

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Yitzchok *ben Moshe a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Just Add Milk

PARSHAS TOLDOS 5776

One of the earliest known *yeshivos* in existence was the *beis medrash* (study hall) of Shem, son of No'ach.

Mention of this esteemed Torah institution is made in this week's *parshah*. It is quite noteworthy how it is characterized by the *passuk*. Rivkah, expecting a child, was confused and distraught over the upheaval taking place within her womb. As such, she sought answers directly from the Source, as it states: 'וַתֵּלֶךְ לְדַרֵּשׁ אֶת ד' – “And she went to seek (counsel) from Hashem” (*Bereishis 25:22*). Rashi identifies precisely where it was that she went to hear the word of Hashem: “She went...to the *beis medrash* of Shem...to be told what the end of the matter would be.” And indeed, Shem did not disappoint, relaying to her the prophecy that “two separate nations shall emerge from your womb” (*ibid. v. 23*).

Thus we see already from earliest times that there existed a close association between Torah scholars and the ability to prophesy. The Gemara picks up this thread, even going a step further: מִיּוֹם שֶׁחָרַב בַּיִת הַמִּקְדָּשׁ, נִטְּלָה נְבוּאָה מִן הַנְּבִיאִים...מִן הַחֲכָמִים לֹא נִטְּלָה – “From the day that the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, the power of prophecy was removed from the prophets... but was not removed from the Sages” (*Bava Basra 12a*).

Those who have grown through Torah to attain the highest levels oftentimes demonstrate an almost uncanny perception of hidden or future matters. It may leave the rest of us in awe and wonder, but it should be understandable as they draw their power from the sacred Torah to which they are so thoroughly attached. As the Ramban (*Bava Basra, ibid.*) explains: “They are privy to the truth through the *Ru'ach Hakodesh* (Divine Spirit) that resides within them.”

It is in this context that we may approach the following account featuring the Chasam Sofer, whose enigmatic message proved to be timely and instrumental.

An Invitation to Breakfast

The persecution the Jews have had to endure during the many long years of their exile have taken various forms. One recurring method was the cynical use of governmental decrees for harassment purposes, to outlaw one or another aspect of the Torah way of life. And so it was that the education minister of Hungary – notorious as a rabid anti-Semite – promulgated a decree that would effectively force the closure of *yeshivos* and related Torah institutions.

In a last-ditch effort to halt the decree, the communal leaders – persevering after numerous refusals – finally secured a meeting with the government minister before the edict was to go into effect. He conceded to meet with the delegation during his breakfast hour.

Shortly before the fateful hour arrived, the delegation stopped by the house of the Chasam Sofer for blessings and advice. After granting them a warm blessing, the generation's leader added an unexpected warning. “Be careful,” he told them, “not to violate any *halachah* – no matter what!” Somewhat perplexed, the men filed away the sage's warning.

It was as soon as they arrived at the minister's residence that they were put to the test. It was breakfast time, so their host had instructed the housekeeper to place before the guests cups of coffee...with milk.

This prospect, of course, entailed a rabbinic prohibition that proscribes the consumption of *chalav akum* (milk from a gentile). As the Mishnah records (*Avodah Zarah 2:6*):

אֵלוֹ דְּבָרִים שֶׁל גּוֹיִם אֲסוּרִין ... חֵלֶב שֶׁחֻלְבוּ גּוֹי וְאֵין שְׂרָאָל רוֹאֵהוּ...

“The following items, when produced by a gentile, are forbidden: ... Milk that was milked by a gentile while not supervised by a Jew...”

If the Jewish delegation felt trepidation at having to refuse the milk from the anti-Semitic minister, the timely warning of the Chasam Sofer shored up their courage. They respectfully informed the minister that, due to *halachic* constraints, they would be unable to partake. This piqued the minister's curiosity...and possibly his ire. “What could possibly be the problem?” he asked. Treading carefully, they explained that milk provided by a gentile might have originated from a forbidden animal.

The minister saw this as his opportunity to show up these meddling Jews. “If that's the case,” he explained, “you have nothing to worry about. You see, I keep only cows on my farm; I assure you the milk could have come only from them.” And to verify his claim – and put them in their place once and for all – he called in the housekeeper. “Tell me,” he addressed her, “from which animal did you take this milk? Was it not from my cows?”

Exotic Recipe

Imagine the shock on everyone's face when the poor woman suddenly dropped to the ground in fright. “Please...please forgive me!” she exclaimed. Shaking with fright, the housekeeper shared her story.

When initially instructed to provide milk for the guests, she had, in fact, milked the minister's cow. This provided the milk to be served to the Jewish delegation. Moments before the meeting, however, the container fell over, and some milk poured to the floor.

“And so I panicked,” the housekeeper continued. “Where would I find more milk to refill the container? I suddenly remembered that your deputy, who lives next-door, might have some. So I hurried there and borrowed some milk.” The minister himself realized what was coming. “Except your neighbor doesn't have cows. Instead, he keeps... camels. Please don't be angry!”

The Jews just sat in wonderment at the foresight and “prophecy” of their leader. And the minister was not angry; instead, he was awed by the clear wisdom of Chazal. Effectively “cowed” by the turn of events, he told his Jewish guests that their mission had met with success: he would indeed cancel the decree (*Aleinu L'shabei'ach, parshas Vayishlach*).