



BADERECH

RABBI JUDAH MISCHEL

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Vayeishev: With Fire!

Isaac Babel was a Russian journalist and playwright, acclaimed as the greatest writer of Russian Jewry. Conscripted as a soldier he eventually became a correspondent in the Russian cavalry, and later wrote of the heinous exploits of the violent Cossacks in his book, *Red Cavalry*. Professor Eli Weisel, zy'a, often spoke of Babel's ongoing crisis of identity and seeming appreciation for violence and bloodthirst, and shared a story, related by his *talmid muvhak*, Rav Dr. Ariel Burger:

While traveling across Poland and the Ukraine with the Russian army, Babel's battalion arrived in the shtetl of Chernobyl. While he was far from observance and Jewish values, Babel had somehow not forgotten his holy roots. Upon hearing there was a famous Rabbi in the town, he decided he would go 'set him straight' and tell him that the world

had evolved, that Jewish history was over and religion was no longer relevant.

And so he set out to find Rebbe Shlomo Ben Zion Twersky, zy'a, the Chernobyler Rebbe. The streets were empty, as all the Jews had fled or were hiding from the ruthless Cossacks. When he arrived at the home of the Rebbe, it was eerily quiet. Going from room to room, he found no one. Eventually, Babel reached the study, and to his surprise, there was the Rebbe, sitting peacefully, so completely engrossed in study that he didn't even notice his stare. After a few long minutes, the Rebbe looked up from his sefer. Seeing beneath the surface of Babel's uniform, the Rebbe smiled, and warmly asked, 'My dear Jew, what can I do for you?'

Babel was completely stunned. Overwhelmed by the presence and response of the *tzadik*, the Russian officer forgot what he'd been planning to say. Describing the experience, he wrote '...Suddenly, a cry that was not mine came out of my mouth... perhaps it was my grandfather's'; I heard myself say, "Rebbe, bless me with *hislahavus*, please give me fervor!"

אָלֶּה הַלְדוֹת יַעֲקֹב יוֹסֵף בֶּן־שִׁבְע־עָשָׂר שָׁנָה
הָיָה רָעָה אֶת־אֲחָיו בְּצֹאן וְהוּא נֶעַר... וַיְבֹא יוֹסֵף
אֶת־דְּבַרְתָּם רָעָה אֶל־אָבִיָּהֶם:

These are the generations of Yaakov: when Yosef was seventeen years old, being a shepherd, he was with his brothers with the flocks, and he was a lad... and Yosef brought evil tales about them to their father. (37:2)

Our sedra thus begins by introducing the



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generations of Yaakov, their dwellings and journeys. At the same time, it pinpoints what lies at the root of their wanderings and descent to the depths of Mitzrayim — namely, Yosef’s ‘disconnect’ from his family and community, and his being sold into slavery, exiled when he was a mere seventeen years old.

Regarding the birth of Yosef earlier in *Sefer Bereishis*, Rashi comments on the deep connection between father and son and frames the reason that Yosef is singled out as his father’s ‘offspring’ or ‘generations’:

וַיְהִי כִּפְאֻשׁר יִלְדָה רַחֵל אֶת-יוֹסֵף וַיֵּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל-לְבָן שְׁלַחֲנִי וְאֶלְמָקוֹמִי וּלְאָרְצִי:

It came to pass when Rachel had borne Yosef, that Yaakov said to Lavan, “Send me away, and I will go to my place and to my land.” (30:25)

On the other hand, Yosef’s separation and descent is also the beginning of Am Yisrael’s reunion and victorious ascent out of exile. In our sedra, Rashi cites the pasuk in *Sefer Ovodiah* (1:18), וְהָיָה בֵּית יַעֲקֹב אֵשׁ וּבֵית יוֹסֵף לְהָבָה וּבֵית, עֵשׂו לִקְשׁ, comparing Yosef to a flame emanating from the fire of Yaakov, and likening Eisav — representing the nations that exile us and distance us from our souls’ purpose — to stubble and straw. A fire (Yaakov) without a flame (Yosef) does not burn anything (Eisav) at a distance (our lowly exile).

Rashi continues:

אֵשׁ בְּלֹא לְהָבָה אֵינוֹ שׁוֹלֵט לְמִרְחוֹק, מִשְׁנׁוּלֵד יוֹסֵף בְּטַח יַעֲקֹב בְּהִקְבָּה וְרִצָּה לְשׁוּב:

“A fire without a focused flame is ineffective”; it is only the flame of Yosef which is *Sholeit m’rachok*, capable of controlling and ruling over distances, and this is the flame that will eventually consume ‘Eisav’. In the presence of this flame, Yaakov himself is motivated to part with Lavan and return

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home to his Land.

As the Sfias Emes explains, the “*eish* of Yaakov” is a metaphor for the fire of Torah, while the *levhavah*, the flame of Yosef, is the *hislahavus*, the passion and enthusiasm we cultivate in our Torah study and fulfillment of its *mitzvos*.

Sometimes one may feel far removed from mitzvah observance and see ourselves as living in a way which is not ideal. We may

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feel alienated or even exiled from aspects of *Yidishkeit* or communal life, distant from *hislahavus* in Torah study or mitzvos. However, the more removed from someone or something that our soul truly loves and desires, the more we may long for reconnection and reunion. This is the expression of the flame of Yosef, representing the *lehavah* that is *sholeit m'rachok*, that reaches and rules over great distances. No matter how far we may feel, the fire of our Jewish soul continues to burn, and can emanate forth like a flame to consume our exile and illuminate the darkness.

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This week we prepare to reveal the powerful flames of Chanukah.

Our Sages explain that the Divine light, the presence of the Shechinah, does not express itself in this world למטה מעשרה, “beneath ten *tefachim* from the ground”, however, on Chanukah, the Divine light does descend below ten *tefachim*, reaching the lowest places and illuminate every forgotten corner and crevice. According to Kabbalistic tradition, the *menorah* is placed below ten *tefachim*, to represent the spiritual poverty and fallen, exiled state of Klal Yisrael at the time of Chanukah. Countless Jews had become Hellenized, assimilating into Greek culture, the Beis haMikdash had been impurified and they even seemed to appreciate that. Indeed, it appeared to them as if Jewish history was over and fiery Torah study and mitzvah observance was no longer relevant.

The miracle of Chanukah touches even those who struggle to find meaning and connection throughout the year feel moved to take part in the *avodah* of Chanukah. The lights of the menorah shine outward with great reach and universal appeal, warming

the souls of those who feel far away, and reuniting them with their soul and family. On Chanukah, no Jew is far, for these flames are *sholeit m'rachok*, illuminating the lowest ‘places’ in our lives, below ten *tefachim*.

May we allow the flames to summon the parts of us that struggle to embrace our true brilliance. May they awaken our passion for mitzvos and our *hislahavus* for Torah, and may we all be reunited at last in Yerushalayim, and behold the inauguration of the Beis haMikdash and the kindling of the golden menorah in great joy. ■