

What Can We Do?

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There is a terrible war going on, and it is growing more intense each day. Just over a week ago, 1,300 Jews were tortured and killed, over 3,000 were wounded and 199 were taken captive. It's heartbreaking.

How are we to react? What is expected of us and what can we do to help the war effort?

Last week, we began again our weekly study of the Torah, beginning with Parshas Bereishis. The first words of the Torah guide us how to behave. When bad things happen to good people, Bereishis, the first thing we need to do, is to remember bara Elokim, that Hashem created the world and leads and controls it. Remember that nothing happens by itself, and since everything that occurs is because Hashem decided that it should, when a tragedy such as the recent one befalls us, we should know that Hashem is behind it and that He loves us.

Additionally, Chazal derive from the word Bereishis that the world was created for Torah and for Klal Yisroel: "bishvil Torah shenikreis reishis ubishvil Yisroel shenikreu reishis." And since the world was created for Torah and Yisroel, it stands to reason that in tough situations, Klal Yisroel should remember the purpose of the world and strengthen their study and observance of Torah.

There is a famous story told about the rebbe Rav Meir of Premishlan. He was going to do a mitzvah on a cold winter day and had to walk down a hill to get to his destination. Although he was walking on treacherous snow and ice, he did not slip or fall, arriving without a mishap. The chassidim who were following him all slipped, slid and fell as they navigated their way. When they caught up to the rebbe, they asked him how it was that he remained steady as he walked along the hazardous path, while they all fell.

The rebbe answered, "Der vos iz tzugebunden in oiben falt nit unten. A person who is tied to the higher level doesn't fall as he goes along the lower level. Rav Meir'l iz tzugebunden in oiben, falt ehr nit unten – Rav Meir'l is tied to Heaven and therefore does not fall as he walks on the earth."

We need to be better connected to Hashem in Heaven, and those who have a strong connection do not fall or falter as they go through life down here in this world.

When tzaros befall us, when tragedies and catastrophes occur, those who are tied to Hashem don't falter or lose themselves. They tighten the connection, for they know that everything that happens down here is controlled from Above. They remain strong and determined. They don't become broken and overcome with anxiety. They strengthen that connection with teshuvah and tefillah.

At the onset of the Gulf War, Rav Nochum Kook was discussing something with his rebbi, Rav Elazar Menachem Man Shach. As they spoke, the first air raid sirens went off, their piercing wails slicing through the silence across the country and spreading fear of incoming Iraqi chemical warheads.

Reb Nochum interrupted the conversation. "Rosh yeshiva, voss tut men yetzt? What do we do now?" he asked, wondering if the rosh yeshiva had a prepared sealed room in his apartment in which they could seek refuge or if they were to hurry to the basement bomb shelter.

As the siren's wail filled the room, Rav Shach sat in silent contemplation. Finally, he looked up and responded, "Reb Nochum, everyone knows himself what he needs to be mesakein! Lomir machen ah cheshbon. Everyone knows what they need to rectify. Let us make an accounting of which of our actions require us to do teshuvah!"

Rav Shach wasn't thinking about the safe room or the basement shelter. He wasn't thinking about what they were saying on the radio.

He was thinking about Hashem.

He was thinking about how he could tie himself stronger to Hashem.

The Torah states that when Moshe Rabbeinu left Paroh's palace where he had grown up and saw the suffering of his brothers in Mitzrayim, "Vayar besivlosam – He saw their pain." He didn't shut himself off from seeing the awful treatment they were experiencing at the hand of the evil Mitzrim. He saw it and he felt it and decided to do something about it.

Feeling the pain of our brothers and sisters is a primary obligation. We can't shut our eyes, ears and hearts to what is happening. We have to see and feel the tragedy of 1,300 dead Jews, old people and infants, mothers and fathers, along with grandfathers and grandmothers, who suffered gruesome deaths. We need to shed tears over them. And each one left behind heartbroken relatives and friends who need consoling.

As bnei Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov, we must feel the pain of our grieving brethren and think about what we can do to help alleviate the suffering. Each one of us is charged with doing our part to help bring this tragic chapter to a close.

What is our part?

Our current problems are from Yishmoel, whose golus Rav Chaim Vital teaches is worse than the other exiles we suffered through. In his sefer Eitz Hadaas Tov, on Tehillim 124, the prime talmid of the Arizal writes, "There are four exiles, Bovel, Modai, Yovon and Edom, but at the End of Days, Yisroel will be in golus Yishmoel, as is brought in Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer and in Midrashim and in the Sefer Hazohar at the end of Parshas Lech Lecha... This exile will be more difficult than the others. This is why his name is Yishmoel, because Yisroel will cry out during that golus, and Hashem will listen and respond to them – Yishma El Veya'aneim.

"Yishmoel will...attempt to eradicate the name of Yisroel as if it never existed... They will cause Yisroel great tzaros, the likes of which have never been seen before."

"Am Yisroel will have no choice but to cry out to Hashem and He will answer them. We will have no hope or recourse other than our trust in Hakadosh Boruch Hu that He will save us from their evil hands."

Even though it discusses the relationship between Yaakov and Eisov, Parshas Vayishlach is still relevant to us in our trying period, for the parsha represents a guide on our relations with the world. Chazal state that chachomim who traveled to intercede with their rulers in Rome would carefully study the parsha before setting out on their missions. As our chachomim throughout the ages studied that parsha and Yaakov's behavior before confronting the exile, we must do the same. Though we are not dealing with rulers, prime ministers or presidents, there are lessons for us in our golus as well.

The Ramban writes that the parsha “contains a hint for future generations, for all that transpired between our forefather Yaakov and Eisov will occur to us with Eisov’s children, and it is fitting for us to follow the path of the tzaddik (Yaakov).”

Throughout the generations, the children of Eisov sometimes present themselves as achim, brothers, concerned about our welfare, and other times their evil intentions are more apparent.

No matter how they present themselves, our response to the nations of the world remains constant. We deal with Eisov the same way Yaakov did, so it is important for us to properly analyze Yaakov’s actions and statements.

The posuk says, “Vayishlach Yaakov malochim lefonov el Eisov ochiv” (Bereishis 31:4). Yaakov sent malochim to his brother, Eisov, to inform him that he was returning to the Land of Israel, seeking a peaceful brotherly reunion.

What was the message Yaakov sent to his wicked brother to convince him to retreat from his threats to inflict bodily harm on Yaakov? He told the malochim to tell Eisov, “Im Lovon garti, although I lived many years with the wicked Lovon, taryag mitzvos shomarti, I observed all the 613 mitzvos.”

The parsha and the dealings between the brothers have historical significance. They are written in the Torah for us to learn from as we navigate our golus experience. There are several issues that bear explanation in order to understand the message Yaakov sent Eisov. Yaakov chose to send malochim, actual angels, rather than human messengers. Why? And since when does man have the ability to send angels on missions with messages? Secondly, why would the wicked Eisov care that Yaakov was able to maintain his lofty levels while living by Lovon? Of what interest was it to him that Yaakov had observed the 613 commandments?

Chazal teach that the performance of mitzvos creates malochim. Every mitzvah creates a malach. The Vilna Gaon taught that since every word of Torah studied fulfills a mitzvah, it follows that every word of Torah we study creates a malach. Who are those malochim? What is their task? Those malochim surround us and protect us from harm.

Yaakov was telling Eisov, “You won’t just be fighting me and my family. If you go to battle against us, you will be fighting the malochim created by the 613 mitzvos I fulfilled even in the house of Lovon. Lest you think that I fell under his influence and created malochim mashchisim (destructive angels), be forewarned that I am the same Yaakov “ish tom” you knew back home. “Im Lovon garti, vetaryag mitzvos shomarti.” There will be thousands of malochim defending me as I enter your turf. Beware.

There is no protection stronger than that of Torah. The Gemara (Sotah 21a) teaches that Torah and mitzvos are “magna umatzla,” Torah and mitzvos protect a person. Torah study and mitzvah observance create a fortress, an impenetrable protective wall. At the yeshiva of Sheim v’Eiver, Yaakov merited learning Torah without hesech hada’as, and in the house of Lovon, he learned Torah “b’af,” through suffering and challenge. He rose above the distractions and oppression, creating malochim the entire time. Try as he may, Eisov would not be able to escape that fact.

“Im Lovon garti vetaryag mitzvos shomarti. Know this, my brother, Eisov: I continued learning and performing mitzvos even under Lovon, so you will not be able to defeat me.”

The Chofetz Chaim participated in the construction of a hospital in Radin. At a meeting of sponsors, wealthy philanthropists each announced how many beds they would sponsor. They turned to the Chofetz Chaim and asked how many beds he would sponsor.

“Fifty,” he said.

“Oh, wow,” the board members said, impressed.

The Chofetz Chaim explained that the Torah studied by the bochurim in his yeshiva protects the town and prevents illness and suffering. In their zechus, the town would require fifty fewer hospital beds.

Torah saves lives. Malochim created by observance of mitzvos and limud haTorah stave off punishment, creating a security fence that saves lives and prevents pain and suffering.

So what can we do? We can create malochim. We can sponsor hospital beds. We can respond to those awful murders by making a real difference, by forming a legion of malochim mamash of our own.

Every time we learn, every time we do a mitzvah, every time we daven, we have to do so with an awareness that we have the ability to impact the balance of power in this world.

We have to care. We have to feel the pain. We have to know that we are all brothers and sisters, despite differences of language, country and custom.

When we daven, we should have in mind the hostages. When we make the brachos of “matir assurim” and “motzi assurim,” we should slow down and think about the assurim and ask Hashem that they be freed. That is how in our own small way we can buy “hospital beds,” and gain freedom for the poor hostages.

Some people see what’s happening today, glimpse at the articles, peek at the pictures if they are not too gory, shake their heads, and move on. Instead of mourning the loss of yet another young life, people send around messages like armchair generals and budding diplomats. The messages we should be sending to each other and the thoughts we should be thinking should be focused on what we can be doing about the slaughter of our people and how it obligates us.

Sharing clips of people offering words of consolation and condemnation, even if they are eloquent, makes people feel good, as if our millennia of suffering and pain needs or is assuaged by outside validation.

The immorality of giving money to Iran, the world’s leading supporter of terror and participant in the recent massacre, goes unsaid.

President Biden and Sec. of State Blinken are to be commended for their immediate strong support of Israel and for traveling there in a time of war to express solidarity. But even as they read prepared emotional statements condemning the massacre, the administration hastened to warn about being proportional in response and the obligation to adhere to international rules of engagement, as if Israel is suspected of not doing so.

While political leaders proclaim they will destroy Hamas, doing so is complicated, especially as Hezbollah seeks to expand the war to a second front.

Anti-Semites of all types around the world are gleefully parading in public, celebrating the carnage and bashing Jews. As they thirst for our blood, they call for peace.

Sending around clips portraying the world's perfidy will not help anyone. Only through Torah can we find and bring about salvation.

The Torah in Parshas Ki Savo (28:1) states that if we will adhere to all the mitzvos, we will merit to be ascendant over all the other nations.

It is interesting that this posuk is preceded by the one which states, "Arur asher lo yokim es divrei haTorah hazos – Cursed shall be the one who does not uphold [raise] the Torah."

The Ramban cites the Yerushalmi in Sotah (7:4) that this curse is referring to people who are in a position to influence others to come closer to Torah and to support Torah and fail to do so. Anyone who shirks their responsibility is included in this arur. Even if the person is a complete tzaddik in everything he does, if he could have drawn others closer to the holiness and truth of Torah but doesn't, he is cursed. Fearful words.

The Chofetz Chaim would repeat this teaching of the Ramban and reinforce its message by quoting the Gemara in Shabbos (54) that someone who has the ability to protest against wrongful actions of the people of his town and doesn't do so gets caught up in their sins. However, someone who gives proper mussar to his fellows and brings them to the right path, thereby strengthening kevod Shomayim, is showered with the brachos that were delivered on Har Gerizim.

He would say that there is no better brocha than this, and therefore, everyone should use whatever abilities they have to help build Torah. If Hashem blessed someone with money, he should use it to build and support yeshivos. If a person is blessed with oratorical skills, he should use them to raise money for yeshivos and for other Torah causes. He should also speak out against practices that cause a weakening of Yiddishkeit.

As the world spins out of control and our eternal enemies act to destroy us, we realize that there is no one we can depend on to protect us other than Hashem. We seek sources of merit for ourselves and to be included with those the posuk refers to as boruch, the blessed ones.

We require extra brocha to vanquish the ever-present ruach shtus and remove us from falling, G-d forbid, into the grasp of those who are arur.

We are all blessed with different strengths and abilities that we must use for worthwhile purposes. Hashem made each of us differently for a reason, and that is because it takes the varied capabilities of a group of individuals to build a community and strengthen a nation.

Let us all follow the advice of the Chofetz Chaim and use our kochos to increase the study and support of Torah. Let us find more time to learn and seek out worthy causes to support with increased generosity. Let us inspire others to do the same. Let us use the power of speech to spread leshon tov and not leshon hora. And let us also seek to do away with some of the evil that pervades our world.

Let us be ever vigilant in our behavior, making sure that our actions follow halacha and do what we know is true and proper.

We should set a time to study Hilchos Shabbos to improve our observance. There are many seforim to can learn from, including the English works by Rav Simcha Bunim Cohen and by Rav Dovid Ribiat. They clearly teach the halachos we can all use brushing up on in easy to understand pieces. Doing that will make us better Yidden and will be a zechus for ourselves and for Klal Yisroel.

In general, whatever we have been doing until now we should do a little better. We should bentch better, daven better, be nicer to other people than we already are, and seek ways to make ourselves and the world a little better. We should act in ways that will cause others to praise Jews, and not in ways that reinforce evil stereotypes and lead to further antisemitism.

Let us also work on maintaining the strength of character and purpose necessary to remain upstanding and connected above in a tipsy world.