



Run, Hide or Fight

Who was the first person in history to follow the active shooter doctrine?

Homeland Security Advice

“Run, hide or fight”—those are the three things that Homeland Security tells everyone to do if you find yourself under attack by any form of terrorism or shots being fired.

Ever since the synagogue attacks several years ago, everyone is concerned about protection and security issues. Doors in public places are now being locked, and synagogues that were once opened to all are no longer such. Doors are secured, with anyone entering being first verified that they are wanted guests. There is even a five-minute video on the Dept. of Homeland Security website which will instruct you on what to do if you face a “moment of truth” of an active shooter at your office.

According to the video, staying safe depends on three pillars.

The first, of course, is “run.” When you hear shots fired, if you can run—run! And encourage everyone near you to do the same. Because it often happens that when shots are fired, people go into shock or panic at the first critical moments and simply freeze—and so they need someone to direct them what to do. However, if a “frozen” person hinders you, the video says to leave him and flee.

The second is “hide.” If you’re in a situation where you can no longer

run, then conceal yourself. Close the office door and put something heavy against the door like a copy machine. Shut off the lights. Don't make any sound. Hide behind something big and heavy. In that situation, if an active shooter tries to get in and finds a locked door and a quiet room behind it, there's a reasonable chance he'll go on to another room.

"Fight" is the last option. If you cannot flee, and you think that the active shooter will find you for whatever reason, then you need to prepare yourself with something heavy so as to fight with the attacker. Use a hammer, a chair or any other hefty object—and be prepared to surprise the shooter.

Well, that's the entire message "on one foot." The Dept. of Homeland Security is confident that they've invented the wheel here—but the truth is that this three-part approach to safety was invented by the first Jew in history to flee the first terrorist in history.

And that, of course, brings us to this week's Torah portion.

Yaakov's Travails

In the Parshah of Vayishlach, we read about how Yaakov Avinu was the first person in the Torah to "invent" this doctrine—but, more accurately, it was Rivkah who invented it.

In the Parshah of Toldos, after Yaakov Avinu got his brother Eisav's blessings, his mother Rivkah called him and said, "Behold, your brother Eisav regrets [his relationship] to you [and wishes] to kill you. And now, my son, hearken to my voice, and arise, flee to my brother Lavan, to Haran" (Bereishis 27:42). And that became a way of life for the Jewish Nation. About Moshe, it says (Shmos 2:15), "And Moshe fled from before the Pharaoh," and regarding King David, it says, "And David fled," and so on (Midrash Tanchuma, Parshas Vayeitzei 65).

Yaakov fled to Padan Aram, where he hid out for some 22 years, until

he could no longer bear the suffering that Lavan inflicted on him. Then, he “fled” again (Bereishis 31:21)—when Lavan was out of town on a business trip, Yaakov used the opportunity to flee.

But Yaakov knew that he was going back to the Holy Land, where there was waiting for him the same person from whom he had fled in the first place 22 years ago—and now, he would have to face him. And so, in our Parshah, we read that Yaakov prepared for war. “And he divided the people... into two camps, and he said, ‘If Eisav comes to the first camp and hits it, then the remaining camp shall escape’” (Bereishis 32:8). Yaakov formed two groups—all of his family in one and the servants, etc. in the other. And the Midrash notes that Yaakov armed them with weapons under their clothing.

Prayer

But Yaakov also did another thing besides those critical three things: He prayed.

The first “tefilah” ever mentioned in the Torah appears right here in our Parshah. True, we find that Yitzchak prayed for his wife Rivkah and that Avraham prayed for Avimelech—but the Torah does not tell us what those prayers were. In our Parshah, however, we read for the first time the “Nusach HaTefilah,” the prayer format, that is still in effect today: “And Yaakov said, ‘G-d of my father Avraham and G-d of my father Yitzchak...’” (Bereishis 32:1)—the very words with which our prayer format opens the Amidah prayer: “G-d of Avraham, G-d of Yitzchak and G-d of Yaakov.” And as the commentator Sforno says on that verse, “He began with a series of praises of G-d and His kindnesses and with mentioning the merits of the Patriarchs—like the order established by the Men of the Great Assembly at the start of the Eighteen Blessings.” And further in his recorded prayer, Yaakov specifically states what and who he is afraid of—he prayed and said, “Please rescue me!”

The Dept. of Homeland Security perhaps thought that prayer didn't need to be explicitly mentioned—because they know that when it comes to such moments, you don't need to tell people that they need to pray. As the old expression goes, “There are no atheists in foxholes”—at such moments, everyone prays with all their heart to be saved.

When Battling the Inner Animal

There's an important lesson here for every one of us. Each one of us is in a constant spiritual battle. Inside each of us are two souls—the spiritual soul and the natural soul, called in Chabad parlance the “G-dly Soul” and the “Animal Soul.” These are symbolized by Yaakov and Eisav, the eternally struggling twins who are constantly fighting for domination of the human being. And in this battle, it's sometimes appropriate to use one of these three techniques. Let's take a look!

What would “flee” mean? Well, if you find yourself in a situation in which you could do or say something bad that you'll later regret, if you could change and take control of the situation, that's definitely good! But if you don't feel that you have the strength to change the facts on the ground, then do what Yaakov Avinu did—“get up and flee.”

But now we can ask: Where to? Yaakov fled to Charan and hid there—but where are we supposed to run to? The Talmud (Tractate Sukkah 52b) tells us, “If the evil inclination meets you, drag him to the study hall.” In the synagogue or study hall, a place of holiness where the Torah is studied and where people pray, there are better chances of saving yourself from your own natural soul, when your bad choice is right there before your eyes.

But the problem is that we don't leave our natural soul at home—rather, he comes with us to the study hall.

The story is told about the Berditchever Rebbe, the legendary Rabbi

Levi Yitzchak, about how, when he was a young newlywed, his father-in-law honored him at synagogue on Simchas Torah with reciting the “Atah Hareisah” text from the podium. Well, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak went up to the podium, picked up the tallis that was lying there to be put on, and immediately put it back down. He waited several seconds and again picked up the tallis and put it back down. He repeated that several times. The entire congregation was standing by, waiting for the fine young man, the son-in-law of the village mogul, to finally put on the tallis and start “Atah Hareisah.” But suddenly they heard him call out, “If you’re a scholar and a Chasid, then *you* say ‘Atah Hareisah’!” He then stepped down from the podium.

Of course, his father-in-law was very embarrassed and hurt by his new son-in-law’s behavior. After the Hakafo, he asked him, “Why did you embarrass me? What’s the meaning of this behavior?”

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak responded, “When I was standing before the podium and I wanted to put on the tallis and say ‘Atah Hareisah,’ my Yetzer Hara came along and said that he wanted to say it along with me.” Meaning, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak felt that he was getting an ego trip from the fact that he had been honored with reciting the first verse of “Atah Hareisah.”

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak then realized that he was not going to recite “Atah Hareisah” completely for spiritual purposes. So he tried to “toss his Yetzer Hara off the podium”—meaning, to free himself from feeling arrogant for getting that honor. But when he came to the conclusion that it was not going to work, that getting the honor would inescapably cause him to feel arrogant, he addressed his own Yetzer Hara and said, “If you’re a scholar and a Chasid, then *you* say ‘Atah Hareisah’!” And with that, he stepped down from the podium. He passed up the honor just so that he would not fall under the domination of the Yetzer Hara.

So here we have it that even a great tzadik like Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, standing before the podium of the synagogue on the night of Simchas Torah, could not flee and hide from his own Yetzer Hara! And so, sometimes we have no other option but the last resort of “fight.”

Fight the Animal Soul

The Talmud (Tractate Brachos 5a, Rashi) says, “A person should perpetually incite his Yetzer Tov against his Yetzer Hora,” and, “Make war against the Yetzer Hora.” And as it’s quoted in the Tanya (Chap. 29), “This means to get angry at the Yetzer Hara, in a loud and angry voice *in his thoughts*, saying to it, ‘You are evil and a sinner!’, etc.”

And so that we don’t just leave this as talk, here’s one real-life example. You’re standing in synagogue in the middle of the prayers, and someone comes along with a good piece of juicy gossip for you. Your first option is to “run”—so you literally change seats or otherwise physically move away from him (without being rude, of course). If you see that he finds you again, “hide”—go take a break in the facilities and in the interim, he’ll find another victim. But if even that doesn’t help, tell him straight out, “I’m sorry, but I’m not interested in hearing gossip.” Now, he very well may try you the next day—but right now, you’re dealing with today... and even if he laughs at you for your sudden “holier than thou attitude,” you’ll be ready to “fight.”

But as the Rebbe always said, what’s best is the Chasidic approach—to add light to the world and to be busy with the positive. When you do so, the Yetzer Hara will automatically find himself a new address.