

Good Shabbos Everyone. It was World War II... grabbing their tefillin, the two young brothers the darted into the forest, dodging the gunfire from the German troops that had stormed and stampeded through their mall village. They knew that many of their family and friends had been killed, and revenge was foremost on their minds, but now was not the time. Right now they needed to create as much distance as they could between themselves and the enemy.

Moshe and Chaim Lechovitch, the "fugitive" brothers, ran away as fast and as far as they could. After running for over five miles they finally stopped to catch their breath. They had barely had enough time to take their most cherished possession, their tefillin, but they had brought no food or drink, nor pictures of their loved ones. All they had now was their memories — their tefillin — and each other. For the first time since they had fled they looked each other in the eye. Their emotions overcame them and they held each other close, fearful of what the future held in store. Suddenly they heard a noise. They listened for a few moments, trying to remain completely silent. It sounded like a group of men, there was some gunfire, and it seemed very, very close. The brothers were terrified. They had obviously run from one regiment directly into another.

Moshe peeked through the overgrown marsh weeds and noticed that the men appeared quite different than German soldiers. He had heard that a growing number of partisan groups were roaming the area and assumed that this must be one. With no place to run, Moshe led his brother with their hands raised above their heads, toward the group. As soon as the brothers were spotted, the soldiers raised their guns and took aim, but then realized that these two young teenagers were not the enemy. The brothers' lives had been saved.

Moshe and Chaim surveyed the group of scraggly men, whose numbers kept increasing as others joined, one at a time. They were not the finest class of men, neither very well armed nor trained, but Moshe and Chaim were grateful that these partisans had found them. After a brief training session in using weapons, the brothers became members of the troop. Every morning they would wake up a few moments before the others and don their tefillin.

The other members of the group, though mostly indifferent, thought that it was strange to practice religion in a world which to them was so obviously void of a G-d, but as long as it did not interfere with their movements and did not endanger the rest of the group's lives, it was fine.

One morning, as Moshe and Chaim were about to put on their tefillin, they heard some bushes rustling in the distance. Immediately they awoke the others and it was quickly decided that everyone move out. Moshe and Chaim ran with the Partisans through swamp and forest for nearly three miles until they reached a safe area and were able to stop. When they unloaded their backpacks and placed their guns by their sides, Chaim and Moshe realized they had left behind their tefillin. They were absolutely devastated. Their one and only connection to their Yiddishkeit was these tefillin; without them, how would they differentiate themselves from their fellow soldiers, who were so bad mannered and boorish? They could not help but wonder why the Hashem had allowed them to forget their tefillin. They had shown such mesiras nefesh - self sacrifice in order to put them on, and had done so solely to maintain a closeness to Him — and now they were gone. Moshe and Chaim looked at each other and knew what they had to do. They were going back. They knew that they were risking their lives, but who knew when they would next find another pair? Who knew when this war would end, and if they would be victorious? They informed their comrades; the crude men laughed and dismissed their religious friends as fanatics, warning them that if the need came to move on, the troop would not wait for them. But the brothers remained steadfast, committed to retrieve their treasured tefillin. And so they set out on their dangerous mission. The three-mile hike was filled with moments of fear and apprehension. With each step that they took the battle within themselves raged on. Thoughts of second-guessing themselves for their foolish decision conflicted with the proud feeling of sacrifice for Hashem and His Torah.

Finally, they reached their destination and there, untouched, were the two pairs of tefillin. But their mission was only half over; they still had to return to the troop. Frightened and wary, they began the return trek. Just over the hill was where they had last seen the Partisan troop. They hoped with desperation that the men were still there. They trudged to the top of the hill and could not believe what they saw. The entire troop was dead. They immediately realized what had happened. The Germans had deceived the partisans into thinking that they were approaching from one angle while they were really preparing an ambush from the opposite side.

The brothers did not say a word to each other. They were hit hard by the magnitude of what had transpired. They stared at the scene of wanton slaughter that lay before them and then looked at the tefillin they held in their hands. It all made sense now. But they could not waste time. After all, it was almost sunset and they had not yet donned their tefillin. (Reb Yechiel Spero, Touched by a Story p.296)

The Torah tells us in this week's parsha, Parshas Shoftim, "For Hashem, your G-d is the One Who goes with you, to fight for you with your enemies, to save you." (Devorim 20:2) There are many levels of understanding of the Torah. On the surface, the Torah is telling us that Hashem escorts the Jewish nation when the Jewish nation goes out to battle. On a deeper level, we can perhaps say that the verse is coming to teach us that Hashem is our primary strength against the attacks by the Nations. The story we told illustrates this principle. Let us remember this story and always put our faith in Hashem and dedicate our lives to His mitzvahs, especially the mitzvah of Tefillin. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**

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

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