bochurim* were actively targeted – particularly by family members – as candidates for the *Haskalah* movement. The Alter was fraught with concern; how could this lad without parents withstand the intense pressure exerted upon him by his older sibling? If these letters reached him – the Alter realized – they could spell a spiritual death-sentence for the budding Torah scholar, G-d forbid. But withholding the letters had its own risks; receiving no response, the overbearing sister would grow suspicious, possibly even appearing in person to "extricate" her brother from the *yeshivah*.

And so the Alter devised a somewhat elaborate operation to navigate this catch-22. He withheld the letters from his precious *talmid* (disciple), to spare him the agonizing pressure. To quell the sister's suspicion, he arranged that her steady stream of letters would receive a response. The Alter summoned a different *talmid* – one whose handwriting was similar to that of the threatened boy. The Alter told him what to write, and in this way – under his watchful eyes – a correspondence of sorts was kept up between the sister and her "brother" (for all she

knew).

In this way, with the antagonist kept at bay, the young scholar was able to continue to learn and grow in the House of Hashem, shielded from the prospect of spiritual corruption. He went on to achieve true Torah greatness, eventually becoming a renowned *rosh yeshivah*.

In time he was recognized as the leader of the entire generation, overseeing the rebirth of Torah in America following the destruction of European Jewry. His name was R' Aharon Kotler.

Repairing the Breach

The Alter's actions were guided in no small part by the overriding principle we discussed last week – the essentiality of *shemirah* (watchfulness) in the service of Hashem. In fact, this idea is one of the very first exhortations listed in Pirkei Avos (1:1), as expressed by the *Anshei K'nesses Hagedolah* (Men of the Great Assembly):

הם אָמְרוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים, הָיוּ מְתוּנִים בְּדִין, וְהִעֲמִידוּ תַלְמִידִים הַרְבֵּה, וַעֲשׂוּ סִגָּ לַתּוֹרָה.

“They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment; establish numerous disciples; and *erect a fence (to protect) the Torah.*”

As R' Reuvein Grozovsky (*Ma'amrei R' Reuvein*) explains, true fear of Hashem necessitates a measure of “thinking ahead,” anticipating a potential trial or temptation and taking steps to avoid it. This idea is manifested in the numerous *rabbinic* enactments, whereby Chazal proscribed certain items or activities in order to forestall violation. (For example, knowing that handling tools such as hammers could induce one to perform actual labor, they forbade the handling of *muktzeh* items on Shabbos). Similarly, in our daily lives, this notion of *shemirah* plays a central role. Rather than waiting for the temptation to exert its influence and *then* overcome it – a high-risk venture – the farsighted servant adopts the strategy of the Alter; he seeks to prevent the incidence of temptation in the first place, thus ensuring steadfastness.

The wily Bilaam was well aware of the importance of the *siyag* (protective barrier). He praised Yisrael for their exemplary employment of this principle (as elaborated upon last week); but he also knew that by removing the barriers, he could effect their downfall – which, unfortunately, is exactly what happened. Through Bilaam's machinations, the enemy dispatched its daughters to “break down” these barriers; through associations which appeared, at first, to be somewhat innocuous, they gradually infiltrated the nation and induced them to new levels of indecency (*cf. Sanhedrin 106a*). The campaign culminated in the event mentioned in this week's *parshah*, whereby a tribal chief of Yisrael perpetrated public and wanton transgression (*Bamidbar ch. 25*).

This episode, then, highlights the necessity for clear and steadfast boundaries, a need so apparent in our precarious times. The concepts of restraint and wholesomeness were at least valued at one time by society; by today's standards, these ideas have been largely discarded. Much of contemporary society, it seems, seeks to emulate Bilaam's behavior, breaking through almost every conceivable boundary of morals and decency. And so the lesson of the *parshah* takes on added urgency: as also mentioned previously, the greater the danger, the greater the need for *shemirah*. Today, perhaps more than almost any other time in history, there is a tremendous need for safeguards – whether on the street, in front of a computer, or so many other facets of our daily experiences.