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TOURO TORAH

• Lander College for Women • Divrei Torah Newsletter • Cheshvan •

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These are the Good Days

By Chana Schuster

Avraham *Avinu* is known as the prototypical disseminator of monotheism. Many of the pagans around him traded their worship of idols for what was virtually a worship of Avraham and his compelling belief system. Evidence of this phenomenon is found at the start of *Parshas Lech Lecha* where, with unswerving adherence to God's command, Avraham left his homeland together with "*hanefesh asher asu b'Charan*". According to Rashi, these words are a reference to the individuals Avraham had drawn to the recognition of Hashem. The devotion these people had to their new leader and beliefs was demonstrated by their willingness to follow Avraham into the unknown, at God's imperative.

While it is common knowledge that Avraham accrued many disciples, very little is known about these individuals. What happened to them? Were they somehow integrated into *Bnei Yisrael*? Do we know of anyone descended from them?

Rav Leib Gurwitz addresses this question with a novel approach. He explains that these converts were deeply attracted to Avraham's way of living, a way of *chesed* and love and passionate, fiery inspiration. With Avraham's passing,

Yitzchak assumed his father's role as spiritual leader of these people. However, they were unable to relate to Yitzchak's manner of *din*, diligence, and perseverance, so crucially different as it was from Avraham's. Without the ongoing inspiration afforded to them by Avraham's method of serving Hashem, these people drifted away, fading into the lesser-known annals of history.

Most of us do not live life on a constantly inspired plane as Avraham *Avinu* did. Inspiration is granted only in fleeting bursts. Accordingly, if our devotion to our faith is based solely on inspiration, considering its capricious nature, it is inevitable that we will falter between bursts. The discipline of Yitzchak is vital to the attainment of consistent, stubborn fidelity to Torah values, even when we are uninspired and discouraged.

This lesson was brought to the fore at *Kabalas HaTorah*. The *gemara* in *Shabbos* (88a) famously teaches that at *Har Sinai*, Hashem suspended the mountain over the heads of the nation and declared that were we not to accept the Torah, we would be crushed beneath it. The *Tosafos*, however, raise an obvious question: Why were we forced to accept the Torah, on threat of death, after we had already cried out *na'aseh v'nishma* in a stunning example of blind faith? Why was this coercion necessary?

R' Yaakov Kamenetsky elucidates: When we proclaimed *na'aseh v'nishma*, we were on a phenomenal spiritual high of indubitable faith, as we had just witnessed the miracles of *yetzias Mitzraim*, *krias yam suf*, and our travels through the desert. *Of course* we said yes to Hashem's offer of Torah, welcoming the chance with the almost illogical response of *na'aseh v'nishma*! Afterward, however, it was crucial that – at our inception as a Torah-faithful nation – we establish that inspiration is not the basis for fulfilling the requirements laid out in the Torah. Our commitment to God is for all times, even dry or difficult ones, and the quivering mountain above our heads drove this message home.

After absorbing this lesson, one may wonder: Is inspiration rejected in favor of discipline and diligence? This could not be more contrary to the truth. Discipline is not intended to *replace* inspiration but to *maintain* it, to bottle it so that it does not evaporate. This idea is

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conveyed at the start of *Parshas Toldos*, where Yitzchak is introduced as “the son of Avraham”, although we already know his parentage. These seemingly superfluous words communicate that just as Yitzchak was Avraham’s continuation in a biological sense, so too was Yitzchak’s method of leading his life as an *eved Hashem* a continuation and outgrowth of his father’s.

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Interestingly, the *midrash* teaches that when Yitzchak was born, mockers spread doubt as to his lineage, hinting that perhaps he was the son of Avimelech. Rav Hutner explains that they were actually belittling Yitzchak’s strict, disciplined way of living. Since it was seemingly antithetical to Avraham’s way, they speculated that perhaps Yitzchak had been fathered by another man! Therefore,

Hashem caused Yitzchak’s visage to strongly

resemble Avraham’s so as to demonstrate that Yitzchak’s lifestyle was in fact a perpetuation of Avraham’s legacy. Indeed, the only way to truly witness Avraham’s beliefs and principles in practice today is through the offspring of Yitzchak.

The *Talmud in Niddah* (30b) tells us that the entire Torah is taught to a fetus in its mother’s womb. At birth, the baby is hit by an angel above the mouth, and he promptly forgets it all. Then what, one may ask, is the point of the child learning it to begin with? The *Maharal* explains that the experience of the baby having absorbed all of Torah shows him that such a thing *can* be done. It is inspiring. In essence, this is the role of *all* inspiration: to afford us a glimpse of what we can achieve. However, vision alone is insufficient; it must be followed by efforts to accomplish.

Koheles 7:10 states: “Do not say, ‘What happened that the early days were better than these?’ for it is not out of wisdom that you ask this.” Which “early days” is the *passuk* referring to, and how does the *passuk* address the question, aside from rejecting it as a foolish one?

Rav Yaakov Yitzchak of Pshischa explains that this question arises when an individual sets off on a spiritual endeavor. In the first “early days,” he is enthusiastic and optimistic about his venture. Inevitably, his excitement wanes, leaving him deflated and discouraged. He wonders, “I used to be so inspired! What happened? Where are those good early days?” The verse teaches this individual that those “early days” were not, in fact, good. The inspiration of the first days was merely an artificial way of showing him what he was capable of doing. Once he invests effort into achieving the same thing during the later days, *those* days will be labeled as good. (In fact, the phraseology of the *passuk* hints to this as well. The word “*lishol*” is used here to mean “ask,” but it can also be translated as “borrowed.” This is a reference to the heady inspiration of the early days, which was merely “borrowed” to show the individual what he could accomplish.)

Each of us continually vacillate between the stages of inspiration and dogged, persistent hard work. After the mounting spiritual highs of *Tishrei*, it is incumbent upon us to utilize and actualize that inspiration during the coming winter months.

(Based on a shiur by Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein.)

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The Festival of Daily Life

By Reena Evans

There was once a *shul* whose members sang *birkas hachodesh* to a tune related to the upcoming month. Prior to *Rosh Chodesh Kislev*, they might have used the tune of *Maoz Tzur*, for *Adar* the tune of *V'nahapoch Hu*, and so on. On *Shabbos Mevarchim* for *Cheshvan* they sang *birkas hachodesh* to the *niggun* of *gemara* learning used in the local *yeshiva*. This is a powerful message about what *Cheshvan* is. *Cheshvan* is the month of learning, of quiet and content joy, of the slow and steady climb inherent in daily life, of carrying out an *avodas-Hashem*-centered schedule.

"*Tishrei* is the month of inspiration, while *Cheshvan* is the month of application" (R' Beinish Ginsburg). The month of *Tishrei* is full of spiritual fireworks. The serious introspection of *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*, the joy of *Sukkos*, all the spiritual and physical busyness of the *yom tov* season. Most people feel the spirit of the season and the need to do something extra, examine their actions a little bit, give more *tzedakah*, prepare in some way to have a good *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur* davening. Some people then feel a sense of relief, that they can get back to their "normal" lives, get their routines back in order and "relax" from their spiritual pursuits. Others may be disappointed that these precious opportunities for *kedushah* have sped by and it is back to the daily grind of work or school. However, as R' Hirsch discusses in his writings on the Jewish year, "It is the routine of everyday life which reflects our true existence, preceding and following those festivities from which they receive their value and significance." *Cheshvan* is not a vacation from *avodas Hashem*, nor even a slowing-down of the spiritual growth we began during *Tishrei*.

Cheshvan is the celebration of quiet daily life. On *Rosh Hashana* we crowned *Hashem* as our King; on *Yom Kippur* we attained forgiveness for our sins; on *Sukkos* we internalized the messages of *bitachon* from the *sukkah*; on *shemini atzeres* and *simchas torah* we treasured our last private, parting moment in the *Beis Hamikdash* with our loving Father, enveloped in the embrace of *yom tov*, and danced joyously with the Torah that He gave us. However, "The whole goal of *Tishrei* is *Cheshvan*" (R' Ginsburg). The goal of all of this is only realized when we take it into our everyday lives, translate it into fervent *kavannah* in *shemonah esrei* and scrupulous honesty in the small business dealings of life. We should be zealous to return borrowed objects and generous with our *tzedakah*. We should exercise an extra ounce of *yiras shamayim* even when no one else is watching, in all our endeavors in life from *kashrus* in the privacy of our kitchens to what we watch on our phones and computers. R' Hirsch states, "Our meditations on His almighty power, His greatness, His wisdom, His justice and His goodness are meaningless if we believe that He is master of all – except ourselves." Actions speak louder than words.

" *Implanting kedusha into one's quiet and mundane life is especially relevant to a woman, whose time is not as rigidly defined by halachah as is a man's, but who has an equal obligation to fill every moment with avodas Hashem. "*

-Reena Evans

there is nothing. Women may not have the constant *chiyuv* of *talmud torah*, but, as Mrs. Saperstein (a teacher at Michlalah) once said, "For girls there isn't *bitul Torah*, but there is *bitul* life!" Perhaps this is the *avodah* of *Cheshvan*. Implanting *kedusha* into one's quiet and mundane life is especially relevant to a woman, whose time is not as rigidly defined by *halachah* as is a man's, but who has an equal obligation to fill every moment with *avodas Hashem*. "We have to learn to recognize the element of eternity that is inherent even in the transient, fast-fading present" (R' Hirsch). *Cheshvan* is very much a string of these "transient, fast-fading" moments. *Cheshvan* presents no climactic events to focus on, no shofar blowing or taking *arbah minim*; instead moment after moment of this precious month can either slip by or be used for *avodas Hashem* and eternalized.

A *mitzvah* that is especially relevant to *Cheshvan* and a good area to focus on is the idea of *berachos*. *Berachos* pop up at every juncture in our day – when we eat, drink, use the restroom; even the weather can involve *berachos* (thunder, lightning, rainbows)! In short, we bless *Hashem* regarding the most mundane, common occurrences, as

" *It is the routine of everyday life which reflects our true existence. "*
-Rav Hirsch

well as the most unique and monumental, joyous and tragic. "Everything that You have caused me to see and to experience... everything You have given me – or denied me – ... reminds me of my mission, constantly renewing my strength and placing new demands upon me to accomplish that mission" (R' Hirsch). *Berachos* are thus extremely apropos to the *avodah* of *Cheshvan* – the implementation of our consciousness of G-d and His service in the humdrum daily existence, thereby transforming it into the gems of eternity.

I Am More Than a Sailboat!

By Chaya Tessler

Coming into the month of *Cheshvan*, I often find myself falling into a mood of complacency. For the most part, things for the past 6-7 months have been busy. First came *Pesach*, then the count down until *Shavuos*, then the three weeks and the 9 days, the *teshuva* campaign of *Elul*, and most busy of all, *Tishrei*, a month packed with *Yamim Tovim*. After all of this, *Cheshvan* can seem like a bit of downer. There are no *Yamim Tovim*, and it doesn't even seem like there's any particular *avodah* we have for this month. To me, it can sometimes feel like all the rushing of the last few months has sent me sailing straight into the spiritual doldrums. There is no wind in my sails, nothing external pushing me over the next wave, the next challenge I face. How do I continue from here?

“ Can we push ourselves over the next wave without the help of that external wind? ”

- Chaya Tessler

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the month of *Cheshvan*, the only month in the Jewish calendar without some form of *Yom Tov*, is purposely placed at this specific point in the year so as to test us. We spend the months of *Elul* and *Tishrei* in a state of introspection and growth, constantly pushing ourselves to do better, and

making goals for the upcoming year. *Cheshvan*, coming at the beginning of the school year, hits us pretty hard. All of a sudden, everything is back to normal, mundane and not particularly interesting. It is simply our usual schedule. It is specifically at this time that all our commitments are put to the test. Can we take that growth and uphold it throughout the year, even when we might not be feeling so inspired and uplifted? Can we push ourselves over the next wave without the help of that external wind?

In *Cheshvan* we put into action all the plans we've made during the months of *Elul* and *Tishrei*. We begin truly living our lives as Jews. With everything we see and hear, with our reactions to every good or seemingly bad thing that happens to us, with every moment in our lives, we ask: Is what I am doing in line with what *Hashem* wants from me? Is this something that will help me grow? What has been my every day, normal routine until now might not be what's best for my spiritual growth. If it is, then I can't get by with doing it all by rote or it won't be good for my growth anyhow!

In *Cheshvan*, it may seem like we're in the doldrums. But thank G-d we're not simple sail boats, reliant on outside forces we can't control. Every one of us has a motor, the potential to give ourselves that internal push to move forward. Whether it's just pushing past the challenge or creating our own inspiration to lift us higher up, we have to take the waves as they come and do our best. Any real growth must come from within. The true test of our commitment can only be taken and passed during real, everyday life. So let's get going!

The Rainbow at the End of Our Storm

By Gita Ginsparg

“ The Midrash ...explains that [the month Cheshvan] was originally named בול because Hashem selected it as the month of the מַבּוּל .”
 –Gita Ginsparg

Before it was named *MarCheshvan* by the Jews returning from the Babylonian exile, the month we are now approaching was once known as *Chodesh* בול. In *Melachim aleph* (6:38), after *Shlomo Hamelech* finished building the *Beis Hamikdash*, the Navi writes, “In the eleventh year, in the month of *Bul*, which is the eighth month, the House was finished.” *Rashi* writes that the month of *Bul* is known today as *MarCheshvan*. The *Midrash Tanchuma* (11:8) explains that it was originally named בול because Hashem selected it as the month of the מַבּוּל. If the *Mabul*, the great flood, is such a defining part of this month, as we now enter *Cheshvan*, it is fitting to explore the topic further and draw inspiration from the many lessons we can learn from it.

In *Sefer Yeshayahu* 54:9, Hashem refers to the *Mabul* as the “*Mei Noach*,” – “The waters of Noach.” According to the *Arizal*, Noach was held responsible for the *Mabul*'s occurrence since he didn't motivate his generation do *teshuva*. Yet we know that Noach spent one hundred and twenty years building the *tevah* (ark) before the *Mabul* came. How is it possible that in all that time Noach never tried to help anyone repent?

Rabbi Meir Shapiro writes that Noach did in fact rebuke his fellow men, but his *mussar* wasn't effective because he never truly believed that they would do *teshuva*. The rainbow that Hashem showed Noach after the *Mabul* was Hashem's message to Noach that he had erred by failing to see the potential in the people of his generation. After forty days of darkness and flooding, Hashem illuminated the sky with a beautiful rainbow, signifying to Noach that even people who are “dark and stormy” can become dazzlingly bright.

The *Arizal* writes that when *Moshe Rabbeinu* pleaded to Hashem on behalf of *Klal Yisrael* after the *Chet Ha-egel*, Noach's sin was finally rectified. Hashem was ready to wipe out the entire nation, but *Moshe Rabbeinu* said, “If You don't forgive *Bnei Yisrael*, ‘מחני נא’ - please erase me – from Your *Torah*.” The word מחני, when rearranged, spells the words “*Mei Noach*.” *Moshe Rabbeinu* not only advocated for *Bnei Yisrael*, but he constantly pushed his brothers to do better because he truly believed they could. Under his leadership, the Jewish people raised themselves to the highest of spiritual levels.

The tremendous power of believing in others is illustrated in a story written about R' Yochanan and Reish Lakish in *Gemorah Bava Metziah* 84. Before he was one of the greatest *amoraim*, Reish Lakish used his strength and leadership skills to lead a band of highway-robbers! One day, R'

Yochanan was swimming in the Jordan River, when he noticed Reish Lakish and immediately recognized his strength, leadership ability, and intelligence. Most importantly, R' Yochanan saw

“ ... even people who are “dark and stormy” can become dazzlingly bright. ”

- Gita Ginsparg

Reish Lakish's potential to use those attributes to achieve great spiritual heights. As Reish Lakish jumped across the river, Rabbi Yochanan called out, “Your strength is for *Torah*!” Disinterested in Rabbi Yochanan's exclamation, Reish Lakish replied, “And your beauty is for the women!” Understanding that Reish Lakish valued physical looks, R' Yochanan offered his beautiful sister to Reish Lakish as a wife in exchange for the commitment that he would leave his life of thievery and devote himself to *Torah*. That R' Yochanan would suggest his sister marry a criminal shows the incredible belief he had in Reish Lakish, who after agreeing to the deal, used his

strength to become a great *Torah* giant, just as R' Yochanan had foreseen was possible.

The *Taana Devei Eliyahu* (25) writes that each and every Jew has an obligation to ask himself, "When will my actions reach the actions of the *Avos*?" The fact is, each and every one of us has the potential to become that great! But, as Hashem taught Noach, we need to *believe* in each other's greatness in order to affect real growth. As was mentioned earlier, Shlomo *Hamelech* finished building the *Bais Hamikdash* in *MarCheshvan*. The *Bnei Yisaschar* writes that through *ruach hakodesh*, Shlomo *Hamelech* saw that the *chanukas habayis* was to take place the following *Tishrei*. Says the *Bnei Yisaschar*, *MarCheshvan* was embarrassed that the *Chanukas Habayis* didn't take place during its month, when it had just been completed. Thus, *Hashem* promised it that the third and final *chanukas habayis* will take place in *MarCheshvan*. With G-d's help, may we use this month, the month of the *Mabul*, to see the potential in ourselves and especially in every one of our fellow Jews, so we can help one another reach new spiritual heights and celebrate the *chanukas Bais Hamikdash* this month, this year *Bemeherah Beyameinu Amen!*

(Based on shiurim "Noach 5778" by Rabbi Moshe Tzvi Weinberger and "Parshat Noach - the Rainbow, the Vine, and the Tower" by Rabbi Ian Shaffer; heard on yutorah.org.)

"Hashem promised it that the third and final chanukas habayis will take place in MarCheshvan."
 - Gita Ginsparg



**Wishing you a happy and
 successful Cheshvan!**

~Touro Torah~

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