

## Less is More

This week we read the double portion of Tazria-Metzora. One thought that comes to mind as we work our way through it is, "What are we talking about?" There is no such condition as Tzoraas nowadays, so, as we learn in excruciating detail about Se'ais, Sepachas, Bahares, Michva, redness, whiteness and even greenness, and more, as they come and go, expand and contract, disappear and reappear, we really have no understanding of what we are reading. A thought that may follow that is, "If this is totally irrelevant nowadays, why does the Torah devote so much space to it, and why are we studying it." This can easily be followed by, "Why did Hashem give so many Mitzvos in the Torah? Most of them have not been applicable for the past two thousand years and more, and the world seems to be managing, continuing to exist even without them. So, were they necessary or not?"

Interestingly, Lee Harvey Oswald almost prevented the world from learning the answer to these questions. Maybe worse, he almost prevented us from having a proper understanding what we are experiencing now, how to value it, and how we are to act when "reopening" comes.

What does Oswald have to do with all this? (He's the guy who shot President Kennedy, for those among us too young to remember.) Let us back up and start closer to the beginning of the story.

On many occasions we have told stories of the legendary Chasid, Reb Mendel Futerfas. He was very active for many years in the Chabad underground during the worst years of Stalin. After World War II came to an end, he was at the forefront of the massive undertaking to smuggle out hundreds and hundreds of Chabad families out of the Soviet Union as part of the postwar repatriation of Polish refugees. He included his wife and children in one of the groups which successfully escaped from behind the Iron Curtain, and they eventually settled in the UK. He, himself, remained behind to continue organizing groups of escapees as long as escape was a possibility. Eventually, in January of 1947, he was arrested and sentenced to many years in labor camps in Siberia. After Stalin's death, many prisoners' files were reviewed and they were released, including R. Mendel. But, there he was stuck in the Soviet Union, separated from his family who had made it to freedom. As strong, or perhaps stronger than his yearning to be reunited



with his family, was his desire to see the Rebbe. Especially after his captors informed him of the passing of the Previous Rebbe, his desire to meet his new Rebbe burned strongly within him. He repeatedly submitted requests to be allowed to leave the Soviet Union but they were consistently rejected.

Finally after 16 long years, a ray of hope appeared on the horizon. In the course of British-Soviet contacts in the spirit of *détente*, Khrushchev had assured the UK that requests for emigration for the purpose of family reunification would be handled favorably. In September of 1963, Jewish communal activists in UK learned that a high level meeting was planned at which the British intended to pursue several such cases where emigration had been denied. They managed to get R. Mendel's name added to the list. When the British delegation placed the five names on the Soviets' table, they assured them they would look into it and see what could be done.

In October the response came that all five would be allowed to leave, and on November 21, 1963, R. Mendel began his journey out of the USSR. He arrived in the UK the following day, November 22. He immediately began to plan his travel to NY to see the Rebbe. But, on the next day, Friday, November 23, 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. A Soviet national would have had a difficult time obtaining a visa, in any case, during the height of the Cold War. He certainly was not welcome in the United States at this time, and travelling to the Rebbe now seemed impossible.

Never one to be deterred, R. Mendel persisted in his efforts to get to the Rebbe, and amazingly, a mere two weeks later he was in 770. (What if the aftermath of the assassination would have delayed R. Mendel's trip to the Rebbe for months or even years? The story could possibly have ended right here and I wouldn't be telling it now. We would have Oswald to blame for that. Fortunately, R. Mendel was an unstoppable force, so the story continues.)

Several nights later, on the second night of Chanukah, he had his first Yechidus (private audience) with the Rebbe.

Immediately after the conclusion of R. Mendel's Yechidus, the Rebbe asked his secretaries to locate for him a Maamar, a Chassidic discourse, of the Mittlerer Rebbe, the second Rebbe of Chabad, which he had delivered within the week before his passing in 1827. (Interestingly, while the exact date of the Maamar is not known, that period coincides with the dates of R. Mendel's journey out of the Soviet Union.) The Maamar



relates to the just enacted Czarist decree that young Jewish boys be drafted into the Russian army to serve for as long as 25 years. The Rebbe wanted the Maamar that night if possible, or by the following day at the latest. A diligent search of the not yet published Maamar turned up a copy, but it was incomplete. In the following days the Rebbe repeatedly asked the secretaries about the search for the remainder of the Maamar, giving suggestions of where it might be found, until finally it was located.

Those who knew of the Rebbe's sudden intense interest in this obscure Maamar, aroused apparently as a result of the Yechidus with R. Mendel, were mystified as to the connection between the two. The mystery was cleared up nearly two months later. On Shabbos Parshas Yisro, 18<sup>th</sup> of Shevat of that year, the Rebbe unexpectedly held a farbrengen. At that farbrengen, the Rebbe explained the purpose of this farbrengen as a farewell to R. Mendel, whose two month visit to New York was coming to an end. During the course of the farbrengen, the Rebbe delivered a Maamar which incorporated in it much of the substance of the Mittlerer Rebbe's Maamar.

What follows is not a summary of the Maamar but just a few points extracted from it:

If the purpose of learning Torah is in order to know how to fulfill Mitzvos, why do we learn those parts of Torah which cannot be fulfilled nowadays? What rationale is there to punish the Jewish people for having failed to keep the Mitzvos properly in the times of the Bais Hamikdash by taking away so many Mitzvos, reducing the number of Mitzvos which can be observed nowadays to a mere 87? It would seem to make more sense to impose other punishments to motivate proper fulfillment of all 248 Mitzvos, rather than to eliminate the vast majority? What is the point of placing millions of Jews in a situation where observance of Mitzvos is possible only through Mesiras Nefesh, literally putting one's life at risk, and even, then many Mitzvos are simply not doable? For example, a Jew in prison cannot fulfill the Mitzvah of Sukah or Matzah or Tefillin, if he does not have them available, and all the devotion and self-sacrifice in the world won't make them materialize in his prison cell.

Due to the failure of the Jewish people to observe Mitzvos, Hashem's expression of His love for us was diminished. Since, the Mitzvos are a gift from Hashem to us and an expression of His love for us, as that expression is diminished, the fewer Mitzvos we have available to us to perform. During this time, the prosecuting angels on high argue that even these few remaining Mitzvos should be taken



away because the Jewish people are not worthy of them and do not appreciate them, as evidenced by the lackadaisical attitude with which Mitzvos are performed, the sporadic observance of some Mitzvos, the lack of enthusiasm in doing Mitzvos and so on.

To prove these angels wrong, Hashem puts some Jews into a situation where the performance of Mitzvos is impossible or close to it. When those Jews show their intense desire to do Mitzvos, as demonstrated by the extreme lengths to which they will go and great risks to life to which they expose themselves, as well as the palpable pain and sorrow which they experience due to the Mitzvos which are beyond their reach, this refutes the charge of the prosecuting angels that Jews don't care enough about the Mitzvos. In other words, the oppressive circumstances which Soviet Jewry was forced to endure serve as the defense of these charges of indifference made against the Jews of the free world, who could do Mitzvos but don't do so sufficiently or with sufficient ardor.

This is also the purpose of learning those parts of Torah which cannot be fulfilled. Learning them and experiencing the intense pain and disappointment of not being able to fulfill them, is the equivalent of intense pleasure at being able to perform those Mitzvos.

In this way, not only are the arguments of the prosecuting angels regarding inadequate observance nowadays refuted, but the argument that we are not deserving of the Mitzvos which are not currently applicable is also refuted. Thus, by learning all of Torah, and wishing to be able to fulfill all of the Mitzvos which study, we earn the complete redemption through Moshiach and the rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdash, may it happen speedily in our day.

Let us apply these principles to our current situation. We are required to remain in our homes and forego many Mitzvos which can be performed only together with others, or in the presence of a Minyan. We have not been able to recite Kedusha or Borchu, or hear Torah reading. Kohanim have not been able to perform their Torah mandate to deliver the Priestly Blessing. Many of us are suffering in the Torah learning department because we don't have the ability to attend classes. Despite the best efforts to deliver Seders-to-go to thousands of people, there certainly were many more who did not/could not fulfill the Mitzvos of the Seder night properly.



## Tazria-Metzora Speech

I have heard from many whose Shul attendance historically was less than stellar, expressing frustration at the inability to attend Shul at all. And, that is precisely the point. Sometimes we can't measure how much we value something until it is taken away from us. All that frustration, pain, maybe even despondency, is exactly what Hashem is looking for. It is that deep heartfelt desire to be able to attend Shul now, and to do all those Mitzvos, which is giving value to all the times we showed up late or wandered out into the hall in the middle and forgot to come back, all the times our minds wandered during davening (or during the Rabbi's speech, Heaven forbid), overslept and mumbled through a hurried davening.

Let's be honest. For many of us and for much of the time, it is hard to say that we attend Minyan or go to the family Seder with Uncle Joe and Aunt Sadie with a real heartfelt sense of absolute delight and pleasure at the opportunity to do a Mitzvah. We go through the motions, but where is the passion? We recite Shma and declare that we are to love G-d with all our heart and all our soul, but do we feel anything as we say it? To help us, Hashem has given us an alternate emotional outlet which is more easier to achieve; anger, impatience, irritation. And He sees embedded in that our love and awe of Him. And, our caring about not doing these Mitzvos is extrapolated by Hashem to all the other Mitzvos we are not doing and haven't done for 2000 years.

The same is true of studying the Torah portions of Tazria and Metzora. That feeling of ennui, that we can't relate to the seemingly repetitive details of an unknown malady, sort of like reading the technical specs gibberish in a user's guide without even knowing which piece of equipment it is for – don't feel bad about it and try to suppress it, revel in it! It is the flip side of delight in understanding Torah, and it is the way we express our deepfelt wish that this part of Torah should once again be relevant in a practical way.

We have to add to the litany of emotions building up within us a feeling of gratitude to Hashem for giving us this gift. We have to nurture *all* of those feelings, the irritation, the anger, *and* the gratitude and make sure they remain strong within us. We need to feel so strongly about it now, that the moment things "open up" we run to Shul, we run to a Torah class, we run to visit the sick, we run to do all the Mitzvos we cannot do now. And that momentum will carry us past the "finish line" into Geulah with Moshiach NOW!

