

# The Hand That Was Almost Amputated

Category: Bamidbar, Shlach

*How did Kalev find the spiritual strength to swim against the tide?*

## Swimming Against the Tide

The story of the spies is one of the most famous stories in the Torah. Moses sent twelve spies, leaders from the twelve tribes, to report about the Land of Israel, and they came back with bad news. They said that the land was a very good one, but it would be impossible to conquer. There were powerful people living in fortified cities, and even the feared Amalekites were there.

Of the twelve spies, only two did not agree with this consensus, and heatedly insisted that the land was conquerable. Those were Joshua and Caleb.

Where did these two find the strength to swim against the tide? Usually, people tend to be confirmers; when we see the majority believes a certain way, we convince ourselves that they are right. Each person thinks to himself, “Who am I to argue with the entire world?” Even if someone has a different opinion, they tend to keep it to themselves. What’s the point of shouting your opinion from the rooftops if it will only get you into trouble?

The truth is, that Moses was actually worried about this scenario; he suspected that there would be trouble from the spies, and he therefore prayed that his close protege, Joshua, be able to withstand the social pressure. He changed his name from Hoshea to Yehoshua, adding the letter Yud, which represents G-d’s name, as a prayer that G-d give him the strength to make the right decision.

But where did Caleb find the strength and audacity to oppose his fellow spies who all believed that entering the land was dangerous? Not only did he reject their opinion, he was also the most vocal opponent. He got up in front of the entire nation and silenced them, declaring that Moses was fully capable of the mission; the people were so annoyed at him that they wanted to stone him. Where did he find this strength of character?

The answer lies in the cryptic verse, “And he came to Hebron.” Rashi explains: “Caleb alone went there and prostrated himself on the graves of the patriarchs, so that his colleagues would not be able to influence him with their plot” (Numbers 13:22).

This was the secret of his strength. During their visit to the land of Israel, he went to Hebron, to the Cave of Machpelah where the patriarchs and matriarchs are buried. He prayed there, asking for the strength to confront the popular consensus. He prayed, “My fathers, seek mercy for me, that I may be saved from the counsel of the spies” (Sotah 34b, also see Toras Menachem v. 47 p. 124).

This is the first time in Jewish history that we find someone going to pray at the graves of the righteous.

## **Why Do We Need A Special Place To Pray?**

What is the point of praying at a righteous person’s gravesite? In truth, what is the point of praying in a synagogue? Ostensibly, G-d is everywhere, so we can pray to Him everywhere — and we often do pray at home. Why do we designate specific sites for prayer?

The answer is that the synagogue, by virtue of being designated as a place of prayer, becomes a holy site. The Divine presence rests there more openly than in any other place. The Shulchan Aruch states that even if you do not have the opportunity to pray with a minyan, you should still endeavor to pray in a shul, “because G-d is present in the synagogue” (Shulchan Aruch 90:10). Similarly, the Midrash says that at the Western Wall, “The Divine presence never departed” (Shemot Rabbah). Prayer offered there is accepted more swiftly.

In a similar vein, the righteous of the Jewish nation are connected to and united with the Divine, and therefore, their burial places become sites where the Divine presence is more manifest, and prayers there are received more readily.

## **The Rebbe**

This week marks the anniversary of the Rebbe’s passing, and tens of thousands of people will come to pray at his resting place at the Ohel in New York.

There are countless stories of individuals whose prayers were answered at the Ohel, people from our community and from all around the world. I'd like to share with you one particular story that happened exactly ten years ago.

You all know that in Israel, soldiers guard the borders day and night. These soldiers are young kids, barely 19 years old, and their commander, who is considered the "grown-up," is often only 24 years old.

One such platoon was stationed at the Gaza-Israel border in 2013, when they noticed a suspicious object near one of the gates in the fence that separates Israel from the Gaza Strip. The captain, Ziv Shilon, approached the package alone to investigate, and the terrorists detonated the bomb by remote control as soon as he drew near. His entire body was thrown up in the air. When he landed, he discovered that one of his hands had been severed and was hanging on the fence, while his other hand was bleeding heavily, immobilized.

Gathering all his strength, he lifted himself up and sprinted towards his fellow soldiers, shouting for a medic to apply a tourniquet and stop the bleeding. They immediately rushed him to a medical facility, and ultimately, doctors managed to stabilize his situation.

Chabad in Israel has a special department dedicated to assisting victims of terror. This initiative was established immediately after the Six-Day War, when the Rebbe instructed Chabad Youth Organization in Israel to create a department that would aid widows and orphans from the Israeli Defense Forces. In this context, the Rebbe once received a delegation of "IDF Disabled Veterans" who visited the United States, and famously argued that they should instead be called, "IDF Outstanding Veterans." He emphasized that the term "injured soldiers" did not define them; they were "outstanding soldiers" and true heroes. Since then, Chabad in Israel has maintained a special department that specifically addresses the needs of those affected by acts of terrorism.

Upon hearing about the injured Ziv Shilon, Rabbi Menachem Kutner, who runs this department, came to visit him at the hospital. He personally accompanied him throughout the process and established a very close relationship with him.

Ziv was eventually transferred to the Rehabilitation Hospital at Tel Hashomer in Tel Aviv and the doctors worked on saving his lifeless right arm. To their frustration, numerous operations accomplished nothing. To make matters worse,

they realized that this arm was becoming a life threatening liability to the rest of his body and they recommended that it be amputated. Ziv adamantly refused to consider this option, and the debate between them continued for several weeks.

Aware of the agonizing decision he was facing, Rabbi Kutner suggested he join a trip to New York along with other injured soldiers, to get a break from the painful reality of the hospital and his medical decisions. He was delighted with the idea. "This is exactly what I need right now!" he said.

The group of ten soldiers had a blast in New York for a full week, seeing the best New York had to offer, going on helicopter rides over Manhattan, going into box seats at the stadiums, and so on.

Friday was designated for the spiritual part of the journey. They visited 770 and davened in the Rebbe's room, and then they paid a visit to the Ohel. Rabbi Kutner explained that there was a custom from the Baal Shem Tov to recite the chapter of Tehillim corresponding to one's age, and he said that as they enter the Ohel, he would recite with each one their chapter.

When Ziv entered the Ohel, he told Rabbi Kutner that he was twenty-five years old, so they recited Chapter 26. As they finished, he suddenly realized that he made a mistake. "I will be turning twenty-five next week. Right now I am twenty-four." They turned the page back and recited chapter 25, and left the Ohel.

That night, they were the guests of honor at a massive Shabbat dinner at Chabad of the Upper East Side. During the dinner, Ziv requested to sit next to Rabbi Kutner, and after kiddush and hamotzi, Ziv turned to him and said, "Listen, Rav Menachem. The Rebbe made me very upset."

"What happened?"

He proceeded to tell Rabbi Kutner that at the Ohel the major issue on his mind was his ongoing debate with the doctors about his right arm. As he was writing his pan he suddenly had the following thought: If the perek Tehillim he recites in the Ohel will have references to a hand, he will take it as a sign that his hand is salvageable. If there is no mention of "hand" he will take it as a sign that he will lose his right arm as well.

As they had read Chapter 26 together, he was elated and relieved to read three

references to “hand” and even the right hand! “*Erchatz b’nikayon kapai*, I washed my hands with cleanliness,” “*asher b’yideihem*, in whose hands...” and “*biyiminam*, whose right hands...”.

But then he realized that he had said the wrong chapter, and as they said Chapter 25, he was saddened to realize that he did to find any reference to hands whatsoever.

“Rav Menachem, the Rebbe’s message to me is that I will lose my right arm as well...”

Rabbi Kutner sat there thunderstruck. Suddenly, a thought occurred to him. “Tell me, Ziv. When you say that you are turning twenty-five next week, are you referring to your birthday on the secular calendar?”

“Correct.”

“Do you know the Jewish date of your birth?”

“Of course. Chof-Gimmel Iyar.”

He jumped out of his chair.

“Ziv! Today was your real birthday! As you were standing in the Ohel your real chapter was Chapter 26, not 25!”

## The Miracle

On Tuesday, as they were touring the city, Ziv ran over to Rabbi Kutner and excitedly showed how he was able to curl his fingers. “I can’t believe it! This is the first time I have feeling in my arm since the terrorist attack! Look what the Rebbe has done for me!”

On Erev Chanukah that year, Ziv had a surgery. That night, when Rabbi Kutner visited him at the hospital to light Chanukah menorah, he handed the shamash to Ziv, and in front of everyone, the miracle occurred. Ziv lifted his right arm, held the shamash in his hand and lit the first candle on the menorah. (Derher, Tammuz 5778)

My friends, this week is the Rebbe’s Yahrzeit. Everyone can write letters and send

them to the Ohel, and receive the Rebbe's blessing. However, I will suggest that you actually make the trip to pray there in person; its a spiritual experience that cannot be conveyed in words.