

Good Shabbos Everyone. In this week's parsha Bo, the Torah tells us about the mitzvah of Tefillin, which is one of the first mitzvahs the Bnai Yisroel were commanded to uphold. Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said that the mitzvah of Tefillin was one of the mitzvahs that Jews throughout the ages were willing to sacrifice their lives for. And the Talmud says further, that tefillin is one of the mitzvahs which Jews to this day are still fulfilling which self-sacrifice. The Talmud goes on to tell us an amazing story about the mitzvah of tefillin: Once the wicked kingdom (of Rome) decreed that anyone who placed Tefillin on his head would have his brains gouged out. In defiance of the ban, the Sage Elisha put on his Tefillin and went out to the market place. Sure enough, a Roman officer saw Elisha and ran after him. Elisha took the Tefillin from his head, placing them in the closed fist of his hand. The Roman caught up with Elisha and demanded from him: "What is in your hand?"

"The wings of a dove!" replied Elisha cryptically. When Elisha opened his fist he revealed the wings of a dove. Hashem had performed a miracle for Elisha. Why are tefillin called the wings of a dove? Because just as the wings protect the doves so do the commandments protect the Jews. And from then on Elisha was called, Elisha the master of wings." (Shabbos 130a) The following is an amazing true story from recent times which illustrates the statement in the Talmud that the merit of the mitzvah of Tefillin protects Jews. Hershel was born in a small town Dubova, near Munkatch, in 1918. Hershel studied in the Yeshivah in Munkatch until it was time for him to start thinking about marriage and setting up his own home on the foundations of Torah and its mitzvahs, like other young men his age. But the rumblings of the second World War threw a dark cloud over his plans.

Hershel was among the "lucky" ones who were sent to do slave labor for the German war machine. The Yeshivah students, like Hershel, and most other Jews in the camp, refused to eat treif (non-kosher) food. Even in the coldest winter days they would not eat the hot meat soup; whenever possible they would exchange it with non-Jewish slaves for a piece of bread. Right from the beginning, Hershel made up his mind that, come what may, he would never part with his Tefillin, which he managed to smuggle into the camp among his few belongings. He was determined to put on his Tefillin whenever he had a chance to do so. It soon became known among his fellow inmates that he had a pair of Tefillin, and while someone kept watch, the Tefillin hurriedly passed from hand to hand. One of the camp guards, to whom Hershel used to turn over his soup and bits of meat rations, returned the favor by informing him when a search of the barracks was to take place. Hershel would then hide his Tefillin outside.

Once he hid the Tefillin in the snow and then had a hard time finding them. He was frantic, but he did find them, and he knew that Hashem was with him. The Tefillin gave him the strongest encouragement to hold on to his faith. He felt that as long as he had his Tefillin, he would outlive his tormentors. Later in the war Hershel's labor camp was ordered to accompany the German and Hungarian divisions which invaded the Ukraine. The slave-laborers had to dig trenches for these soldiers right at the battle-front, under the constant fire from Russian artillery and air attacks. Hershel always had his Tefillin with him -- the one for the head in one pocket, and the one for the arm in another.

Once, in Kiev in the year 1943, he almost lost his Tefillin again. For some time past, his work detail had been sent out for a day's work and returned to the camp. Every day, before going out to work, he hid his Tefillin after praying. One day in August, he did the same as usual, but suddenly he felt uneasy about leaving his Tefillin behind. He quickly ran back to the hiding place and put the Tefillin in his pockets, taking them with him to his workplace. Great was his relief to learn that his heart had told him the right thing, for it turned out that they were to remain in the new place for six weeks! So Hershel was able to continue to pray with his Tefillin and enabling other Jews to do the same.

Thus passed the awful war years of 1942-1944, when danger surrounded Hershel daily. He saw so many times how Divine Providence protected him, and he felt certain in his heart that his Tefillin had saved him from many, many dangers. All through the following winter, weary, frozen and hungry German troops were forced to retreat with heavy casualties, dragging with them the remnants of the surviving slave-laborers, amongst them -- Hershel. In March, 1944, Hershel found himself in the Carpathian Mountains. Realizing that the situation was getting most desperate, Hershel and his friends decided on a plan to escape and hide in the mountains. This, Boruch Hashem they succeeded to do. They disappeared into the nearby forests and separated into small groups, digging bunkers where they could hide. Hershel with a group of ten persons found a suitable place for their underground hideout. They dug their bunker under a hill, carefully covering up the entrance, praying to Hashem that they remain safe until the Nazis would be crushed and their power broken forever.

During the day they all stayed in their cramped tomb, barely able to move. German patrols roamed the woods, and it was dangerous to venture out. Only in the dark of night they crept out to stretch their limbs and get some fresh air. One morning, just as Hershel had finished praying, and his Tefillin were being passed from hand to hand, they suddenly heard the barking of a dog and heavy footsteps approaching their underground hideout. German soldiers were on the prowl, with their bloodhounds. Suddenly, the footsteps were directly overhead. Hershel and his friends froze with fear and held their breath. *continued next week.* **Good Shabbos Everyone.**