

Parshas Vayeilech 5773

NE'ILAH

PLACID IN THE FACE OF PERIL

The group set out for the border.

The arrangements had been made months in advance. Having just purchased a horde of merchandise, the budding entrepreneur knew that he stood to make a nice profit. But the prospect of the small fortune in taxes to be levied at the border-crossing weighed heavily upon him. That's when he decided to take drastic action: he would run the border.

To do so, he made contact with an expert wagon driver, one who knew all the twists and turns of the region — and the best ways to evade the border agents. Obviously, avoiding detection was top priority. And so the two planned to stage their journey on a long, dark night.

As the day of departure drew closer, the merchant began to worry. Discovery would entail a lot more than just paying taxes; all possessions would be confiscated, and the evaders would be jailed, banished — or worse. One month before the scheduled date, he was fraught with anxiety and could no longer sleep peacefully at night. As the days would draw on, he was more and more preoccupied with thoughts of improving the plan and the consequences of failure. In contrast, however, the expert wagon driver retained his composure. Confident in his horsemanship and thorough knowledge of the terrain, he was relatively unconcerned with the prospect of apprehension.

But as the appointed time drew ever nearer, even the driver began to get nervous; what would happen if... on that off-chance... they would be caught? Everyone knew the harshness with which violators were treated. And so, one week before the attempted crossing, even the wagon driver was

losing sleep. The merchant, of course, was in doubly-worse shape. Having long given up on being able to sleep, he now could hardly get down any food... Only the wagon-driver's assistant remained unconcerned at this point. He usually didn't bother thinking about his assignment until the day arrived, at which point he merely followed his superior's instructions.

The appointed time finally arrived. As the three set out on their journey, the fear was palpable. Even the simple assistant was quaking visibly. And as the company neared the fateful spot of the actual border — where the true danger lurked — the trio was almost senseless in their trepidation.

Suddenly, the unthinkable happened — they were discovered! "Halt!" cried harsh voices. A flurry of movement, the appearance of soldiers — the company was stopped. The assistant's body shook violently. The face of the wagon driver was white as a sheet. And the merchant himself collapsed on the spot in a dead, frightful faint.

Of the members of the ill-fated group, there remained two, however, who showed no signs of anguish. On the contrary; the pair seemed perfectly content, unfazed by the armed policemen who had halted the group's progress at gunpoint. For the two horses who had been pulling the wagon were blissfully unaware that anything untoward was amiss. Now that they had stopped, they could rest and munch some grass.

This is how R' Chaim Soloveitchik characterized the various responses to the pending Days of Judgment. There are those *yidden* who grasp the seriousness of the season and begin their preparations of prayer and repentance immediately with the onset of the month of Elul. Others do not become attuned to the fact that their lives and the lives of their families are on the line until the day before or the day of Rosh Hashanah; still others put things off until the advent of

Dedicated in loving memory of
ישראל צבי בן חיים יהושע פאלק ע"ה

by his children, Marc and Debbi Frankel, Bala Cynwyd, PA

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
חנה פייגא בת שמואל דוב ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with
no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her neshamah.

Yom Kippur. It is possible to remain “asleep” and forestall any awakening — even right through the *Ne'ilah* service (*Otzros HaTorah, Yamim Nora'im*, pp. 281-2).

Of course, many of us are aware not only of the solemnity of this time period, but also of the remarkable opportunity it presents. Especially during the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah* (Ten Days of Repentance), much spiritual ground can be traversed and great heights can be attained: “Seek out Hashem while He is to be found; call on Him, while He is yet close” (*Yeshayah 55:6*). This refers to the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur” (*Rosh Hashanah 18a*).

“WHILE HE IS YET CLOSE...”

R' Leib Gurvitz would drive home the importance of utilizing these moments (when repentance is Divinely facilitated) while the opportunity is still available. He draws attention to the fate of the *belue'ei* Korach (Korach's followers who rebelled against the authority of Moshe and Aharon and were swallowed by the ground as a result).

The usual duration of the wicked's stay in Gehinom is outlined by the Mishnah (*Eduyos 2:10*):

מִשְׁפַּט רְשָׁעִים בְּגֵיהֶנָּם, שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר חֳדָשׁ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר וְהָיָה מִדֵּי חֳדָשׁ בְּחֳדָשׁ.

“The wicked are sentenced to Gehinom for a period of twelve months, as it states (*Yeshayah 66:23*): ‘And it shall be from month to month...’”

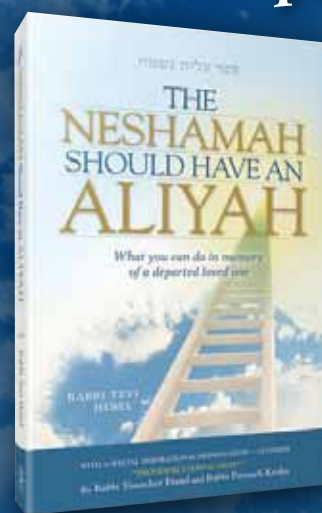
Nevertheless, certain individuals who distinguish themselves for their evil ways can have their sentence greatly extended (cf. *Rosh Hashanah 17a*, which lists categories of sinners whose punishment in Gehinom lasts for “*dorei doros* [throughout the generations]”). One hair-raising example of those consigned to the flames of Gehinom in perpetuity is the *beluei* Korach (the “swallowed-up” associates of Korach). The Gemara in *Bava Basra (74a)* relates how the great Talmudic sage Rabbah bar bar Channah discovered the place where the *b'luai* Korach “resided.” As plumes of smoke rose from fissures in the ground, the sage heard an utterance reverberate from the depths. “Moshe is true, and his Torah is true!” the languishing rebels called out.

R' Gurvitz remarked on the chronology of the event: Rabbah bar bar Channah lived two thousand years after Korach's company descended to the depths. This means that they have been calling and calling for all of this time — but to no avail.

“Imagine,” he continued, “if they would have issued the same statement — just once — *prior* to their descent. Repentance is always accepted — even at the last minute. They would have been spared in this world and the next. But they waited one second too late; now, their cries cannot help them, and they have lost everything, forever.

This is a potent lesson to bear in mind — for the month of Elul, for the Ten Days of Repentance, and certainly, for *Ne'ilah* — while there is yet time (*Otzros HaTorah, ibid.*, p. 456).

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