

**Good Shabbos Everyone.** This Saturday night through Sunday night marks the observance of Tisha b' Av, the ninth day of the month of Av, the day on which both of the holy Temples in Jerusalem were destroyed. Tisha b' Av is the saddest day of the year; in recognizing such, the Sages instituted fasting and denied us other comforts on that day in order to focus our attention on mourning for the destruction of the Temple, the Bais HaMikdash.

The primary function of the Bais HaMikdash was to bring sacrifices, which among other things, enabled Jews to atone for their spiritual missteps. Now that we do not have the Bais HaMikdash, it should be speedily rebuilt, the Sages teach us that Torah learning takes the place of sacrifices. (see Menuchos 110a). The MaHaRaL explains that just as the korban - sacrifice had the power to bring a Jew back closer to Hashem, so too does learning Torah has that power. A sin distances a Jew from Hashem; Torah learning brings him closer once again. The following inspirational true story will inspire us to want to learn more Torah. Under the dreaded Communist regime, the Soviet Union was nearly totally devoid of any Yiddishkeit - Judaism. All that remained was a small remnant of the great Torah centers and Jewish communities which once were.

There were just a few precious souls keeping Judaism alive. One such soul was Yuri Zilber, who was a mathematician. With a government position, he was regarded as a loyal, simple servant of Mother Russia. Yet his true servitude was not to Mother Russia. Clandestinely, Yuri was Yitzchok and he spent every free moment delving into the depths of Hashem's holy Torah. It seems impossible that a well-known academic could get away with living such a double lifestyle, but Yuri/Yitzchok had a secret. A secret that was well hidden. Every morning Yitzchok would tear out one page from a Gemara (Talmud), conceal it in his clothing, and when he had a spare minute, he would steal away some time to learn; at times he even got lost in the page he was studying, risking revealing his true identity. Amazingly, Yitzchok did this for quite a long time, demonstrating remarkable perseverance. Daf by daf, sheet by sheet, he lovingly tore out each page, reviewed it over and over, and mastered it, noting to himself the topics that were perplexing and difficult, and which he could not resolve. Ultimately, after tearing out over 2,300 pages of Talmud, he had mastered them all. He had accomplished the impossible! But his mission was not yet complete. In 1973 he achieved what he thought was hopeless — exit visas for his entire family to immigrate to Eretz Yisrael. The excitement was indescribable. But perhaps more than anything else, Yitzchok looked forward to finally being able to resolve the difficulties that he had encountered in his Gemara studies throughout the years. His family boarded the plane and, with joy in their hearts, took the trip of their lifetime.

The moment the plane landed in Ben Gurion Airport, Yitzchok descended and ran over to the first man with a yarmulka that he saw. With a tattered page of the Tractate Eruvin in hand, Yitzchok grabbed the man by the lapels, "Please explain this Tosafos (Talmudic commentary) to me!" The stunned man, a security guard, stared at Yitzchok in disbelief. Had this man lost his mind? Yitzchok looked more closely at the guard and immediately realized that not everyone in Eretz Yisrael made the most of the opportunity they had to study Hashem's Torah. Broken, Yitzchok began to cry. After years of living in a land where religion was forbidden, and intolerance reigned supreme, he was shaken by the fact that every Jew who was free to do so was not constantly immersed in Hashem's Torah. Soon after Yitzchok and his family arrived in Eretz Yisrael, his son Anatoly, or Avraham as he was now called, came to the Mirrer Yeshivah in Jerusalem. He had come to meet the Rosh Yeshivah, Reb Chaim Shmulevitz. It was hard to fathom that a mere few days earlier opening a Gemara in public was grounds for imprisonment, torture and even death. And now here he was about to come face to face with the leader of one of the greatest yeshivos in the world.

But Avraham's heart was filled with anxiety, and he did not wear the worry and concern well. The palms of his hands were sweaty and cold and his stomach churned as he stood on the ground floor of the yeshivah outside the door of Reb Chaim's apartment. The door opened and Reb Chaim invited the 17-year-old Russian boy inside. Reb Chaim's warmth enveloped the young boy. Although Reb Chaim was overjoyed to spend time speaking with the young man, he was taken aback when Avraham requested to be admitted to the yeshivah. Reb Chaim looked into the young man's eyes and could sense his intense desire to learn and to be a yeshivah bochur. But Reb Chaim explained to him that there were other yeshivos which were better suited for one who was still a novice in learning. He encouraged him warmly and assured him that when the time came he would most certainly accept him into the yeshivah. (Reb Chaim feared perhaps that Avrohom would become despondent should he fail to succeed in such a high caliber yeshivah.) Avraham listened to each and every word and nodded. When Reb Chaim finished speaking, Avraham looked at the Rosh Yeshivah, this time with tears in his eyes, and insisted that he be given a chance, a chance to prove himself. Finally, Reb Chaim relented and agreed to test the boy. Reb Chaim felt rather uncomfortable administering the entrance exam to this young man, for he feared that the boy would be embarrassed. They walked together to the bookshelf and Reb Chaim turned to Avraham and asked him on which tractate of the Talmud he wished to be tested. The young man hung his head in shame. Reb Chaim realized that the boy had obviously not learned much of anything in Russia. With no Hebrew school to attend, what could he have possibly learned? Reb Chaim looked down at the boy, and through his silence sensed the embarrassment the young man felt. Again Reb Chaim asked him, but this time in a softer tone, "You do not have to be ashamed. Is there any Gemara I can test you on?"

The boy looked up and Reb Chaim noticed the tears that now filled his eyes. "I'm ashamed to say that I know only Seders (Orders of the Talmud/Mishna) Nashim and Nezikin, Gemara, Rashi and Tosafos." (A very sizeable amount of Gemara.) Reb Chaim could not move! He was stunned! He just stared at this suddenly mature young man and was overcome by the awesome realization that this boy, under the threat and danger of expulsion to Siberia, had learned more in his seventeen years than most yeshivah boys in liberated countries accomplish during their entire lifetime of learning. Reb Chaim pulled the young man close to him and held him tight — and he gladly accepted him into the yeshivah. (TOUCHED BY A STORY 2, Reb Yechiel Spero, P. 158) Let us all be inspired by this story to increase our Torah learning as much as possible. We hope to have the Beis HaMikdash rebuilt speedily in our days, at which time we will once again have the sacrifices to atone for our sins. In the meantime, let us apply ourselves in Torah learning, which Sages have promised us as having the power to atone for our misdeeds. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**