

Good Shabbos Everyone. The Torah in this week's portion hints about the importance of supporting Torah institutions, as we read this week about the mitzvah to give a half shekel for the up-keep of the Mishkan (tabernacle). The following inspirational story will inspire all of us to give generously to institutions which teach our children Torah, which is the Tree of Life. R' Binyomin Wilhelm, founder of Yeshivah Torah Vodaath and other worthy institutions, succeeded where many others failed. He succeeded because he was a man of deep emunah (faith) and iron-willed determination. More importantly, he was always ready to give of his time and energy, even when some might have argued that the problem could not be solved.

R' Binyamin was born in Poland around the year 1885 and was orphaned at the age of eleven. He then went to live with his grandfather in a one-room apartment. One morning, Binyamin awoke to discover that his grandfather had died suddenly during the night. Now he was alone in the world. He did not attend yeshivah because there was no organized system of yeshivos as it exists today. Every father had to see to it that his son learned with a melamed (Torah teacher) who was paid directly by the parents of his students. If a boy's father could not afford to pay the melamed, or the boy was an orphan, he very often grew up ignorant of Torah. When he was sixteen, Binyamin received a letter from a friend who had emigrated to America and was living in New York. The friend knew of Binyamin's tragic situation and implored him to join him in the "new country." Binyamin soon boarded a ship without a penny in his pocket. He paid his way by working in the ship's kosher kitchen.

Upon arriving in New York, Binyamin was welcomed by a small group of old friends. At a get-together, he and his friends solemnly vowed to always live faithfully by the Torah and never to compromise on a single mitzvah or halachah, no matter how great the pressure. This was at a time when finding a job in America was almost impossible for those who kept Shabbos, and when kashrus supervision in America hardly existed.

Binyamin opened a successful hardware business, married a deeply religious girl from a fine home and settled in New York's Lower East Side. He attended Torah classes every day, and through intense study and effort, developed into a respected talmid chacham. In the early part of this century, the Lower East Side boasted the largest Jewish population in America. Most of its Jews lived in crowded apartment buildings. Across the river in neighboring Williamsburg lived another large concentration of Orthodox Jews. Williamsburg had many blocks of large single family homes, something which was quite appealing for a young, growing family.

R' Binyamin and his wife moved there in 1917 and were very happy in their new dwelling. But there was one major problem. In the Lower East Side, Yeshivah Rabbi Jacob Joseph had already been founded, but in Williamsburg there were no yeshivos. R' Binyamin's oldest son was four years old; R' Binyamin was determined that his son receive the Torah education that he himself had been denied. He approached a number of prominent Jews living in Williamsburg. They all responded the same way: Their neighborhood was not the place for a yeshivah. Though they were religious, they were resigned to sending their children to public school, where they could receive a quality secular education. Yeshivos, they felt, belonged to the "old world" of Europe. One man pointed to the palm of his hand and told R' Binyamin, "When hair will grow here, there will be a yeshivah in Williamsburg."

One day, a man met R' Binyamin in the street and asked if he had had any success in his quest to start a yeshivah. When R' Binyamin responded in the negative, the man said, "R' Binyamin, take my advice. Stop asking others to start a yeshivah; start one yourself." Over the next four months many nighttime meetings were held in R' Binyamin's home. His wife served herring and kichlech in the hope of attracting a crowd. But the meetings were not successful and it seemed as if the predictions of failure were correct. It is customary in many shuls to read the entire Book of Devarim on the night of Hoshanah Rabbah. Such was the custom in the Polisher Shteibel, one of the largest and most prominent congregations in Williamsburg.

On the night of Hoshanah Rabbah in 1917, R' Binyamin made his way to the front of the Polisher Shteibel and pounded on the bimah for attention. He said, "I will not permit the reading to commence until we resolve an urgent matter — the future of our children. Many are convinced that they can continue sending their children to public school and watch them grow up as Torah Jews. This is a grave error. Without Torah our children will not be Torah Jews. And without a yeshivah, they will have no Torah."

At the conclusion of his address, R' Binyamin asked for pledges toward founding a yeshivah. One of the shul's wealthy members, Mr. Aharon Goldman, wrote out a check for one thousand dollars, and a furrier named Mr. Wolf pledged five hundred dollars, both enormous sums in those days. Many others came forth with smaller pledges. As news of R' Binyamin's Hoshanah Rabbah "protest" spread, people came forward to offer their participation in a founder's committee. A few months later, a building on the corner of Marcy Avenue and Keap Street was rented. Forty-five children were registered for the yeshivah, which was to open its doors the following September. But when September arrived, the picture became clouded once again. With only forty-five children spread across five grades, there was not enough tuition to pay the necessary rebbeim, secular studies teachers and office staff. At a committee meeting held a few days before Yom Kippur, the committee voted to postpone the yeshivah's opening for one more year. The only dissenting vote was R' Binyamin's. "How can we wait another year?" he demanded. "What of the children who might become lost to us this year, and might never be brought back? How can we face the Ribono shel Olam on Yom Kippur after having made such a fatal decision?"

After hearing R' Binyamin's heartfelt plea, the committee decided to postpone a final decision until after Yom Kippur. R' Binyamin spent the Holy Day in a most unusual manner. He arose early on Yom Kippur morning, and instead of going to shul, davened alone in his house. He spent the rest of the day going from shul to shul making appeals — not appeals for money, but for children. He appealed to fathers and mothers to save their children, and future generations, by registering them in the yeshivah that was soon to open. When the fast had ended, R' Binyamin returned home after a very successful day. Forty-five more children would now be enrolled in the yeshivah. With projected income from tuition now doubled, the committee voted to open the yeshivah in a few days. Yeshivah Torah Vodaath had been born. (Shabbos Stories, Reb. Shimon Finkelman, p. 105)

R' Binyamin has tremendous merit; he is credited with generations of Jewish children and adults who have been able to learn Torah because of his deeds. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**