

בס"ד

Shluchim Sermons



Bamidbar

Be a Rock

What is wrong with our society? How can we make a difference?

Once Again

Highland Park.

We are all still in shock by the horrific shooting that took place this week. This mass shooting hit close to home, with four of the seven murdered were members of the Jewish community.

Everyone has the same question: Where does it come from? How does a young man fall into such an abyss that he stands on a roof and shoots innocent people?

There have been more than 300 mass shootings in the United States in the last six months, and the situation is only getting worse.

There is no question that we need to tighten gun control, and everything possible must be done to reign in the shooting madness that is sweeping America. However, there is something deeper here that needs to be figured out: what is it that drives young people to do such terrible things?

The Covenant

This year, we mark the centenary of a rare event in Chabad history.

1922 was a difficult year for Russian Jewry. In those years, Russia underwent the Bolshevik revolution, and communism took its strong hold on the country. Communism was founded with the mission to

erase the belief in G-d — Karl Marx claimed that religion was the “opium of the masses” — so the new Bolshevik government did everything to fight religion. They fought not only Judaism, but all religions.

Observant Jews saw that there was no future for Judaism in Russia. They left en masse; entire yeshivos with their rabbinic leaders fled the country.

However, the Previous Rebbe chose to stay in Russia. He knew that most Russian Jews chose to remain; while the most religious had left, millions of Jews still lived in Russia, and many of them were enthusiastic about the Communist dream that would bring a utopian equality between the rich and the poor.

The rabbis, shochets and mohels all left Russia. Who would preserve Judaism under the Communists? Who would be there to remind Jews that Rosh Hashanah was approaching? Who would bake matzah for Passover?

That is why the Previous Rebbe remained in Russia and established a Chasidic underground.

Now, in 1922 the situation seemed dire. Every day, new laws oppressing Judaism were announced: mikvahs were closed because they did not meet the “hygiene” standards of the government. Circumcision was declared a “barbaric act.” Jewish slaughter was declared not compassionate enough. A “Compulsory Education Law” was declared in which every child was forced to appear in school, even on Shabbos, to be taught Communist dogma — including brainwashing them against the belief in G-d.

The Previous Rebbe wanted to do something dramatic which would give Chasidim the strength to stand up to the “evil empire.” Exactly one hundred years ago, the Rebbe gathered nine of his followers —

with him, they were a Minyan — and they made a covenant that they would fight for the preservation of Judaism in Russia until the last drop of blood.

Fifty years later, in 1972, the Rebbe recounted the incident. He explained that the covenant gave them the spiritual strength to overcome all obstacles. Despite the KGB interrogations, imprisonment and torture, they lived with their promise to each other that they would remain strong to the end — no matter what. With that commitment they persevered, and they won.

My own father, Rabbi Moshe Greenberg, OBM was born in Romania in 1927, and when his family fled the Nazis at the beginning of World War II, they came to Tashkent, Uzbekistan. My grandfather heard that there was a group of Jews who risked their lives to teach Torah to Jewish children, and they were called Chabad. My grandfather had never heard the name Chabad before, but he wanted his children to remain Jews, so he sent my father and his brother — both teenagers — to Chabad. That's how my father became a Chabad Chassid.

Who were his teachers? These were Chassidim of the Previous Rebbe who had remained in Russia to teach Judaism in secret, in basements and attics, to preserve the Judaism of the next generation.

Water & Rocks

In this week's parsha, we read the famous story of Moses hitting the rock.

This is not the first time Moses hit a rock. In Exodus, right after they leave Egypt (at the end of Parshat Beshalach), we read how the People of Israel in the desert could not find water. They complained to Moses and Aaron, Moses prayed to G-d, and G-d told him to take the staff in his hand and hit the rock. Moses did so, and from that moment onward, the People of Israel had water in the desert.

Forty years passed, Miriam died, and the people once again don't have water. Once again, they complain to Moses and Aaron, and this time, G-d tells Moses to speak to the rock. In the end, Moses hits the rock instead of speaking to it, and the rest is history.

The question arises: Why did G-d choose to take water out of a rock? When there is no water, we usually do the normal thing: we pray for rain! The natural thing would have been that after Moses prays to G-d for water, G-d makes it rain. Instead, G-d twice insists on bringing water precisely from a rock, both at the beginning of the journey in the desert and also at its end.

What is the idea behind this? Why a rock?

Jewish Stubbornness

We find the answer in next week's parsha, Parshat Balak, a story which is also pretty much well-known.

Balak was afraid that the People of Israel would conquer his land, and he chose to go the unconventional route: he decided to fight them with a prophet. He turned to Balaam, the prophet of the gentiles, and asked him to come and curse the People of Israel, obviously for generous compensation. After a back-and-forth, Balaam came to Moab to fulfill Balak's request.

He ordered Balak to build him seven altars, but when he finally opened his mouth to speak, wonderful blessings emerged instead of curses.

What is interesting is that right at the beginning of his speech, Balaam basically apologizes for not being able to curse Israel. In the Rebbe's words: "This is the first statement that Balaam said regarding the scheme of Balak, which indicates that this is a fundamental point." (*"Hashem melech,"* Toras Menachem v. 69 p. 32).

What did Balaam say? “I see them from atop the rocks, and gaze on them from the mountains.” Rashi explains: “I look at their origin and I behold them strongly founded like rocks and mountains, through their patriarchs and matriarchs” (Balak 23:9).

With these words, Balaam defines the People of Israel: “I see them strong as rocks”; the secret of their power is that they have an unshakable faith in G-d which is strong as a rock. The fact that the Jewish people managed to survive the exile and remain Jews is because they stood firm against all the surrounding influences and pressures and never surrendered. Not only were the forefathers strong as a rock, the Rebbe says, but our ancestors bequeathed that Jewish stubbornness to every single Jew in future generations.

A prime example is my father, Rabbi Moshe Greenberg, whose Yarzeit is today.

When he was imprisoned by the Russians, he discovered tremendous personal strength. The interrogators tried to extract the names of those who had taught him Torah and those who helped him illegally cross the border; they wanted him to incriminate others. But, my father told me, when he was arrested, he made a firm decision that he would not reveal a single person’s name, no matter what. The interrogators beat him and tortured him; he would return bleeding to his cell after a night of interrogations, but they were unable to extract a single name.

He also made a commitment to eat only kosher food. It was basically a decision to survive only on bread and water, and he insisted on doing so throughout his years in prison. He told me that he was so thin that he was able to see the food digesting through his body...

The Message of the Water-Rock

Perhaps that is why G-d chose to extract water from a rock — to teach

us that the way to receive water, is through a rock.

Our Sages teach us that the Torah is likened to water. The Rebbe explained in a Sicha that just as water persistently descends to the lowest possible place, so too, the Torah — which is the wisdom and will of G-d — insists on descending to the lowest place, for the lowest Jew, even the smallest child.

And G-d took water from the rock to teach us that in order for “water” to come out of you — in order to teach Torah — you need to be as strong and stubborn as a solid rock.

The fight against atheism didn't stop with the fall of the former Soviet Union. It's relevant today as well.

On 12 Tammuz 5741 (1981), the Rebbe said that what our generation lacks today is faith in G-d. A generation or two ago, most parents were religious; before each meal they would bless G-d, and before bed they would do the same. They also taught it to their children, inculcating them with the knowledge that there is a G-d, someone who watches over them and protects them. Every child knew that he could not simply do whatever strikes his fancy.

In the last generation, the Rebbe said, the situation turned on its head. Now, it is normal for students to attack their teachers! Whoever heard of such things a generation ago? It happens, said the Rebbe, because they have no G-d in their lives.

If in 1981 students were attacking teachers, today's students have progressed — they stand on rooftops and shoot people.

We need to do everything possible to share with others the belief in G-d. If someone asks you how you are doing, answer him honestly, “Thank G-d.” Even if they'll smile, there is nothing to be ashamed of. We will influence another person and another person, and with stone-

firm Jewish stubbornness we will bring Moshiach.

(Based on 12 Tammuz 5732 — Toras Menachem v. 69)