

Never Stop Digging

Category: Bereishis, Toldos

When a young rabbi chanced on a synagogue's desecration in Siberia, he knew he couldn't remain silent.

“Only We Don't Know”

This week, two international conferences took place: One was the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, Scotland, and the second was the International Conference of Shluchim in New York.

In the first, they discussed how to save the world from warming too much, and in the second, they discussed how they could add a little Jewish warmth to the cold world.

One fascinating story was related by Rabbi Shneur Zalman Zaklos, a native of Israel.

When he was dating his wife, he shared his dream of becoming a Chabad rabbi somewhere in the world. His future wife responded that she was willing to go anywhere — aside from Russia.

After their marriage, they searched for a suitable posting. Among the suggestions was one from Rabbi Berel Lazar, the Chief Rabbi of Russia and Chabad's senior representative in the area. He suggested Russia's third largest city, following Moscow and S. Petersburg, called Novosibirsk. Where is it? Southwest Siberia.

Rabbi Zaklos turned down the offer. It was too cold, too remote, and it didn't fit their goals. But Rabbi Lazar insisted. “Why don't you at least visit the location before making a decision?”

For whatever reason, they decided to ‘take a vacation’ to Siberia. It was 20 years ago when they got onto an airplane and flew to Siberia's capital to arrange a Purim party for the local community. It was only when they landed that they realized just how bitterly cold the place really was; the average temperature was below zero.

The first thing they did was visit the synagogue. They found an old building with broken windows which was a hub for the homeless. The restroom was a hole in the courtyard, and it was the only synagogue in the city. They managed to pull off some sort of party with the Jews they managed to locate, and then they planned their return to Israel.

A day after Purim, Rabbi Zaklos decided to go pray in the synagogue. As he opened the door, he discovered a disaster. All the tables and chairs were turned over, prayer books were thrown on the floor, and most disturbing of all: the Torah scroll was laying desecrated on the ground. A group of anti-Semites had vandalized the synagogue.

Terribly shocked, he immediately called Rabbi Lazar to tell him what had occurred. Rabbi Lazar told him that the only way to ensure the authorities would intervene was through involving the media. Rabbi Lazar immediately contacted all the media organizations and told Rabbi Zaklos to bring them into the Shul. "The pictures of the devastation will speak for themselves."

When Rabbi Zaklos returned to the synagogue an hour later, he was greeted by a crowd of journalists, photographers, and media people. They entered the synagogue, and it immediately turned into an impromptu press conference. One of the first questions was, "Are you the rabbi of Novosibirsk?"

He realized that he couldn't answer, "no." If he wasn't the rabbi, what was he doing there? Who did he represent? He responded that he was the new rabbi who had come to serve in Novosibirsk, and he expected the authorities to respond appropriately to the event. He said that a large, beautiful Shul needed to be built, and they needed to ensure that such an event would not repeat itself.

The story immediately took off around the world. Everybody wrote about the terrible desecration of the synagogue in Siberia and the new rabbi. By the time he returned to Israel several days later, everybody came over to congratulate him on his new post.

Several months passed, and they still were unsure about the future. But one evening, as he sat with his wife, he told her, "Listen, everybody knows that we are the Shluchim to Siberia. The Russian government knows it, our community knows it and our family knows it. Apparently, we are the only ones who don't know it yet..."

He realized that his statement at the makeshift press conference wasn't coincidental. Divine Providence had guided him to that moment to assume that responsibility. He and his wife went back to Novosibirsk, settled down, and built up a beautiful Jewish community.

What is the Secret of Chabad?

The secret of Chabad is hidden in this week's Torah portion. Over the recent weeks, we've been reading about the forefathers of the Jewish people, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We know a lot about Abraham's goals; we know that his life mission was to spread knowledge about God and to do acts of kindness. We also know Jacob quite well. He spent many years raising the first large Jewish family — the 12 tribes that are the foundation of the Jewish people. But what exactly, the Rebbe asks, is the role of Isaac? What was his mission?

In this week's portion (chapter 26), we read that Isaac moved to the Philistine city of Gerar (between Gaza and Beersheba) after famine hit. He began planting the fields, and with G-d's help he was very successful. He had servants, maidservants, and plenty of cattle — he became very wealthy. What followed is very common whenever Jews are too successful around strangers: "The Philistines were jealous of him." The locals hated Isaac to the extent that the king told him outright, "Go from among us, because you have become too powerful."

Isaac left the city and settled next to a stream, where he began his next project: to dig wells. Water is the greatest commodity in a desert without which it is impossible to survive, so he commanded his servants to dig new wells. It's important to remember that with the primitive tools of their day, digging wells was a costly and long endeavor —but they were successful, and they found water.

Immediately, the local shepherds claimed, "The water is ours." Isaac didn't argue; he moved a bit farther from the city and dug a second well. But here, again, the locals claimed it for themselves as soon as they found water. Again, Isaac didn't argue. He moved even further away from the city and dug a third time. This time, nobody challenged his claim.

What exactly is the secret behind this story?

The question here isn't 'Why did Isaac dig wells?' The question is, 'why did the

Torah tell us the story?’

Isaac lived 180 years, and he no doubt accomplished much throughout his life. Only a few of his accomplishments were selected to be told in the Torah. If the story about the wells was among them, it clearly has an important message for us. What is the message? What are we to learn from digging wells?

Never Stop Digging

The Rebbe answers that Isaac teaches us never to give up. “Isaac’s approach was . . . such that he didn’t fight with those who disturbed his well-digging. When his servants found water and the locals claimed it as their own . . . he wasn’t deterred, and he commanded them to continue digging. Even when they took the second well, he dug a third, until he finally reached true peace and prosperity.” We too should never give up.

The deeds of our forefathers are a lesson for us, and this is also expressed in the history of the Jewish people. The Rebbe says. “The Jewish people tried and built a temple, but unfortunately the world wasn’t able to handle it . . . and therefore, 410 years later, it was destroyed.”

“Later, after a short exile of 70 years in Babylon, the Jewish people tried again and built another Temple . . . this time, it stood for an extra 10 years, but it too . . . was destroyed after 420 years.”

“Nachmanides says that the first and second temples represent Isaac’s first two wells, *esek* and *sitnah*. The third temple, the eternal one, represents the third well, *rechovot*. Through our actions . . . during the time of exile, we get closer and closer, day by day an hour by hour.”

But what does it mean to dig wells in the 21st century?

Every Jew has a wellspring of water inside him. He has a soul which desires to become closer to God. Sometimes, this well is completely covered; “On the outside, only stones and mud are visible, covering the wellspring of water.”

The message is that it is our job to uncover those hidden wellsprings and allow the water to spill forth.

“You might claim that you tried to dig once and then twice . . . What use is there in continuing? The answer: the work of Isaac and his descendants needs to be carried out without too much calculations. The fact that you haven’t been successful until now is G-d’s responsibility. What matters to you is that you continue to dig and dig until you finally reach water.”

This is the secret:

The Rebbe taught us one thing: That every Jew has a wellspring in his heart, and we need to keep on digging — whether in the cold of Siberia or the heat of Beersheba. We need to dig until we uncover the well, and that well will be enough to quench the thirst of an entire city.

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