

This Shabbos was the twelfth day of the month of Kislev. For me personally, the twelfth of Kislev is the anniversary of the last time I had the merit to be in the holy city of Tzfas. How, you no doubt are wondering, do I remember what day I was last in Tzfas? If my love for Eretz Yisrael was as deep and as fully expressed as it ought to be, you would not even wonder why I would remember every detail of a visit to Tzfas. But the actual reason is a little more pragmatic. This week, out of the blue, I received an email containing the Torah thoughts of a Chassidic *tzaddik* known as the *Bas Ayin*, with a note that his *yahrtzeit* was this Shabbos. And it so happens that when I was last in Tzfas and looking for directions to the ancient cemetery, a Jew who was kind enough to help informed me that I would notice a lot of people gathered around the grave of the *Bas Ayin*, as that day was his *yahrtzeit*. I did not join them there, as I had other destinations in mind, but it sticks in my memory.

There is another reason why I would think of the holy city of Tzfas on the Shabbos of Parshas Vayeitzei, not that one needs a reason. If you leave the old city of Tzfas and go all the way up the stairs, and you make a right on Rechov Yerushalayim, and then, just after you go under the bridge, you turn left and go up some more stairs, you will see, on your left, a place which, according to tradition, was the location of *Yeshivas Shem V'ever*. When I first visited this spot, it was just a little cave with an old sign; today, there is a little shul on the premises called Beis Knesses Shem V'ever, making it one of the few buildings in Eretz Yisrael named after someone who did not give any money to the building campaign. [I imagine, though I did not confirm, that the Avraham Avinu shul in Chevron is also in this category.] I do not know the source of the tradition that places Shem and Ever's yeshiva here. But regardless, *Yeshivas Shem V'ever* is a mysterious place in the history of the world, and perhaps there is no better place for it than Tzfas.

The beginning of our parshah adds another chapter to both the story and the mystery of *Yeshivas Shem V'Ever*. The parsha opens with Yaakov on his way to Lavan's house in Charan, but as the Sages tell us, he did not go directly to Charan. He first spent fourteen years in the yeshiva of Shem and Ever, immersed in the study of Torah to the exclusion of every physical comfort. But why did Yaakov go here, of all places, before setting off to encounter Lavan? As Rabbi Hauer articulated a few weeks ago, and as we know from many sources, *Yeshivas Shem V'ever* seems to have been a place where you went to escape from the world around you. Yaakov was on his way to encounter the world for the first time; moreover, he was about to spend twenty years with Lavan, our most wily and insidious adversary. Why didn't he go to the ancient equivalent of Aish Hatorah, to a place that would have given him the tools to engage a world he had never encountered?

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky famously writes that *Yeshivas Shem V'Ever* developed a particular element of the Torah: the element that teaches how to sustain yourself in exile. It was this that Yaakov went to learn. But I would add another layer to this idea.

Yaakov is the one of our forefathers who teaches us how to survive and thrive in our long, dark exile. And the genius of the Jewish people, the epiphany of the Jewish soul that has sustained us throughout the *galus*, is not that we simply withdraw from the

world around us and keep our heads down. It is that the places where we take refuge are the places that give us our greatest strength, the places which fill us with life and light -- our shuls, our *batei medrash*, our schools, and our homes.

In describing what Yaakov was doing for those missing fourteen years, Rashi uses a lyrical word which, in this context, is almost untranslatable: נטמן בבית עבר, *he was nitman in the house of Ever*. What does it mean to be *nitman*? It is a word that blends the nuances of hiding, being buried, and being wrapped by something warm and supportive. Maybe the best analogy I could use is "cocooned." Yaakov was not just biding his time in yeshiva, or cramming in some extra years of study before facing the world. He was creating the template through which we have always thrived in adversity: by learning how to build those places where we can cocoon, by building walls that do not just keep the madness out but nurture our spirit within and grow us into something greater. We emerge from the darkness by sitting next to the fire that heats our *neshamos* and ignites our spiritual ambitions.

Without dwelling on it too much now, this is very much the story of Chanukah. We face down the military and cultural might of the Yevanim by the transformative light of the Menorah. How many people actually saw the miracle of the Menorah? It happened in the holiest section of the Beis Hamikdash, where hardly anyone is allowed to enter. It was נטמן. But that, too, is the message of Chanukah. We have enemies to face and great battles to fight. But to be successful, we need to turn to what is hidden inside, to the private holy places which allow our hearts to beat and which, in turn, allow us to face our challenges. Inside is where our greatest treasures are stored, and that is the secret to our strength.

We have spent the last several months learning about retreating from the world around us, and I have nothing to gain by telling you more about that right now. But -- we hope it is sometime soon -- we will eventually begin to emerge from our retreat, albeit cautiously and unpredictably. And as we do so, we might need to remind ourselves that aside from our own homes, we have another cocoon, a place from which we draw all our vitality, all our spiritual strength and our most meaningful relationships: our shul. Our shul is the place where we can be *nitman*. Our shul is the place where we find not just activity and Torah and *tefilah*, but the place inside that shelters us because it provides us with all the spiritual energy we need. Our shul is our *Yeshivas Shem V'Ever*.

Our shul, baruch Hashem, is starting to fill again with energy and activity for young, old and everyone in between. We will of course continue to stay cautious and responsible with our health, but we will, with Hashem's help, continue to thrive. And the reason is not simply because we need something to do or a nice venue for activities. It is because it is the place that fuels our ambitions, the place, as long as we are connected to it, that is our opportunity to be *nitman* and then to carry that strength with us everywhere else. And until we find our way back to Tzion, which is בית חיינו, I hope we always find strength together in our own *Yeshivas Shem V'Ever*.