

## **Summer Thoughts**

### **Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz**

For many people, this Shabbos marks the beginning of the “Country Season.” Tens of thousands of Yidden head for the hills, to their summer homes, to what we used to call bungalows, although, by now, most are anything but.

That got me thinking. Do you ever think about where you would go if you wanted to run away from everything?

Not a vacation. Not a weekend getaway. But a place where the noise of the world cannot reach you. A place where the pace of life is measured not by deadlines and headlines, but by the rising and setting of the sun.

I have heard people say that if they ever had to run away for some reason, chas veshalom, they would head to one of those small, picturesque towns tucked away in the hills of Vermont.

I can imagine being holed up in a modest farmhouse at the end of a winding dirt road, surrounded by acres of trees, with a stream running nearby and a porch where I could sit with a sefer and a cup of coffee as the world passes by unnoticed.

I have only been to Vermont a couple of times, but each time I was there, I thought that there was something almost mythical about the place. The rolling green mountains, the village greens, the family farms that have existed for generations, the maple trees that explode into brilliant shades of red and gold every autumn. It represents a kind of America that seems to have been frozen in time – a simpler, quieter place where neighbors know each other, children play outdoors until nightfall, and people still wave as they pass on country roads.

Of course, I am not planning on moving there anytime soon. Aside from the issue of finding kosher food and a minyan, I suspect that I would miss the noise and energy of our communities more than I realize. A Jew was never meant to live alone on a mountain, disconnected from a kehillah and the warmth of other Yidden.

In any case, the pipe dream went up in a puff of smoke when I read an article from The Free Press about an Israeli woman who moved to Bristol, Vermont, a tiny town of 3,782 residents, the kind of place where, as she described it, “you let your kids run outside barefoot and leave your doors unlocked.”

As a child of the Second Intifada, she had lived with the fear of terrorism and violence. She believed that by moving to a quiet corner of rural America, she had left those anxieties behind. Vermont was supposed to be her refuge; a place far removed from the conflicts and hatred of the Middle East.

But then she found herself sitting on a folding chair at a local gathering, hearing accusations of “land theft” and chants about the “occupied land of Palestine.” In that moment, she said, she no longer believed that she was safe.

Think about that for a moment.

If antisemitism can make its way to a tiny Vermont town hidden among forests and mountains, a place where the biggest concerns should be the coming winter or the next maple harvest, then there is no corner of the world untouched by this ancient hatred.

The Jews of Europe once thought that they had found enlightened societies where they were accepted. Jews fled from one country to another searching for peace and security. In every generation, we have searched for a place where we could finally exhale and say, "Here, we will be left alone."

History has repeatedly shown us that our ultimate security cannot come from geography. A beautiful landscape can soothe the soul. A quiet town can offer peace of mind. A mountain retreat can provide silence. But no place on earth can guarantee safety.

The only true refuge of the Jewish people has always been our connection to Hashem, our Torah, and our communities. We can appreciate the beauty of Vermont's mountains, but our real shelter has never been found in the shadow of any mountain. It has always been beneath the wings of the Shechinah.

When we imagine escaping, we usually imagine subtraction. Fewer people. Fewer obligations. Less noise. Less tension. A small house at the edge of a forest where the only sound in the morning is the wind rustling through the trees and birds announcing the arrival of a new day.

There is something very alluring about that image. The world has become so loud. In an era of constant connection, we yearn for some time to disconnect.

While the quiet country road may be beautiful, it cannot replace the sound of a child reciting a posuk. The solitude of a mountain sunrise is inspiring, but it cannot replace the warmth of a "Gut Shabbos" exchanged between neighbors walking home from shul. A field of maple trees changing colors in autumn is breathtaking, but it cannot replace the sight of a bais medrash filled with Yidden bent over their Gemaros.

That is why there is something almost poetic about the Vermont dream collapsing under the very reality it was trying to escape. It was not only that antisemitism followed the Jewish people there. It was that the dream itself had overlooked an essential truth: A Jew does not find safety by becoming invisible.

We have tried that throughout our long golus. We have moved from country to country, from one enlightened society to another, hoping that perhaps here we could simply be another citizen, another neighbor, another person left in peace. Yet, the story has repeated itself too many times.

And yet, we endure, not because we have found the perfect corner of the earth where trouble cannot reach us, but because wherever we have gone, we have carried our home with us. A sefer on a table. A mezuzah on a doorpost. A minyan in a shul. A mother lighting Shabbos candles. A father learning with his child.

Perhaps that is the greatest irony of all: The little Vermont farmhouse hidden among the mountains seems like a refuge because it is far away from everyone. But a Yid's greatest refuge has never been found in isolation. It has always been found in connection – to Hashem, to Torah, and to other Yidden.

The forests of Vermont may offer silence. But the sound of Torah is what has allowed us to survive every storm.

Think about the irony of what the Israeli woman was seeking. She went to Vermont because she wanted a place where her children could run barefoot on the grass and where doors remained unlocked. She was searching for innocence, a world that felt untouched by hatred and conflict. A world that would not bother her for being Jewish.

That longing is profoundly human. After centuries of wandering, persecution, and uncertainty, who could blame a Jew for dreaming of a quiet little corner of the world where history finally leaves him alone.

But perhaps that is the great lesson of our journey through golus. We do not survive because we find a place where there are no storms. We survive because we have learned how to build homes that can withstand storms wherever they arise.

Whether it is a Jewish home in a crowded apartment building in Boro Park, a small house in Monsey, a village in Europe centuries ago, or even a remote farmhouse surrounded by Vermont mountains, the walls do not protect us. What protects us is what is behind those walls: Torah, tefillah, emunah, and the generations of mesorah that we carry with us.

Last week, I found myself in Boro Park, having gone there to be menachem avel the Rubashkin family upon the passing of their dear mother. Having grown up and lived in Monsey for most of my life, and now residing in Lakewood, walking down the streets of Boro Park felt a bit jarring.

The streets were alive with noise, traffic, and construction, with people of all ages moving in every direction, all close together, all in motion.

As I walked, I noticed a sign indicating a bais medrash and stepped inside, simply to sit for a moment and look into a sefer. The sign read "Fultichan." I pulled the door, expecting it to be locked, but it opened immediately – no combination, no multiple locks.

Inside was a small room with two people learning.

I had never been there before, and I do not know if I will ever be there again. But I walked in and felt at home.

A Yid walks into a bais medrash and feels at home, wherever it is, whatever its size, whether it holds multitudes or just two chavrusos learning a sugya. There is a familiarity there that transcends place and circumstance.

And that reminded me that I do not need to go to Vermont or the country or anywhere else to find stillness. All I need to do is step into a bais medrash, open a sefer, and I am transported to the eternal Yiddishe place of solitude, comfort, and safety.

A person can build a house at the edge of the forest and believe that he has finally escaped the world. But a Jew has never been tasked with finding a place where he can hide from history. Our task has always been to carry eternity with us as we walk through history.

There is something about a Vermont or country summer that speaks of innocence and simplicity, where life is uncomplicated and peaceful, formed from a combination of deep green mountains, wildflowers growing along the fence lines, the old country store where everyone knows each other, the gravel road disappearing into the hills, and the old pickup truck moving slowly because there is nowhere to rush.

But even a place where time seems to move more slowly, a place that looks like it belongs in a Norman Rockwell painting, cannot promise an escape from the darker currents that run through the world.

The winds blow through the valleys of the Catskills or Vermont just as they blow through every other place on earth. The difference is not whether there is a storm outside. The difference is whether there is a flame burning inside.

And perhaps that is why, after all the centuries of exile, a small shtiebel in a noisy city can be a greater refuge than a cabin on a dusty country road.

Perhaps every person has his own Vermont.

For some, it is a bungalow in the mountains. For others, it is an apartment at the edge of Geulah, a house on a lake, or simply the dream of a different life where the burdens and anxieties of the present somehow cannot find us.

And perhaps every generation has its Vermont as well.

A time when it believes that the storms have finally passed. A moment when all the pieces appear to have fallen perfectly into place. The right people are in power. The dangerous enemies have been weakened. The future seems secure. We tell ourselves that the battles are behind us and that we can finally sit down on the porch, open a sefer, pour the coffee, and rest.

But history has a way of knocking on the door of even the quietest farmhouse.

Because no matter how far we run, we cannot run away from the world that Hashem placed us in. The purpose of a Jew is not to escape history, but to live through it with emunah. We are commanded to build homes, raise families, learn Torah, and serve Hashem not in a world free of uncertainty, but in a world where uncertainty is the stage upon which our bitachon is tested.

And that is a lesson we have been reminded of once again in recent months.

Everything was falling into place. Donald Trump won a landslide victory, doing away with Kamala Harris with historic flourish. He was Israel's friend, the best anyone could hope for. He stood at Israel's side during his first administration and promised to do so in his second. He was surrounded by Jewish people, conservative ones, and friends of the Jewish nation. As far as friends of Israel were concerned, he could do no wrong. He said and did all the right things. He was a welcome change and relief from the Biden and Obama years and their anti-Israel administrations.

Binyomin Netanyahu's life mission has been to derail Iran's push for nuclear weapons, but despite his many efforts and hard work, he found no allies in his campaign. And then Trump bought in. Following his reelection in November 2024, Netanyahu flew to the president-elect's mansion in West Palm Beach and discussed with him how they would jointly attack Iran and its nuclear project.

Working together, last year at this time, the United States and Israel attacked Iran's nuclear facilities. Trump and Netanyahu were jubilant. The Iranian threat had finally been removed. After lying about their nuclear ambitions for decades, Iran would finally not be able to continue production of a bomb. Trump was proclaimed an Israeli hero, and Jews the world over were thrilled.

But by February, Iran appeared to be on the cusp of enriching its uranium to levels necessary for bomb-making, and the Trump-Netanyahu coalition went to war against Iran once again. Commencing with the assassination of the Iranian Supreme Leader and dozens of members of the country's leadership, their goal was to cause regime change and spark a transition to a post-theocratic government. Trump had promised the Iranian people as much, and he was coming now to make good on that pledge.

The other goals were to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, destroy its ballistic missile capabilities, and end Iran's ability to maintain and support its terror proxies.

Netanyahu was thrilled. He was finally achieving his life's ambition. The American president was his best friend. They spoke every day or two and things were looking up. He was planning his reelection campaign, preparing clips of himself and Trump working together, and gathering Trump's many complimentary quotes about his greatness, military leadership, and importance to Israel. Trump was even going to travel to Israel before the elections to campaign for his friend, Bibi.

And then, after months of bombing and achieving military victories, decimating Iran's nuclear capability along with its navy and air force, Trump decided that he had had enough. What he thought would be a quick war was dragging on. Iran was blocking ships from transporting oil through the Strait of Hormuz, causing the price of gasoline to rise along with inflation. His threats and bravado were not cowing the Iranians, and the war was quite unpopular in the United States and elsewhere. He and his administration had done a poor job of selling it and explaining to the American people the need for the war.

The whole thing fell apart. All the words of Chazal cautioning us not to trust in governments or people came back to haunt us. All the lessons we have learned over the years once again became so real. Everything we have learned about *lev melochim vesorim b'Yad Hashem* is smacking us in

the face. Eretz asher Hashem Elokecha doresh osah, tomid einei Hashem Elokecha bah, meireishis hashanah v'ad acharis shanah. If you follow Hashem's directions, His chukim umishpotim, He will be there for you, protecting you, suppressing your enemies, and keeping your friends your friends.

But when you disrespect Him, when you do not follow His laws, when you mock His Torah and those who dedicate their lives to it, then things begin to crumble. And that is exactly what happened. When you take credit for military miracles, when you say, "Kochi v'otzem yodi asah li es hachayil hazeh," then He says, "I will leave you to your own devices and see how far you will get."

And as the world found out on October 7, that is not too far. And now that lesson has been repeated again. Your best friend, colleague, ally, and protector now mocks you, criticizes you, and curses you, and his vice president speaks with open contempt, if not outright hatred, toward you and your country.

President Trump tells you that if not for him, the State of Israel would not exist. If you do not acknowledge Hashem's role in your state, then you leave a vacuum, and the American president is as eligible to fill that role as anyone else. He has been a good friend and dependable ally, and he deserves appreciation.

Israel is the land of the Jews, our haven in a sea of hatred, but when its leadership turns its back on Hashem, His Torah, and those faithful to Him, things begin to collapse.

Overnight, the man who fashions himself as master of the art of the deal was out-negotiated by a couple of lunatics with their backs against the wall, quickly running out of money and power. Overnight, the best friend of Israel, the commander-in-chief whose army worked shoulder to shoulder in unprecedented unity with Israel's forces, jointly confronting the world's pariah state, which views them as the Big Satan and the Little Satan, was convinced that Iran's leaders wanted to turn over a new leaf and function as a rational country.

After dropping tens of thousands of bombs across Iran, and annihilating its navy and air force, most of its drones and missiles, and the capacity to manufacture more of them, and causing hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of damage, the United States gave the regime a lifeline.

What happened? What changed? Observers wondered. Israel and its supporters scratched their collective heads. Commentators commented and pontificators pontificated. Republicans bit their tongues, and Democrats gleefully wagged theirs in a fit of "I told you sos" over the president's seeming capitulation.

It is only a memorandum, not a deal. There is much negotiating ahead and nothing is definite. But a few things are clear: We are not in charge, nothing happens by itself, and nothing can be taken for granted.

When the war began, people the world over were fearful, and everyone immediately began davening and saying Tehillim. As time went on, they got used to the situation. Besides, Trump and Netanyahu were in charge. Their armies, the two most powerful in the world, were doing what they do best and crushing Iran. What could go wrong?

We slackened off. We lost sight of the One Who really runs everything and thought that the ruination of the Iranian regime was a done deal. Israel would be granted years of peace. Iran's days as a terror paymaster would be ended, and its proxies would collapse. The Arab Gulf states would have nothing more to fear and would line up to make peace with Israel.

Well, it is not yet over, but the war seems to be heading toward a surprise ending. Our tefillos have the ability to change the outcome. Our devotion to Torah can bring about the change. Our mesirus nefesh for Torah has the power of the parah adumah to result in taharah and kedusha.

This week, we lain, "Zos haTorah, odom ki yomus b'ohel." The secret of our existence, the secret of our success, is to go beyond our abilities, to stretch ourselves physically and financially for Torah. By doing so, we succeed, and our people succeed along with us.

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Perhaps, one day, I will still make my way to that little farmhouse in Vermont.

Perhaps I will still sit on that porch as the morning mist rises from the stream, a cup of coffee warming my hands, a sefer open before me, listening to the whisper of the trees as they sway in the gentle breeze.

But the peace I imagined finding there was never hidden among the hills or waiting for me at the end of some forgotten dirt road.

A Yid can sit in the middle of a city, surrounded by noise and commotion, with enemies gathering at his borders and the nations of the world changing their loyalties overnight, and he can still possess a tranquility that no mountain retreat can provide. Much the same, a person can sit in the most beautiful corner of the world and be filled with fear if he believes that his fate rests in the hands of presidents, generals, and governments.

The lesson of these days is one our people have learned and relearned throughout thousands of years of history. We appreciate those whom Hashem sends to help us. We express gratitude to friends who stand by us. We use the tools that Hashem places in our hands – diplomacy, military strength, wisdom, and strategy.

But we must never confuse the messenger with the One Who sent him.

The same Hand that directs the flow of a quiet Vermont stream directs the currents of history. The same Creator Who paints the leaves in the forests of New England decides the fate of empires, moves the hearts of kings, and determines whether a friend remains a friend and whether an enemy loses his power.

"Zos haTorah, odom ki yomus b'ohel." The secret of Yiddishe existence is not our ability to find a place where the world cannot touch us. It is our ability to enter the ohel of Torah, to live by it, and to sacrifice for it.

After thousands of years of wandering through every kind of landscape – deserts and ghettos, palaces and prisons, prosperity and persecution – the Jewish people are still here. We never found our Vermont.

We found something far greater.

The ohel of Torah.

The nations search for their security in treaties and alliances. Empires trust in their armies and economies. We have our own refuge.

Not a farmhouse at the end of a winding road.

Not a president in Washington.

Not a military coalition or a diplomatic victory.

Our refuge has always been, and will always be, the Ribbono Shel Olam.

He is always available to us, wherever we are. We do not have to run away anywhere. We do not need to find quaint towns and cottages. “Ki karov eilecha hadovor me’od beficha uvilvovcha.”

Personal tranquility is a choice that can be achieved by stepping into the ohel haTorah, the Ohel Hashem, figuratively and literally. It is always open, always available.

The light is always on.

May we all be zoche to the ultimate tranquility and peace with the coming of Moshiach Tzidkeinu bekarov mamash.