

The Miracle House

Category: Devarim, Ki Setzei

How is it that one single house survived the conflagration? Well, there is only one good answer.

Hawaii

The natural disaster on Maui in Hawaii has turned into the deadliest fire the U.S. has seen in the past century. Rescue efforts are still ongoing, and authorities are trying to understand why the alert system, which included more than 80 alarms, didn't work— a disaster of its own which prevented residents from evacuating.

However, within this tragedy, there was one small glimmer of light. Although the devastating fire completely consumed the resort town of Lāhainā, destroying over 2,200 buildings, resulting in \$5.5 billion worth of damage, everything was burned except for one house. In the pictures coming from the area, amidst the charred ruins of the island, you can see one house with a red roof that survived the ordeal. The fire didn't touch this house; even the porch survived.

It has already earned the name "Miracle House." When asked how he explains this phenomenon, the owner gave several reasons: they recently replaced the roof with a metal one, the entire exterior is surrounded by stone, and so on and so forth. But in the end, he believes there was Divine intervention at play.

In his interview, he added that on one hand, he feels guilty that only his house survived, but on the other hand, he thinks that his house remaining standing could be a source of hope to all the residents whose homes turned to ashes. It's a reason not to lose hope and look forward to rebuilding.

Whose Fault Is It?

We find this idea—that everything comes from above—in our weekly Torah portion. Parshat Ki Tetze contains the highest number of commandments, 74 in total. Among these many commandments, the Torah instructs us: "When you build a new house, make a railing for your roof; do not bring blood upon your house, for

a fallen one will fall from it.” (Deuteronomy 22:8). It’s not enough to have a metal roof; it’s important to have a railing as well, to protect people from falling.

However, when we examine the verse closely, we notice that the Torah uses unusual language. It says, “for a *fallen one* will fall from it.” The sages ask about the repetition of the word “fall”; logically, it should have simply said, “for a *person* will fall from it.” Why does the Torah *define* the person who might fall as a “fallen one”?

Rashi, the famous commentator, explains: “This person is destined to fall, but don’t allow his fall to be caused by you” (Shabbat 32b). In other words, Judaism believes that there are no accidents or mistakes. If a person falls from that roof without a railing, it’s not just happenstance. It’s meant to be their fate. Nevertheless, the Torah is telling us, you should ensure that you are not implicated in it.

This commandment, in other words, teaches that everything is by Divine providence. The house that survived in the middle of a completely destroyed town, amid the smoke-filled ruins, is something that cannot be logically explained—to the extent that it was named “Miracle House.” The Almighty wanted this particular house to remain intact.

The Delayed Wedding

This week, Rabbi Yitzchak Twersky of Rachmastrivka, a well-known Chassidic rebbe, passed away at the age of 92.

He first arrived in the United States in 1953 when he was engaged to the daughter of the Skverer Rebbe. As customary, the wedding was to take place in the bride’s hometown in New York, but a wedding date wasn’t set for a while because the groom’s parents (in Israel) were Russian citizens, and during the Cold War, it was often challenging for Russian citizens to get U.S. visas. They tried and tried, but couldn’t manage to secure the visas, and eventually decided to move on with the wedding. Then, shortly before the wedding—almost miraculously—the long awaited visas arrived.

Before the wedding, the groom and his father Reb Yochanan of Rachmestrivka came to visit the Rebbe. They were old acquaintances; during World War I, Reb

Yochanan had spent time in Nikolaev, the rabbinic seat of the Rebbe's grandfather, and he had made the Rebbe's acquaintance there.

At the yechidus, the Rebbe mentioned that there was a *landsmann*, a fellow acquaintance from Nikolaev, who had since immigrated to the United States and become a professor, but left the path of Torah observance. The Rebbe had tried to bring him back to the fold but to no avail, so, the Rebbe suggested, perhaps Reb Yochanan would be able to influence him. Reb Yochanan agreed, and then and there, the Rebbe picked up the phone and dialed the man's number. "I have Rabbi Yochanan Twersky sitting here. Do you remember him? He is interested in meeting with you. When can you meet?"

On Friday afternoon, as arranged, the former student and the Rachmastrivka Rebbe met, and after exchanging warm reminiscences, the man offered him a check for the wedding. But the rebbe said to him, "I won't take the check until we finish our conversation."

He understood that something wasn't quite right, so he asked what the exact issue was. Rabbi Twersky began to discuss his Torah observance.

"What's with Shabbos?"

The professor replied that it's difficult for him, especially during winter when he returns late from the university.

"What about kosher?"

The professor answered that if there was a kosher store nearby, he would buy kosher food, but he finds it challenging to make the effort. Whatever he asked, the professor had a ready excuse.

Suddenly, Rabbi Twersky burst into tears.

"In Russia, we risked our lives to observe Torah. They could have shot us, sent us to Siberia, and still, we risked our lives. And now, we've come to a country where there's religious freedom—and we look for excuses..."

The professor was deeply moved and started crying along with Rabbi Twersky. Right then, he said to him, "Rabbi, I promise you that I will return to Torah observance."

Rabbi Twersky started to discuss with him practical ways to achieve this goal, and then before her left, he said, “Rabbi, would you take the check from me now?”

Rabbi Twersky answered, “When the Lubavitcher Rebbe tells me that you came back to Judaism, I will accept your donation.”

A few weeks later, the phone rang and the Rachmestrivka Rebbetzin answered. The voice on the line asked to speak with Rabbi Twersky.

“Who’s speaking?” she asked.

“Doh ret-men fun Lubavitch (I’m calling from Lubavitch).”

Realizing it was the Lubavitcher Rebbe, she excitedly gave the phone to her husband, who was happy to hear the Rebbe’s update: their friend had indeed begun to observe mitzvos. “Reb Yochanan,” the Rebbe added, “you think you came here in order to marry off your son? You came here so that a Yid would come back to his roots!”

What did the Rebbe mean?

Simply, they had set the wedding date with the understanding that the groom’s parents might not attend. Even without them, the wedding would still take place. The fact that the circumstances worked out for them to receive the visas was orchestrated by G-d to bring this professor back to Yiddishkeit—because that was something only he could do.