

Good Yom Tov Everyone. Let us begin our discussion with the powerful words of the Mishnah: "Rebi Yossi ben Kismah said: Once, I was walking on the way and a person met me and greeted me and I greeted him back and he said to me: *Rebi, where are you from?* I said to him: *I come from a large city of scholars and scribes.* He said to me: *Do you want to live with us in our place and I will give you thousands of gold coins and precious stones and pearls?* I said to him: *[Even] if you were to give me all the silver and gold and precious stones and pearls in the world, I would only live in a place of Torah. As it is written in the Book of Psalms by King David: "The Torah of Your mouth is better for me than thousands of gold and silver."* (119:72) *And not only that, but at the time a person departs from this world, neither silver and nor gold nor precious stones and pearls escort him, rather Torah and good deeds only...*" (Avos 6:9) The last shirt we wear on this earth has no pockets. We take only our spiritual accomplishments with us to the next world.

The following two stories illustrate how Jews have learned Torah under the most trying circumstances.

When the entire Nevardok Yeshiva was placed behind prison bars by the Communist government, the main intent was to prevent them from learning Torah and serving Hashem. Religion was frowned upon, especially the intense observance found among the young men in the Novardik Yeshivah. The prison guards attempted to weaken the resolve of the students by depriving them of basic physical needs. They were served only enough food to barely stay alive and they were constantly damp and cold due to the stone walls and floors of the prison cells. They had neither coats nor blankets and the temperature was usually well below freezing. But what pained them more than anything else was that they were robbed of their most prized possessions: their Talmud.

Amazingly, the boys' families were allowed to bring food packages, and one of the young men came up with a clever plan. At the time of their arrest, the yeshivah students had been learning the tractate of Makkos, one of the shorter tractates. The entire tractate was only twenty-two pages long.

The "prisoners" sent word to their families that they needed packages of cheese: twenty-two packages to be exact, each wrapped in another page of Gemara (Talmud). In this way they would be able to smuggle in the entire tractate and share the Gemara. The unwary guards never suspected a thing and before long the young men from Novardik had their entire tractate.

The question arose as to how they were allowed to disgrace the pages of Gemara by using them as wrapping paper for cheese if the halachah clearly states that the honor of Torah is even more important than Torah itself. Rav Eliezer Rabinovitch, the Rav of Minsk, answered that not learning Torah for these boys was a matter of life and death and for matters of life and death it is permissible.

Perhaps the following story will help us to understand why these yeshiva students learned with such self-sacrifice and resolve. It was their Roshei Yeshivah who were role models and provided the inspiration.

Reb Chaim Efraim Zaitchik, the Novardik Rosh Yeshivah, had been exiled to a Soviet labor camp in Siberia for the "atrocious" of learning and teaching Torah. The food rations were sparse and the hunger pains which gnawed at the men were a constant reality. The water which they drank was brought from a spring located three kilometers away in a thick forest. Carrying the water was a thankless job as the pails were heavy and the path treacherous.

But one day Reb Chaim volunteered for the position of water-carrier. Why? Because he had heard that there was a village at the other end of the forest where there might be another Jew. He made his way through the forest and after a few hours reached the spring, put down his pails and trekked to find the village.

Seeing a clearing in the distance he made his way to the small town. Searching door to door, Reb Chaim was thrilled to finally find a little hut that had a mezuzah on the doorway. He knocked softly and the door was opened a small crack by a poor middle-aged woman who obviously did not have much extra food in her home.

Nevertheless, she slipped an extra slice of bread through the small crack and sent Reb Chaim away. But Reb Chaim persisted. "It is not food that I want. Please just give me a sefer to learn from." The woman called her husband to the door and he greeted Reb Chaim. "I'm sorry but I'm not a very learned man. I own only one sefer and I'm not about to part with it."

Reb Chaim pleaded with him, "Please just give me a page of the sefer. I'll take any page, even the opening page. I beg you. I'm starving for learning. Don't send me away with nothing!" The sincerity in Reb Chaim's pleas moved the poor villager and finally he brought the sefer.

"I'll tell you the truth. The sefer is a Gemara, with two tractates in one, Nedarim and Nazir. I'll give you one." Reb Chaim tore the volume in two and gave Reb Chaim the tractate Nedarim. He hid it under his clothing and thanked the man profusely for his priceless gift.

Returning back to camp with the buckets of water, Reb Chaim's body was sore and his bones ached. But the smile on his face would not go away because as he held onto his Talmud he knew that he had acquired something much more valuable than anything else in the world. (R' Yechiel Spiro p. 188 Touched by a Story.)

The lesson of these stories are especially important on Shavuos. Shavuos commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. The moment that the Children of Israel received the Torah, we became the Jewish Nation. Because, it is only the Torah which distinguishes us from the nations. In truth, every day we have the opportunity to receive the Torah. If we take time out of the day, even for five minutes, to learn a little more Torah, then we will be affirming our membership in the Jewish Nation. **Good Yom Tov Everyone.**