

The Tunnel Crisis

Category: Shemos, Va'eira

I'm sure you all heard about the 770 tunnel crisis. Let me share the 770 story...

Did You Hear the News?

The news is busy this week with the tunnels that were discovered under 770. I want to share with you the story of 770, and how it came to be such an icon that there are even replicas all over the world.

The Previous Rebbe's First Shema

The previous Rebbe arrived in the United States on 9 Adar II, February 19th 1940. When World War II broke out on September 1, 1939, he had been in Poland, and it took a tremendous rescue effort, carried out mainly by a group of Chassidim in the United States, to extract him and bring him to safe shores.

In those days, the Rebbe was paralyzed and suffered from a variety of ailments. He disembarked from the ship in a wheelchair. However, he didn't allow it to impair his dedication to spreading Judaism even for a moment.

On the very day of his arrival, after a reception at the pier attended by thousands of Chassidim and local Jews, the Rebbe didn't rest for a minute. He called a meeting to his Greystone hotel suite with the leading members and activists for Chabad in America, and informed them that he would immediately open a Yeshivah, Tomchei Temimim, which would function just like the Yeshivas in the old country. He announced his plans publicly as well, at a public reception at the Greystone hotel later that evening. The Rebbe's message was, "America is not different"; authentic Jewish life could flourish in America just as it did in Europe.

The previous Rebbe wrote in his diary about the reaction to his announcement that day.

Two of his greatest supporters, long-time residents of the United States, had approached him and said, "Rebbe, we heard what you said about establishing a Yeshiva here, but unfortunately, we must inform you about the poor spiritual state

of Judaism in America. We want to save you from a catastrophic failure and preserve your dignity.”

They explained that American Jews are quick to get excited and quick to cool off. They warned the Rebbe that many times, prominent Rabbinic figures were warmly received in America only to later be shunned and ignored. They wanted the Rebbe to have a clear understanding of the situation and know how to sustain his activities in America.

The Rebbe concluded in his diary that there was no need to explain how he felt after hearing these words from his most loyal supporters. He shed bitter tears when he recited the Shema for the first time on American soil (Likkutei Dibburim v. 3 p. 465b). In reality, a Yeshivah with ten students was established within a week, marking the beginning of successful Chabad Yeshivas in the United States.

Finding 770

Meanwhile, the Rebbe stayed in a hotel in Manhattan, and for Pesach, he traveled to Lakewood, New Jersey, which was then a vacation town. Some suggested that he stay in Lakewood, a suitable place for a quiet Chassidic community, but the Rebbe declared, “I dwell among my people”; he wanted to live together with the Jewish population, not isolate himself in a remote vacation town.

After Pesach, he returned to the hotel in Manhattan and began searching for a suitable home for himself and for the Chabad community, which was just starting its way in the United States. Chabad was a community of immigrants with very limited means, but they established a special committee for this purpose, and after a few months, they found the building at 770 Eastern Parkway.

Crown Heights was an upscale neighborhood, and 770 was the newest building in the area. Most residents were secular Jews, and the building was across the street from the Brooklyn Jewish Center, the most significant center of the Conservative Jewish community in the United States. Moving to Crown Heights would make quite a statement—that the Rebbe was here to make a real difference.

The 770 building belonged to a Jewish doctor who had built it in 1933 as a residence and private clinic. He had run into tax issues, leading to the foreclosure

of the building, and the bank offered to sell the building at an exceptionally low price: \$30,000 (the doctor is estimated to have invested around \$200,000 in the building, even installing an elevator, at a time when it was quite rare—but which would be perfect to serve the Rebbe's needs).

However, even that low sum was not available to Chabad, and in the end, Chabad purchased the building with an upfront payment of \$5,000 and a twenty year, \$25,000 loan from the "Morgenthau Bank."

The Petition

However, as always, things didn't go smoothly. Some residents did not like the idea of the Rebbe and Chassidim moving to their beautiful neighborhood. They started a petition against Chabad settling in Crown Heights. The person promoting the petition went from office to office with a stack of papers bearing all the signatures of those opposing the sale of the building.

But then, as he approached a doctor who was a friend of his and asked him to sign the petition, another Jew overheard their conversation and angrily interjected, "I don't understand how you dare to fight against a Jew who dedicated his entire life for the sake of Jews and Judaism. He survived the war and now seeks some peace, and you're trying to make life difficult for him?" He grabbed the entire stack of papers with all the signatures and tore them to pieces. With that, the petition came to an end.

After seven months in the United States, just before the high holidays in 1941, the previous Rebbe moved into 770. His residence was on the upper floors, and the ground floor held the synagogue and the new Yeshiva.

Jews Don't Run Away

The Previous Rebbe's son-in-law, the Rebbe, arrived in the United States a year later and took the office on the first floor, which became his permanent study.

To the Rebbe, the original 770 building which had been the home of his father-in-law, the previous Rebbe, was holy. There was once a proposal to expand the synagogue located on the first floor, but the Rebbe responded that they shouldn't touch even one brick of the building; "*nit unriren a shtayn*, even one stone of 770

shouldn't be touched!" When they decided to build the Sukkah in the yard of 770, the Rebbe agreed on the condition that they wouldn't even hammer a single nail into the building.

Towards the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies, there was a significant demographic change in the neighborhood. As a result, the neighborhood suffered from serious crime, leading to a mass exodus of Jews. When one person on a block would sell his home, the entire block would panic and flee, fearing a dramatic decline in home prices. The Rebbe was the sole Jewish leader in the neighborhood who declared that he would not move; his place was in the building where his father-in-law, the previous Rebbe, had lived and been active for ten years in the United States. Here he would remain forever.

In those years, the Rebbe explained that running away and abandoning the Jews who can't afford to move is contrary to Halacha. Therefore, the Rebbe encouraged Chassidim to buy homes in Crown Heights, to strengthen the local shuls, and to hold their family simchas in the neighborhood. The Rebbe spoke, cajoled and encouraged, and ultimately persevered. Today a moderate house in Crown Heights costs around two million dollars.

Frogs, Just Frogs

So, what exactly happened there this week?

In this week's Torah portion, we read about seven of the ten plagues that G-d brought on Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

The first plague inflicted upon the Egyptians was the plague of blood, where the water of the Nile turned to blood. This was an important metaphor: The nature of water is to be cold and moist, and represents indifference and detachment. In contrast, blood is hot; it is a symbol of warmth, enthusiasm, and fervor. The message is that to leave your personal Egypt, one must rid oneself of his indifference.

Jews often fulfill mitzvot without enthusiasm or vitality. "When the children were young, we would light Chanukah candles every night, eat latkes, and play dreidel. Today, on a good night, we barely light the candles. On Passover, when the children were at home for the Seder night, it was a party, with four cups of wine,

the Afikoman, etc. Today, I sit with my spouse, perform the Seder in half an hour, and go to sleep.” They’ve lost the vitality in mitzvot; everything is cold, sometimes even as cold as ice.

To leave Egypt, our personal and internal exile, one needs to turn water into blood, and coolness into warmth. We need to be excited to be Jewish.

Why is it so important to have enthusiasm? Because every person *has* enthusiasm and vitality, and the question is only where he *directs* that enthusiasm. Is he enthusiastic when performing a mitzvah, or when he watches the game? I’m sure that when he watches a game, he shouts and cheers for his team; that same enthusiasm could be directed towards a holy goal.

The second plague in Egypt was the plague of frogs. Frogs also come from the Nile; most frogs spend their time in the water. But in the frog plague, the Torah tells us that the frogs left the water (which represents coolness and indifference) and came “into your house, and into your bedroom, and on your bed... and in your ovens” (Exodus 8:28). The frogs, says the Rebbe, caused the Egyptian ovens to malfunction. They brought coolness; the frog plague symbolized the opposite of the plague of blood.

Its lesson is that enthusiasm for earthly matters needs to be cooled a bit. It’s true that one needs to eat, but why all the enthusiasm? You might need to rebuke someone who did something wrong, but it doesn’t have to be done with absolute fervor.

The plague of blood, the Rebbe explained, symbolizes enthusiasm for Yiddishkeit, while the frog plague symbolizes indifference towards the unholy (Likkutei Sichos, vol. 1, p. 123).

It seems to me that this week in 770, the enthusiasm was directed the wrong way...