

Reinventing Yourself

Category: Bo,Shemos

Yud Shvat

Covid has forced many of us to reinvent ourselves. Let's learn how to do it from the experts.

Covid Reinvention

Flurona.

That's the new name that was given for those who contracted the flu and the covid together, combining the words flu and corona.

Over the past two years since the outbreak of the COVID pandemic, many of us were forced to reinvent ourselves, and some even more than once. We all needed to get used to new realities and find new opportunities to the best of our abilities.

Let me share with you a story of true reinvention.

This Wednesday, the tenth of Shevat, marks the anniversary of the passing of the previous Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, who led the Chabad movement from 1920 through 1950. During one Yahrzeit gathering (in 5734), the Rebbe noted that each of the three decades of his leadership were unique, each with their own unique challenges and characteristics.

Russian Reinvention

When the previous Rebbe assumed leadership in 1920, he was 40 years old. It was right at the beginning of the Bolshevik revolution, the revolution which changed the face of Russia. Within a short time, the government forbade all religious activities; synagogues were closed, mikvahs were plugged, mohels were thrown into prison, and religion was outlawed. The previous Rebbe found himself facing this 'deluge' right at the beginning of his leadership.

Until that moment, the primary role of a Chabad Rebbe was to teach and spread

the message of Chassidism. Now, the Bolshevik revolution forced Chabad to go underground and take on the role of preserving Judaism in the Soviet Union. The Rebbe's role became to preserve basic Jewish observance — to dispatch a teacher to an underground Jewish school in one city, to send money for an underground mikvah in a second city, and to send funding to support a rabbi who simply couldn't provide for his family.

Being a Rebbe in the Soviet Union of 1920 was a dangerous and complicated task. Indeed, by 1927, he was arrested and exiled, and only miraculously released and expelled from the Soviet Union.

Polish Reinvention

Leaving Russia behind, he looked for a place to settle. He wasn't just looking for a home. He needed to find the right place to reestablish the world headquarters of the Chabad movement. He visited Israel for several weeks, then traveled to the United States to see if it was ready to host the center of Chabad, but after nine months he decided to return to Europe and settle in Poland.

After a short time in Latvia, he settled in Warsaw. Poland and Russia couldn't have been more different at the time. Poland was a free country, where Judaism could be practiced in public. Warsaw was teeming with scholars and rabbis and religious Jews. There was no need to support the basic Jewish infrastructure. Here, he had to start from scratch. In Poland, the mission was to bring the local Jews the message of Chabad Chassidic thought — which was totally foreign to them. With a small yeshivah, he began from the ground up.

As usual, not everyone agreed with the Chabad approach, but the Rebbe didn't give up and didn't get tired. Under his leadership, Chabad experienced exponential growth in Poland during that decade.

Then, on September 1st, 1939, the Nazis invaded Poland in a blitzkrieg. The Previous Rebbe was nearing 60 and suffering from a debilitating illness. Confined to a wheelchair, aides were forced to carry him quickly into the air raid shelters every time the bombing commenced. Chassidim in the United States mobilized to save the Rebbe from the Nazi inferno, and after superhuman efforts, he arrived in the United States on the 9th of Adar.

American Reinvention

When the Rebbe got off the boat, he was greeted by thousands of people who remembered his first visit 10 years earlier. He didn't look nearly as healthy, but it didn't affect his spirit. While still at the pier, the Rebbe declared, "America is no different!"

This was quite a statement. The Eastern European immigrants to the United States would often say, "America is different," excusing themselves for the lax Jewish life that existed in America at the time. But the Rebbe declared, "America is no different." Jewish life in the United States would be the same as it was in Europe.

That very evening, he convened a meeting with a group of activists and associates, where he told them of his plan to open a Chassidic Yeshiva.

After the meeting, two of his greatest supporters — who were instrumental in saving the Rebbe from the Nazi inferno — entered his room.

They said: "Rebbe, we came to tell you that the idea of opening a Yeshiva like in Europe is simply unrealistic; it will never happen. We are telling you this because we want to spare you the embarrassment of failure. We treasure your dignity and the dignity of Chabad; you do not know American culture — it is simply unrealistic."

That night, the Previous Rebbe recited Shema before retiring to bed.

In Chassidic thought, the Shema before bed is a time for introspection; it is like a daily Yom Kippur moment, when we reflect on the events of the day and think about how we can improve them, making tomorrow a better day.

The Rebbe recounts in his diary that when he recited Shema that night, he wept bitter tears. These were his closest friends and supporters, and yet even they were convinced that there was no future for a yeshiva in America (Likkutei Dibburim vol. 3 pg. 466).

The Rebbe wasn't deterred. Rabbi Pinchas Teitz recounted that he went to see the Rebbe a few days after his arrival. When he said that he was in a rush to go broadcast his radio program, he was told to announce on the radio that the

Lubavitcher Rebbe would be opening a yeshiva in America. (From a Kfar Chabad interview).

True to his statement, a week later on Shushan Purim, ten students gathered at a synagogue in Brooklyn, thus opening the first European style yeshiva in the United States - where the whole day was dedicated to Torah study.. For the third time in his life, the previous Rebbe — when he was sixty — had to start all over again.

At that time, European Jews and particularly Chassidic Rebbes lived on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The Previous Rebbe went somewhere else entirely. He chose to settle in Brooklyn, in an upscale neighborhood called Crown Heights, home to the wealthy secular Jews of New York. Needless to say, it wasn't a very Chassidic neighborhood. American Jewry was large and successful — but very far from Judaism. In those days, Jews tried to be as American as possible.

In August of that year, the Rebbe moved to what is now known as the Chabad World Headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway. At the time, the residents of the neighborhood were mostly Conservative Jews who did not like the idea of a Chassidic Rebbe living in their neighborhood. The “Jewish Center” on Eastern Parkway — just one block from 770 — was actually the most prestigious Conservative center in the United States at the time.

A number of locals even organized a petition in an attempt to cancel the sale of 770 to Chabad. It was only scuttled when one of the activists asked a local doctor to attach his signature; another person present in the room burst into a fury; “How dare you fight a Jew who has sacrificed his life for Judaism and has only recently arrived from Nazi occupied Poland!” He took the petition with all the signatures and tore it to pieces. (Beis Chayenu 770 pg. 111).

In the US, the Rebbe started again from scratch, spreading Judaism beginning with the Aleph-Bet. Now he was dealing with educated Jews, doctors, judges, lawyers, businessmen, etc., but when it came to Judaism, they knew nothing — and moreover, they ran away from it. The Previous Rebbe began from scratch, organizing activities like Mesibos Shabbos, where the Yeshivah students gathered children on Shabbat, handed them candies and told them Jewish stories.

Another program was Release Time. In the same month the Rebbe arrived, a new law was enacted in New York which allowed public school children the

opportunity to study their religion for an hour every Wednesday. The Rebbe immediately took advantage of this law and sent yeshiva students to pick up Jewish children, bring them to a synagogue and teach them Judaism each week. Thousands of children participated in this program. Thus began the third decade of his leadership.

A year later, the Rebbe arrived to New York, and Chabad's activities began to gain momentum.

Three decades in three countries with three different cultures, always needing to start over again from the beginning.

Egypt—Desert—Israel

This is the story of the Jewish people.

The family of Jacob went down to Egypt, and, as they told Pharaoh, "We and our fathers have always been shepherds" (Vayigash 47:3). Nonetheless, it was not long before they adapted very nicely to Egypt. In the last verse of Parshat Vayigash we read, "And Israel dwelled ... in the land of Goshen and they took possession of it..." Rashi says that they bought houses and land and went into the real estate business. They reinvented themselves.

Two hundred ten years of exile pass, and the children of Israel are about to leave Egypt. People who lived in the most advanced civilization of its day were being forced to go out into a barren desert.

True, G-d provided them with all their needs; manna from heaven, water from the rock, and so on. But what exactly were they supposed to do there? There is no real estate in the desert, and there is no way of doing business; they simply sat and waited to enter Israel. They needed to learn to get used to it. They were like the Holocaust survivors in DP camps. Sitting on their suitcases, the survivors thought that they would be receiving visas to the Promised Land immediately. In the end, they remained stuck there for many years and had to learn to live there as well.

But the main challenge was when they entered the Land of Israel. Suddenly, all the Jews who were born in the desert, who never held a shovel in their hand and

received all their needs directly from G-d, needed to become farmers. They once again were forced to reinvent themselves.

Soldiers

The power to reinvent oneself again and again comes from a place deep in the Jewish soul.

When a person knows that he is not here to enjoy life but is here as part of G-d's army — and the goal is to bring G-d into the world — it does not matter to him if he is accustomed to one type of work or another. He doesn't complain that it is too late to start anew in life.

He is a soldier of G-d, and a soldier — wherever he finds himself — does his job with devotion.