

VAYAKHEL (EXODUS 35:1-38:20)

(Madison Square) Garden of Eden

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Moses assembled the entire Israelite community and said to them, “These are the things that G-d has commanded you to do...” (Exodus 35:1) Nachmanides explains that this event took place after Moses returned from Mount Sinai with the second Tablets. Moses had brought the first set, with the Ten Commandments engraved upon them, down from Mount Sinai. Upon seeing the Nation worshipping the Golden Calf, Moses smashed the Tablets. Moses spent another 40 days on the mountain, begging G-d to forgive the Nation’s terrible sin of idol worship. He was now bringing a replacement set of Tablets. He assembled the entire nation -- men, women and children -- to inform them that G-d had accepted their repentance. This was an important message that had to be shared with the entire assembly: G-d would still rest His divine presence upon them; Israel would survive. Important announcements need to be made to large numbers of people. ----- Lublin, Poland. Once a center of Jewish life, it was one of the first Polish cities that the Nazis succeeded in declaring *Judenrein*. Lublin once boasted of its beautiful Yeshiva, *Chachmei* (The Sages of) *Lublin*. Its founder, Rabbi Meir Shapiro, had found the housing situation for Yeshiva students to be abhorrent. They slept in stores and ate in different people’s homes, living in poverty. The Rabbi of Lublin wanted to house Yeshiva students in comfort and dignity. After all, *Kovod HaTorah* – the Mitzvah of honoring the Torah – demanded no less. The Nazis derived great pleasure from burning the library of Yeshiva Chachmei Lublin in 1939. Those books represented the heart of the “Sages of Lublin.” There were so many books that the dastardly deed took twenty hours to complete. But in their perverted sense of values, twenty hours were a small investment to pay for the dividend of destroying Rabbi Shapiro’s work and silencing the voice of Torah study. Jewish Lublin was dead. The Rabbi of Lublin’s dream was crushed and destroyed, never to rise again. Or, perhaps not. Rabbi Meir Shapiro had another dream. The Rabbi of Lublin wanted people to be well-versed in all areas of the Talmud. He wanted all Jews – whether rabbis or doctors, whether manual laborers or professionals – to make a daily commitment to study Torah. The *Lubliner Rav* envisioned a world where any Jew from anywhere in the world could meet another Jew and be able to engage in a scholarly discussion on a topic in the Talmud, one in which they were both conversant. Rabbi Shapiro’s dream was the *Daf Yomi* – Daily Page program. Every day participants would study one page (actually two pages; a *Daf* consists of the two pages on either side of a single sheet of paper). Over the course of 7½ years, participants would complete the entire 2711 double-sided pages of the Babylonian Talmud. Rabbi Shapiro pointed out the international background of every page of the Talmud. The *Mishnah* was written in Israel while the *Gemora* that analyzes it was written in

Iraq (Babylonia). *Rashi*, who comments on the *Mishnah* and *Gemora*, lived in Germany, while the Tosafists lived in France. The commentaries of the Maharsha and Maharam were written in Lithuania and Poland. Rabbi Shapiro saw Torah as the great unifier of world Jewry. Important announcements need to be made to large numbers of people. Rabbi Shapiro presented his revolutionary idea to the 600 delegates of a convention of Agudath Israel in Vienna in August of 1923. A few weeks later, on Rosh Hashanah, thousands of Jews embarked on a 7-plus-year journey through the wisdom of the Talmud. Jews from all walks of life made the commitment to daily study. Important announcements need to be made to large numbers of people. Seven years later, in 1930, Rabbi Shapiro experienced the intense pleasure of presiding over the *Siyum* – completion celebration – in Lublin. The second *Siyum*, in 1938, saw 20,000 Jews from across Poland gathering in Lublin to celebrate the completion of the Talmud, as well as the dedication of a new wing of the Yeshiva. That celebration, however, was bitter-sweet, for the beloved *Lubliner Rav*, father of the Yeshiva as well as the *Daf Yomi*, had passed away at the age of 47. By the time the third *Siyum* took place in 1945, there didn't seem to be much to celebrate. Not only was Rabbi Shapiro gone, but the Jewish population of his city and millions of others had gone up in smoke. His dream of building a magnificent Torah institution in Lublin was dead. The "Sages of Lublin" had been silenced forever. But the *Lubliner Rav*'s other dream, the *Daf Yomi* lived on. Even in Auschwitz, under the most hellish conditions, dedicated Jews managed to sneak a little bit of Heaven into their lives with daily study of Talmud. At great personal risk, Jews continued daily to gain strength and inspiration from learning G-d's word. And it hasn't stopped. The study of *Daf Yomi* has grown exponentially. There is a daily lecture for commuters on the Long Island Railroad. Business lunches in prestigious law offices consist of a quick sandwich and an hour of Talmud study. Study materials are made available in almost every medium imaginable. Important announcements need to be made to large numbers of people. Fifteen years ago, I was privileged to join 20,000 of our brethren at Madison Square Garden. Seven years ago, the Garden sold out so fast that they had to have a concurrent celebration at the Nassau Coliseum. This Tuesday, my family and I went to the Continental Airlines Arena to participate in an event that was linked to the *Siyum* at Madison Square Garden. The program was skillfully choreographed to allow some of the speeches to take place at the Garden, and some at the Continental Arena. But we were not "alone." Important announcements need to be made to large numbers of people. The celebration was carried by live hook-up to cities across the globe. From Salt Lake City to Sao Paulo, from Houston to Hong Kong, from Los Vegas and Little Rock to Caracas and Kiev, an estimated 120,000 Jews gathered to participate in the fulfillment of one of the two dreams of a young rabbi from Lublin. And, speaking of Lublin. Rabbi Shapiro's other dream, the one that apparently failed. That Torah center, destroyed by the Nazis. Every Jew was gone. The library had been reduced to ashes. But the magnificent building was allowed to survive. It became a medical school. Jewish Lublin is over. Nothing but a memory. The building remains as an empty shell; a relic from the past. Well, not so fast. The music played at the Continental Arena, and 20,000 Jews sang and danced in celebration of the Eleventh conclusion of the Talmud. To my amazement, I looked up at the video monitor and observed a scene that sent a chill up my spine. There,

on the screen I saw people dancing in celebration. The caption under the picture blew me away. Half a world away, in a beautiful building that once housed a palace of Torah learning, Torah study was again being celebrated. Yes, Torah lives on. Yes, the *Lubliner Rav's* dream lives on. THEY WERE SINGING AND DANCING IN YESHIVA CHACHMEI LUBLIN!!! -----

----- *Moses assembled the entire Israelite community and said to them, "These are the things that G-d has commanded you to do..."* Moses gathered men, women, and children to tell them that G-d would watch over His People for ever. This Tuesday, 120,000 of us were together to hear that message again. Important announcements need to be made to large numbers of people. -----

----- What a celebration! Thousands upon thousands of us, united in purpose. Thousands upon thousands of us, gathered to demonstrate our love for G-d's Torah. We completed the Talmud. We began it anew. The music began, and people began to dance. The man on my left grabbed one arm and the man on my right took the other. There was no room to dance in a circle, so we danced in place, to the right and to the left. We sang. I felt as if the Heavens themselves opened to hear our songs. I looked up at the seats across the arena. The place was rocking! 20,000 Jews testifying to the world that Torah is uplifting and eternally relevant. And the prayers! The *Maariv* Service is a short, 10-15 minute collection of prayers that is recited every night. If you have a *Minyan*, a quorum of 10, it is considered communal prayer. The community prays together. The leader says, "*Borchu... – Bless G-d, the Blessed One,*" and the other 9+ respond, "*Baruch Hashem ... – Blessed is G-d, the Blessed One, forever and ever.*" Do you have any idea what it is like when the Cantor's call to prayer is answered by the equivalent of TWO THOUSAND MINYANS?! It was inspirational! It was uplifting! It was invigorating! It was also insufficient. -----

I did a little quick math. The Continental Arena seats about twenty thousand people. That is the equivalent of two-thirds of one percent of three million, the estimated population of our Nation when we left Egypt. Think about it for a moment. Take the most inspiring moment of the evening, as we poured out our hearts in uplifting joy and prayer, and multiply it by 150. Add the fact that our ancestors were holy and righteous people, and that G-d revealed His Presence to His People. Those people experienced prophecy! Can you now see that it is absolutely impossible for us to even begin to comprehend the song that Moses and the Nation sang when the Red Sea split? Is it not obvious that we have no idea whatsoever what it was like to experience G-d's Revelation at Mount Sinai?! Now THEY must have really understood what inspiration is all about! They saw infinitely more than 150 times as much as we experienced on Tuesday. They must really have been psyched! So how, pray tell, did those people, inspired as they were, turn around and build a Golden Calf????? -----

----- The answer is that inspiration only goes so far. It is relatively easy to be uplifted by seeing the culmination of a person's 7-year project. It is exciting to pray with twenty thousand people. But there needs to be follow-up. There needs to be work! A big *Siyum* is very impressive. But what is REALLY impressive is the seven years of effort that all those participants put into studying *Daf Yomi*. Day in, day out, for 2711 days, they pored over ancient texts of the Talmud, and

linked themselves back to Mount Sinai. A *Siyum* is, in a sense, a glamorous event. Study, however, is hard work. It means staying up to study when you'd rather go to bed, and getting up early when you'd rather hit the alarm clock and roll over. It means a little less leisure time, and a little more Torah time. It's not easy to become a Torah scholar. As Thomas Edison put it, "Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration." The generation that stood at Mount Sinai was certainly inspired by that event. But that experience, as holy as it was, was not followed up with ongoing daily Torah study. As a result, it didn't become part of their lives; it didn't give them the strength to resist the lure of the Golden Calf. -----

Allow me to share a personal experience. I personally don't participate in the *Daf Yomi* program. The various areas of Torah study and teaching in which I am involved don't allow me the time to study each page with sufficient depth.

However, a few years ago I took on a project to complete the entire Six Books of the *Mishnah*, a study of the 525 chapters upon which the Babylonian Talmud expounds. For a few years now, I've made a *Siyum* every year on my father's *Yahrtzeit*. It is an allegedly simple project. In twenty or so minutes a day, one can cover a chapter and a half. My *Mishnah* study is brief, almost an overview. It is not at all the major emphasis of my daily learning. Rather, it is "light reading," a way to keep myself acquainted with areas of Torah study that I might otherwise rarely, if ever, see. Last year, I ran into a problem. For several reasons, I got off to a late start. No big deal! I'll study two chapters a day instead of one and a half. Then I found out I was moving. Before I knew it, I had hundreds of chapters to study, and not a great deal of time before the *Yahrtzeit*. *Mishnah* study became my passion. I HAD to finish. It was "all-*Mishnah*, all the time." I cut back on sleep time, as well as other interests. I even, as you may recall, stopped writing Torah Talk for about two months. I finished on time, thank G-d. I even had a day to spare! -----

Now, I don't recommend the procedure that I just described. That is NOT the way to do it. (As the saying goes, "Don't try this at home, folks!") But I believe that there is an important lesson to be learned here. If you set a goal, and force yourself to stick to it, you will, G-d willing, see success. I spent those countless hours studying those *Mishnah* texts because I had to. I had made the commitment, and I could not let myself make excuses. I HAD to make that *Siyum*. My friends congratulated me at the *Siyum*. They were impressed by my humble efforts. But that's not why I did it. I made the *Siyum* in my father's memory. I did it for him. But I also did it for myself. The joy of completing the study of a segment of the Torah is a celebration of linking oneself back to Mount Sinai. The celebration is nice, but it is nothing compared to the elation and holiness of bringing G-d into your life on a daily basis. The trip itself is more important than the destination. -----

Study Torah, my friend. Do it every day. It doesn't matter what you study. It can be *Daf Yomi*, if you're up to the task, but it doesn't have to be. It can be *Mishnah*. It can be the weekly Torah Portion. If you're not sure what to study, call or email me. I'll be happy to discuss it with you personally and make some suggestions. Study Torah. It will change your life. You too, can be one of the "Sages of Lublin." Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

