

Good Shabbos Everyone. In the second part of this week's double portion Matos-Masei, the Torah details the journeys of the Bnai Yisroel (Children of Yisroel) as they traveled through the desert. Why is it so important for the Torah to describe in such great detail the wanderings of the Jewish people? The commentary Maor Eynayim explains that there is a reason for every place that we must go in life. Namely, we must go to that certain place to elevate the sparks of holiness, which lay there, waiting to be elevated. We elevate the sparks of holiness in that place, by serving Hashem in that place. This is especially true in places with little Jewish presence. The following inspiring true story illustrates one Jew's journeys in this world. We now read the following amazing true story, told in the first person by Schneur Zalman Stern.

"In October of 1971 I came to Crown Heights from Kentucky and enrolled in Yeshiva Hadar HaTorah, the very first yeshiva for baalei teshuva -- young men like myself who were new to Torah learning. The Yeshiva's 76-year-old founder, Rabbi Yisrael Jacobson, obm, looked upon me as a child of his old age. Months later, Rabbi Jacobson said to me with a glowing smile, "You don't have to worry about paying for anything anymore. Just give me your cameras, and you will be able to learn without distractions."

But my cameras were my freedom and my sole means of support. Determined to keep my options open, I said, "I will go to Yeshiva full-time, but I still want to support myself by photography."

The following week, I arranged to meet a wedding photographer in Far Rockaway, Queens. It was about 10 pm when I took the IRT bound for Manhattan -- my first solo subway trip. It was after one o'clock when I boarded the subway train to return to Crown Heights. The train ride seemed to go on forever, and, as all the maps in the deserted train were obscured by graffiti, I had no idea where I was. When the train pulled into a station I got out and headed for a toll booth, relieved to find a black gentleman sitting there reading a Bible.

"Sir, could you tell me how to get to Crown Heights?"

"Take the AA to Manhattan, and change at 42nd for the 2 to Brooklyn. On Saturday nights the AA runs but once an hour. You should have stayed on that train." I sighed. It was 2:45 a.m. "There's a shortcut, if you're interested," he said. He sketched a map on a scrap of paper. "Go out those doors, take a right, and at the corner of the building, you'll see a fence with a hole. Climb through it and follow the tracks. "At the end of this field, you'll see an old, swinging bridge hanging across the tracks. Cross it. On the other side there's a staircase going into an alley. Make a right into the alley and follow it for 5 or 6 blocks. On your right, there'll be an elevated platform for the IRT."

"By the way, where I am?" I asked. "East New York," the man answered.

I headed out of the station. A mangled chain-link fence connected the station to a bridge abutment. I crawled through the hole in the fence and saw the path leading to a field littered with rotting garbage, rusty car fenders and other refuse. Pressing on, I came to the swinging bridge, and walked gingerly to its center. I surveyed the panorama: bombed-out tenement houses, garbage heaps, graffiti. I crossed the bridge, went down the staircase and -- just as the man described -- stepped into a dark alley. "Empty your pockets!" A voice growled from the darkness. A black man, aged 24 or so, walked up to me and pressed a .38 revolver into my chest. Click. He cocked the gun's hammer. "Empty your pockets before I kill you," he barked.

I pondered the double meaning of his words and concluded that I was probably about to meet my Maker.

"Before I empty my pockets," I said, looking straight into his fierce eyes, "there is something you must know: G-d gave everyone seven basic commandments and one of them is 'Thou shall not steal.' Now that you know this, if you steal from me, you will lose your portion in the World to Come."

After a moment of silence, he frothed, "I hate Jews!" Just then, another man emerged from the shadows carrying a large club. "Yo man, what's taking so long?" the club man asked the gunman. "This Jew is giving me jive," the gunman responded. "Shoot him," he retorted. "Let me explain," I said, and I again went through the scenario of the Seven Commandments. I told him that if he stole from me he would forfeit Eternal Life.

The club man said angrily, "Is your G-d white? I don't like no white G-d." "My G-d is invisible," I answered, "Yet, He is the Creator of all colors." They seemed placated by my words, so I continued. "You know, if you don't steal from me, G-d will owe you. When the time comes, He's going to pay you." Silence. Then, the club man said to the gunman, "He is a jiving Jew! I'm going to empty his pockets." "Put your hands up Jew boy," the club man said.

His hand searched my pocket. His fingers became tangled in my tzitzis, (ritual fringes) and he couldn't reach the money in my pocket. He pulled his hand out, but the tzitzis held fast. He suddenly became terrified. Frantically, he untangled the strings from his fingers and jumped behind the gunman. "This Jew's got pocket guards," he said.

Both men examined my tzitzis. They argued vehemently about whether my tzitzis were strings or elastic bands, then growled, "What are those things?" "You see these knots?" I said, showing them the knots made from the strings. "There are five knots. Coming out of these knots are eights strings. Five plus eight is thirteen. The strings are called 'tzitzis' in Hebrew. The numerical value of the letters of the word 'tzitzis' add up to 600. Six hundred plus 5 knots, plus 8 strings, is 613, which is the number of commandments G-d gave to the Jewish people. These tzitzis always remind us of G-d and His commandments." There was silence followed by a long "Naah, you puttin' us on."

"I'm telling you the truth," I answered. "I want to see your G-d. Where can I see your G-d?" I answered, "G-d fills the world, transcends the world, and is continuously creating the world anew. In fact, He is creating this whole scene right now. G-d is also creating you, but because you have chosen to do evil, you are nothing more than a stick in G-d's hands." The guy with the club walked away, disappearing into the shadows. The other guy approached me. "Where are you headed?" he asked. "I'm trying to get to the number 2 train," I said. "Man, you gonna die six times before you reach the number 2. But don't worry. I'm going to protect you." Taking the gun in his left hand, he draped his right arm over my shoulder and escorted me to the platform. The next day I told Rabbi Jacobson what happened. With very little coaxing, Rabbi Jacobson convinced me to fork over my cameras, and supported me while I studied in yeshiva for the next four years." **Good Shabbos Everyone.**

In memory of Shusha Malka bas R' Avrohom ob'm

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