

Parshas Vayeishev
Shabbos Chanuka

December 11-12, 2020
Kislev 26 5781

This week is dedicated in honor of our dear Zaide Matisyahu Ben R'Avraham Abba Halevi.

I would usually write some esoteric or limud from the parsha, but I am at a loss of what to write about, as, I fully believe we lost a Tzaddik.

I want to quote Chabad.org regarding words of the Rebbe on the Holocaust:

In his writings and discussions on the subject, the Rebbe rejected all theological explanations for the Holocaust. What greater conceit — the Rebbe would say — and what greater heartlessness, can there be than to give a "reason" for the death and torture of millions of innocent men, women and children? Can we presume to assume that an explanation small enough to fit inside the finite bounds of human reason can explain a horror of such magnitude? We can only concede that there are things that lie beyond the finite ken of the human mind. Echoing his father-in-law, the Rebbe would say: It is not my task to justify G-d on this. Only G-d Himself can answer for what He allowed to happen. And the only answer we will accept, said the Rebbe, is the immediate and complete Redemption that will forever banish evil from the face of the earth and bring to light the intrinsic goodness and perfection of G-d's creation.

To those who argued that the Holocaust disproves the existence of G-d or His providence over our lives, the Rebbe said: On the contrary — the Holocaust has decisively disproven any possible faith in a human-based morality. In pre-war Europe, it was the German people who epitomized culture, scientific advance and philosophic morality. And these very same people perpetrated the most vile atrocities known to human history! If nothing else, the Holocaust has taught us that a moral and civilized existence is possible only through the belief in and the acceptance of the Divine authority.

The Rebbe also said: Our outrage, our incessant challenge to G-d over what has occurred — this itself is a most powerful attestation to our belief in Him and our faith in His goodness. Because if we did not, underneath it all, possess this faith, what is it that we are outraged at? The blind workings of fate? The random arrangement of quarks

that make up the universe? It is only *because* we believe in G-d, *because* we are convinced that there is right and there is wrong and that right must, and ultimately will, triumph, that we cry out, as Moses did: "Why, my G-d, have you done evil to Your people?!"

But the most important thing about the Holocaust to the Rebbe was not how we do or do not understand it, nor, even, how we memorialize its victims, but what we *do* about it. If we allow the pain and despair to dishearten us from raising a new generation of Jews with a strong commitment to their Jewishness, then Hilter's "final solution" will be realized, G-d forbid. But if we rebuild, if we raise a generation proud of and committed to their Jewishness, we will have triumphed.

It is truly only the Rebbe who with confidence tell us not to reverse the trajectory of Godliness in the world because of the evils of humans, but to challenge the human led evils, by saying that it spits in the face of Godliness. Hashem gave us the tools, it is us who messes things up, even when that would seem to be the exact reason that inexplicably angers theologians and secularists. Humans are so narcissistic to think that every rationale and reason is the actual truth, when there are a plethora of plausible outcomes to any situation, and explanations, that are beyond our own comprehension, the Holocaust being one of them.

For whatever reason Hashem created a world in which Jews are trialed, and subject to unimaginable tribulations and suffering. Perhaps I am less questioning of Hashem's involvement because I have lived, thus far, such a privileged and blessed life.

But if I learned anything by writing these divrei Torah, it is that while Hashem provides us with guidance and prophecy, there is a natural order to things, that we are in control of changing. There is something freeing from unleashing oneself to that thinking. This is to arrive at a place that is deeper than thought, speech and action, (levushim) which generally guide our lives, to the core midos, and to Atzmus itself. In this space, one is free, devoid of restrictions that limit one's ability to fully flourish.

I say all this metaphysical diatribe, to bring out the ultimate point that Zaide Max was and is a living breathing example of a Godly person. His poignant, simplistic behavior was deeper than even the deepest intellectual faculties, because everything he did, worked.

I said on the Zoom Shiva the Rashi from Bereishis 37:1 (the first posuk)

וַיֵּשֶׁב יַעֲקֹב בְּאֶרֶץ מִגְוִרֵי אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן:

As quoted from www.chabad.org; Jacob desired to settle in tranquility, but there pounced upon him the agony of Joseph. For when the righteous wish to settle in tranquility, G-d says: "Is it not enough for the righteous what is prepared for them in the world to come, that they ask also for a tranquil life in this world?"

This adage is perhaps applicable for Zaide, in that during his long life, it was filled with trials, particularly the Holocaust, which could have resulted in a broken man (emotionally, not physically), or a person who settled, yet that cannot be said of Zaide. He had a long life preparing himself for the world to come, where, based on other Talmudic passages, we know he passed away a Tzadik.

Over the past weeks of writing these Divrei Torah there has been a theme of the human element to fulfilling a prophecy, and that while Hashem may set something in motion, and it should be enough to rest on one's laurels, we know that not to be the case. We must continuously act, perfect and perform in order to prepare this world for the ultimate redemption, and to make it a dwelling place for Hashem. This clearly began with Rivka's revelation of the prophecy of Ever about the twins, and her getting involved in the switch up of Ya'akov and Esav in order to control the outcome of the prophecy, and then the continued reassurance by Hashem and the angels to Ya'akov that the blessings will come to fruition. As it a) was not obvious that the path of the world without action can change, and b) it shows on the righteousness of Ya'akov, who despite having reassurance about the future, and being armed multiple times with the blessings of how destiny will arrive, he pursued the work to ensure this outcome, steadfastly and with faith.

While we in the moment don't understand what is happening in the world, or what Hashem in a moment wants from us, we know the goal, and must try in all ways to imbue ourselves with the mission, that is to make a dwelling place for Hashem here, which we can do, no matter what.

When I write this, I think back to the opportunity I had a few years ago on Shavuot to speak on a panel about the future of Jews and the Torah. The question was whether Jews will be around, and the Torah will be around in 80 or 100 years. The answers ranged, from the Reform perspective, which although generally different from my own, had the similarity in the belief that Jews and people following the Torah will be around. The Humanist perspective was bleak, in that the Rabbi didn't think Jews as they are today would be the same, or even around...My perspective, is that there will be unwavering change, because no matter what happens in the world around us, we can control the outcome, knowing that there is an outcome. The outcome being that Moshiach will come through our hard work. If we know that Mashiach is coming, why do the work at all? Because what Ya'akov beginning with Rivka taught us, which is human intervention, in the right way can ensure a destiny is fulfilled, otherwise, it is not obvious that the outcomes that are promised will arise.

This being said, the mission of Chanuka that our Chassidic masters, and the Rebbe most recently implored us to do, is to fill the world with light. The mitzvah of Chanuka is to be mipharseim the light of Chanuka, because a tiny light in a very dark room will light the space up.

Chanuka being 8 days, represents the loftiest levels of spirituality. The menorah of the temple was 7 branches, ours is 8. There are practical reasons for the 8 days, but chassidus explains, because the 7 days of the menorah of the temple represent the 7 days of creation, but our menorah represents the 8th day, the 8th level, the level that supersedes the physical, that goes beyond the mundane limitations of the created world to the unlimited world of Atzmus Ohr Ein Sof itself, where there is only light, that shines and surrounds all, and fills all.

The first Rashi in the parsha explains the importance of a spark. When Ya'akov saw all the chiefs of Esav's family he thought, "who will conquer them?" Rashi explains through a story of a flax merchant whose camels were laden with flax. The blacksmith wondered where all this flax can be stored. A clever fellow answered him, "one spark can go from your bellows and burn all the flax up..." Similarly, Ya'akov saw all of the chiefs of Esav and asked "who will conquer all of them?", the answer is what is written further which is "these are the offspring of Ya'akov, Joseph, implying that Joseph is the solution to the Esav problem, as it is written, "and the house of Ya'akov will be fire, and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esav for straw..." "A spark shall go forth from Joseph which will annihilate and burn up all of them..."

Perhaps, the light and fire of Chanuka is that spark that will burn up all the external forces of antispirituality, and antisemitism that exists and persists in the world, making it more difficult for us to achieve our goals. This theme, and the hammer (Makav/Makabi) which is the mnemonic of Matisyahu Cohen Ben Yochanan. This is the perseverance of the Jewish people. This is perseverance of Zaide. We lived with someone who lived through massacres and destruction, as is unfortunately common in Jewish history. But the miracle of the rebirth after destruction is apparent, in our Matisyahu, as it was with the Matisyahu of Chanuka, all those years ago.

There are multiple commentaries on where we know the source for Chanuka from the Torah (Yalkut Shimoni). Without going too deeply into the matter, Parshas B'Haloscha in Bamidbar discusses the lighting of the candelabra of the tabernacle (and the future temple). Regarding the menorah the first Rashi explains that it follows the dedication of the scarifies in the previous parsha, because Ahron was complained to that he and the tribe of Levi won't be excluded from the dedication of the Mishkan. Hashem responded that their service will be everlasting in that in the future we will all light the Menorah. And the rededication of the temple by the house of Levi (the Kohanim of Matisyahu) will be a light shining spirituality in the dark era of that time. The message is consequently even the same, therefore the fact that our Zaide was named Matisyahu, and was a Levi, is even more appropriate as a message of who he was, and the lessons we can learn from him to persevere and shine light everywhere we go.

May the Neshama of Zaide Matisyahu Ben R'Avraham Abba Halevi be a meilitz yosher for our family, and the Jewish people, and may we continue our mission to bring the ultimate geula speedily in our times.

For everyone's reading, I've also attached the eulogy from Zaide's funeral.

The Gemara in Shabbas, tells us the following story. R'Elazar asked Rav- Which person has a place in the World to Come? Rav replied a person has a place in the world to come if the eulogist explains, "The path that this person has chosen, follow it! (Yishaiah 31:21).

When writing this, I cannot do justice in summarizing my grandfather's life for the number of emotions, and positive things there are to say about my Zaide.

For those of us allowed to gather here, I will state, follow the path of my Zaide Max, Matisyahu. He was not a man of extremes, rather he was grounded, he taught me and our family to stay levelheaded, and not to covet our neighbors, or to make assumptions about anything we don't know to be true. He was a realist in the fullest sense. He was a witty man, and loved a good joke and chazanus

He was an incredibly honest person, and with that he was incredibly modest-he lived his life with humility. He didn't want a fanfare about anything he did, rather, he would act quietly and in a dignified fashion. One of the most important lessons he imbued in my mother and the rest of the family is that slow and steady wins the race.

He was pragmatic with such clarity and foresight, and he was a sharp and clear-headed man who knew the truth and spoke truthfully (emes). He would tell me to work hard, but work smart, and to value my time, as life is like a fly, it is short, so make it sweet and sometimes it is the little pleasures that are most valuable.

He was a fighter and had an internal fortitude that was a reflection of his ability to survive and provide. The culmination of his character is "Ashreinu Mah Tov Chelkeinu" praise your lot in life and be happy with what you have.

My Zaide passed away at 96, he lived long years, as the parsha in Vayishlach we just read yesterday said of Yitzchak Avinu,

וַיָּגַע וַיָּצְחָק וַיָּמָת וַיֵּאָסֶף אֶל-עַמּוּי זָקֵן וַיִּשְׁבַּע יָמָיו וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ עֵשָׂו וַיַּעֲקֹב בְּרָיוֹ:

when he breathed his last and died. He was gathered to his kin in ripe old age; and he was buried by his sons Esau and Jacob.

Although he lived to a ripe old age, I want to reflect on the trials and the seemingly insurmountable he overcame throughout his life.

My Zaide was born in Bogoria in the Stashiv region of Poland. He was born to a large family and was required to work on his family farm. Early in his life, as a young adolescent, he didn't take to the local anti-Semites picking on his friends, and he made sure to overcome those childhood adversaries and establish who is in control. Early in the war years, after he had turned Bar Mitzvah, he was carted off to labor camps throughout Poland and Germany. He was mainly sent to munitions labor camps, staving off the deadly work of assembling bullets and bombs by repairing shoes, a skill he learned from home.

In his final labor camp, building munitions, a large piece of machinery fell on him and a few workers, immediately killing them, and although his life was spared for the moment, his back and lower leg were broken.

Most of the dead bodies, including his unconscious body were thrown into a pile to await removal. A passing farmer heard whimpering from the pile and pulled my Zaide out and brought him back to the labor camp. By some miracle, he was laid to rest in a barrack, and was given food by his campmates. A few weeks later, he was liberated, and in his words, was saved by his broken mess, as he couldn't rush to eat the food given to the survivors by the liberators. More people rushed to stuff themselves, perhaps this is where he learned when to draw a line, and enough is enough, chasing more doesn't help a person.

After the war, he swore off a surgery that was to repair his back and leg. Although at the time it would have been the best therapy, the surgery, and what they wanted to do, namely install a metal pole in his back and leg didn't make sense to him. He declined the surgery, to the chagrin of the doctors who told him he wouldn't live long and recovered for some time after the war- but lived with the pain throughout his life, finally making his way back to his hometown with his cousin and brother. After settling his affairs, and working as much as he could, the time and opportunity came in 1948 for my Zaide to leave Poland, and make his way to Canada, where an older brother had emigrated before the Holocaust.

He was able to secure a boat ticket to New York, where he subsequently took a train and arrived in Toronto, Canada ready to rebuild his life from the ashes that was Poland and his home. With nothing more than a few dollars, and the items he was allowed to travel with, he didn't rest from his long journey, he began working in the Shmateh factories within days of his arrival. He quickly learned the trade of sewing, and out worked and performed, even his foreman. He was fired from his first jobs for being too productive, can you imagine?

Within a short time, he and his brother opened their own shop designing, manufacturing and selling women's clothing. In the late 1950's his friends were telling him to find a wife, and that there are women in Israel that would make a good Shidduch. In 1960 after traveling to Israel, he was set up on a date and met Sabina my bubbly. They hit it off, and in July 1960 they were married. My great grandmother, my grandmother and Zaide all moved back to Toronto, and my mother was born.

In the 1980s my grandfather left his business and focused on his investments and being there for his family. He would joke in the 80s and 90's and even until 2008, that every time he would trade in his car, that it would be his last one. And yet, no matter what was thrown at him, he pushed on, and survived. Toward the end of his life, as things got labored, and it would seem that the end was near, he would say that his mother kept him alive, and kept pushing him on. 2 and half years ago my Zaide suffered a debilitating stroke, that left him unable to walk or use his arm. Although that would have seemed to break him, he kept fighting. More recently, he was diagnosed with cancer, and although the prognosis was bleak, he pushed on. After being set up in Baycrest in palliative care, he pushed on, out living his stay, where for the past year, and in relative isolation, pushed on and on, never giving up hope, and never waning. Even in his last few days, although he was in and out of consciousness, when he was able to answer, he would respond.

My Zaide imparted huge nuggets of wisdom, that as I grow up, I realize more and more the truth behind every word.

What seems like a novelty in the world of business, came naturally to my grandfather, and when I asked him about how he knew the things he did, or who taught him, he would tell me his rationale, and it all made sense- he kept things simple, and it was reflected through and through to his core, and the essence of what my Zaide was all about.

My Zaide's Hebrew name was Matisyahu, which relates to the upcoming holiday of Chanuka, Matisyahu in the story was named Matisyahu Kohen ben Yochanan (Mem, Chof, Beis, Vov- Makav- the Hebrew word for hammer- also Makabi.) Matisyahu was the father of the Maccabees which is derived from the posuk (Shemos 15:11) Mi Komocha Beilim Hashem Who is like you among the heavenly powers Hashem. It was Matisyahu's strength and fortitude that culminated the miraculous victory of the Jews and the holiday of Chanuka. My Zaide, appropriately named Matisyahu reflected this in his life. He even said about himself, that he had many lives like a cat, as he kept surviving, no matter what, no matter how bleak the day seemed, he would push on. His life and survivorship and the family he built is a slap in the face of the hardship and that befell the Jews in the Holocaust- he outlived all odds.

There are 2 mitzvot in the Torah that clearly state the reward for it will be long life. That is Shiluach Ha'khan (sending away a mother bird to retrieve its eggs) and Kibud Av V'eim (honoring one's mother and father). Vilna Gaon says that both mitzvahs represent the opposite extreme of mystical characteristics of, Chesed, compassion, and Gevura, resistance, in this case opposite of compassion. According to Chassidus, the reason the reward is listed in the Torah, is either for its simplicity, or because they arouse compassion in Hashem to save the Jews and redeem us from Golus.

But on a deeper level, perhaps one gets long life because the opposite traits that come together if one leads a life of compassion and resistance. In Chassidus and kabala, the combination of Chesed and Gevura is Tiferes- harmony, that allow for the balance of Kindness and compassion and resistance to exist in a fruitful way. The final lesson of my Zaide that I want to impart, is be

harmonious, in all your dealings, with family, friends, and the world around you. My Zaide passed away on Shabbos 19 Kislev, the Rosh Hashana of Chassidus at the culmination of the holiest day of the week, and the holiest time of the day known as Raiva D’Raivin.

In 1985 on his birthday The Rebbe wrote the following in a letter to his Chassidim:

On Shabbos morning, when the full pleasure of the relief and rest from work has already been attained, it is supplanted by a higher category of *Oneg*, which is associated primarily with the concept of “Shabbos unto G-d,” leading up to the highest category of *Oneg*, namely *Raiva d’chol Raivin* (“pleasure of pleasures”) at the time of Minchah — the most sublime kind of pleasure which stands out as *Oneg*, even after the *Oneg* of *raivin*: a purely spiritual *Oneg*, without any association of any memory or residue of anything material and mundane, but purely “Unto G-d your G-d.” And here, too, there is the possibility of advancing, beginning with the general feeling and the basic *Emunah* (absolute belief) in HaShem.

My Zaide lived on a different plane, and his strength as a person, and a Jew, and the lessons he imparted on all of us culminated and is reflected in the peaceful way in which he passed, on the day in which he passed, and the time of day in which he passed.

The gemara towards the end of Masheches Shabbos says “Someone born on Shabbos will die on Shabbos, since the great day of the Shabbos was profaned on his account. Rava bar Rav Shila said, ‘And he will be called a great and holy man’.” For, dying on Shabbos is a holy thing, and not everyone is worthy of such a death. According to the Arizal, one who dies on Shabbos does so free of sin.

The Zohar tells us that we say the prayer of Tzidkascha on Mincha on Shabbos afternoon, as a prayer to Moshe, Yosef and David Hamelech, three of our greatest forefathers who passed away on Shabbos, and now for the Neshama of Matisyahu Ben R’ Avraham Abba HaLevi.

This week’s Parsha also reflects the death of Devora, who we know little about without the mipharshim. Ya’akov mourned her, because of her significance in his life as a caretaker and a caregiver- although there are many connections to make- there are 2 things to be derived from here, the first was my Zaide was a caregiver and caretaker and ensured all of us in his family were and are well taken care, throughout our lives and I want to say thank you Zaide.

The second is we must thank the caregivers who in our absence during COVID were tirelessly with my Zaide providing him with round the clock care, comfort and respect. Thank you Vima and Emmy and the staff and nurses at Baycrest.

I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the measures my mother would go on a day-to-day basis to be there for my Zaide, and my grandmother bubbly Sabina. As an only child there is a great

responsibility my mother has undertaken, with grace, and I wish her Arichus Yomim and Shonim Tovos along with my father, who as a pair, work tirelessly to make us all comfortable. The lessons of my Zaide are strong within us, and is reflected in his children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. To my Bubby, who is part and parcel of making sure my Zaide was always comfortable, and clean, and was his partner for 60 years, I wish you strength, love and long life.

Although due to restrictions we are gathered as a small minyan, it was more important to my grandmother and mother not to be here so that we say Kaddish at the gravesite, as all those who perished in the Holocaust did not necessarily have this honor. As such when we say Kaddish today, it is for my Zaide, but it is also li'uley nishmas all those who perished in the Holocaust who did not have the opportunity to hear a kaddish by their gravesite. V'Yeiosef El Amov all those neshamos next to my grandfather to hear Kaddish.

The Gemara at the end of Berachos says R' Avin Halevi, when you say goodbye to your friend you don't say "Lech B'Shalom" go in peace rather say "Lech L'Shalom", go to peace and the gemara explains with using an example from Moshe, and David Hamelech.

But when leaving a funeral procession, a person should not say Lech L'Shalom (go to peace) rather they should say Lech B'Shalom "go in peace", as it says in the posuk Hashem said to Avraham you will join your ancestors B'shalom in peace (Ber 15:15).

Goodbye Matisyahu Ben R'Avraham Abba Halevi, Zaide, and Lech B'Shalom.