

What Is Waiting for Me Here?

Developed and Presented by Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz

I would like to share a thought brought by Rabbi Eliyahu Wolff in Me'at Min Ha'or, based on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's sichah for Shabbos Parshas Noach 5740.

There is a remarkable passage in the Zohar. Rabbi Chiya and Rabbi Yehudah were traveling through high mountains when they encountered bones belonging to people from the generation of the Flood. The bones were so enormous that the two sages walked three hundred steps within a single bone.

They recognized the terrible lesson before them. Here were the remains of people whose extraordinary strength had helped make them arrogant. They had felt so powerful that they dismissed Hashem's authority and refused to acknowledge His judgment.

But a question remains. Why does the Zohar tell us that these two sages encountered those bones? What are we meant to learn from their journey and from the particular sight that confronted them?

The first lesson we can learn is as follows. The people of the Flood were hard and unyielding. Their strength became a reason to resist. Chazal teach us to be soft like a reed rather than hard like a cedar. A reed bends in the wind and survives; the cedar's rigidity can become the cause of its collapse.

The strength we need is the strength to remain humble before Hashem, teachable, and willing to change.

That is the first lesson. But the encounter carries another, deeper message. The sages had arrived at this place. Something there was now part of their avodah.

The Place You Did Not Plan to Visit

מה' מצעדי גבר כוננו

"A person's steps are established by Hashem." The Baal Shem Tov teaches that when we arrive somewhere, our arrival is directed by Hashem. We may have our own reasons for traveling, but there can be a spiritual task waiting for us at our destination.

The business appointment explains why I bought the ticket. It may not explain everything Hashem intends me to accomplish after I arrive. The delay explains why I am waiting. It may not explain everything I can do with the time or whom I may meet there.

We call this work birur: uncovering and elevating the good that is concealed within the world, using what we encounter in the service of Hashem. This can happen through Torah, a mitzvah, a brachah, or an act of kindness.

If Hashem brought me here, what can I bring to this place?

Consider the sages confronting those enormous bones. They could recognize Hashem's greatness even in the extraordinary strength He had once granted to people who rebelled against Him. Their encounter could awaken humility and awe rather than admiration for human arrogance.

But we can go further. The sages were also there to elevate what they encountered. How can we speak of holiness in connection with people who were so corrupt? We have to distinguish their wicked choices from the spiritual root of the life and strength Hashem gave them. Their actions were evil. Elevation means uncovering the holy root and directing that vitality toward the service of Hashem.

For us, this begins with a practical question. Is there someone here who needs encouragement? Can I use this moment for Torah? Is there an opportunity to make a brachah thoughtfully, to help, or to respond with patience? We may not know the hidden reason for our arrival, but we can

recognize the mitzvah in front of us.

Let me tell you a Chassidic story about the Baal Shem Tov. As we listen, let us keep one question in mind: what might be waiting for us in a place we never intended to visit?

A CHASSIDIC STORY

The Mysterious Journey to Leipzig

A Chassidic story, as told by Rabbi Tuvia Bolton on Chabad.org.

A Journey Full of Questions

Late one Wednesday night, the Baal Shem Tov informed one of his younger disciples that the next morning they would be traveling to the city of Leipzig, where they would be spending the Shabbos.

The disciple was overjoyed. He was flattered to have been chosen by his master and was sure that he would learn many important things on the journey. In addition, this would be an opportunity to visit his parents, who lived in Leipzig.

They set off early Thursday morning. It was a ten-hour journey, so they had plenty of time to arrive before evening. But as they boarded the wagon the Baal Shem Tov turned to the young man and mysteriously said: "Don't count on seeing your parents, we won't have time."

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The Baal Shem Tov turned to his wagon driver, Alexi, and told him that after they left the city he could let the reins drop and go to sleep.

The entire duration of the trip the Baal Shem Tov did not stop whispering words of Torah to himself. The wagon moved swiftly and it seemed they were making good time; strangely, however, after some fifteen hours of travel, as night was falling, they still had not reached their destination.

They hitched the wagon to a tree by the side of the empty road. The young disciple fell asleep almost immediately. When he awoke next morning, the wagon was already moving, but he was certain that the Baal Shem Tov had not slept all night.

Two Mysterious Stops

After several hours it seemed clear that they were going nowhere and that they probably would have to spend Shabbos in the wagon as well. Suddenly a house appeared in the distance. As they got closer, the young man was overjoyed to see a mezuzah on the door. At least they would have a place to stay.

The wagon stopped before the house. An old woman, beaming with joy, appeared, called to her husband, and greeted the Baal Shem Tov with blessings.

From behind her emerged her husband, an old man with a radiant face who ran toward the Baal Shem Tov and warmly embraced him before escorting him into the house.

"Just wait in the wagon, I'll return shortly", the Baal Shem Tov said to his pupil just before he closed the door behind him.

Fifteen minutes later he returned and they were on their way.

"I thought we would stay here for Shabbos," said the worried young man. But the Baal Shem Tov just told the driver to let the reins drop as soon as the hut was out of sight. A short while later the horses strayed off the road, crossed a field, then entered a forest and stopped. The Baal Shem Tov got out, took a silver cup from his bag, motioned to his bewildered pupil to follow, and after several minutes suddenly stopped and said: "Listen! Water!"

Sure enough, from within a thicket they heard a bubbling brook. They cleared away the vegetation. The Baal Shem Tov dipped his cup into the water, stood to his full height and recited the blessing over water: Blessed are You Hashem our G-d, King of the Universe, by whose word everything came to being. But what a blessing! It seemed as though the entire forest reverberated with each word the tzaddik uttered. The chassid had never really heard or seen anything like it in his life.

The Baal Shem Tov finished drinking, recited the "after-blessing" with the same deliberate intensity, and then motioned for his pupil to return to the wagon.

A brachah in a hidden forest. Why had they come all this way?

It was beginning to hint of sunset. A cool wind blew across the grasses and the young chassid wondered where and how they would spend Shabbos.

He was lost in his thoughts when suddenly he heard the Baal Shem Tov say to the wagon driver "Here, turn down this street!"

A Dangerous Turn

He looked up to see that... they were in Leipzig! In fact if they just continued straight they would be in the Jewish section. They could stay with his parents! What a miracle!

But the Baal Shem Tov had other ideas. "Here, Alexi, turn right!"

"No, NO! Not here!" The pupil cried. The street to which his master had directed the wagon driver was the infamous Shillergass, a street lined with taverns adjoining the university. No Jew dared show his face on that street. "If we turn here it will be the end of us!"

But the Baal Shem Tov paid no attention. They turned and after a few moments he told the driver to stop. "Here is where we are staying. But hurry! It's almost Shabbos."

They took their bags and got out in front of a door that had a big sign hanging over it saying "Tailor". The Baal Shem Tov knocked loudly at the door. A small peep hole opened. They heard numerous locks swiftly unlocking and in no time the door opened revealing an elderly Jew dressed for Shabbos with several young men standing in the brightly lit room behind him.

"Come in!" He whispered fearfully. "Who are you? Are you mad? Come in quickly!"

They entered, the old man closed the door and said as he was turning the locks, "You are fortunate that no one was in the street. These people are animals — real animals. They study in their universities but they are nothing but bloodthirsty animals. The sight of a Jew — especially when there is beer or vodka in their blood — turns them into instant killers. They tolerate me here because they need a tailor — otherwise they would kill me in a minute. Who are you? What are you doing here?"

The Baal Shem Tov promised he would explain but because it was very late he wanted to begin to lead the afternoon prayers. The tailor had seven sons and together with the Baal Shem Tov and his pupil they made a minyan (quorum of ten). The Baal Shem Tov began to pray aloud at the top of his voice.

The old tailor was astounded. At first he was filled with fear but then he suddenly felt as though his heart was exploding with love for Hashem. He had never heard such prayer before.

But when the prayers finished the sound of bottles crashing against his door from outside abruptly brought him back to reality. The Baal Shem Tov simply walked to the door opened it and stepped outside to the drunken crowd.

"Kill him! Kill the Jew!" Someone yelled and threw a rock but it missed.

One student ran toward the Baal Shem Tov with an iron bar screaming "You dirty.." Suddenly he froze, his hand paralyzed in midair, screaming with pain. Another student drew a large knife, with the same alarming results. The two of them just stood there screaming and weeping until the crowd dropped their rocks and bottles and began begging the Baal Shem Tov to take away the spell.

The Baal Shem Tov said something, and the paralyzed students fell unconscious to the ground. Their friends carried them away. The mob scattered in fear, leaving only their rocks and bottles strewn in the street.

The Baal Shem Tov returned inside leaving the door wide open behind him and, after washing his hands, began the evening prayer greeting the Holy Shabbos.

The Stranger in the Corner

Again the room was magically transformed, and all felt as if they were in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem in the days of King Solomon. A few minutes later, a tall thin man, wrapped in a black cloak, suddenly appeared at the open door. He looked silently around the room, walked to a corner and just stood there, staring at the Baal Shem Tov and his praying.

After the prayers, they sat down to eat the Shabbos meal amidst song and wondrous words of Torah. All this time the tall stranger stood and stared, and the Baal Shem Tov paid him no attention at all.

Only when they finished the meal did the man approach the tailor, asked him when they would be praying in the morning, and left as soon as he got the answer.

"That man," said the tailor to the Baal Shem Tov's pupil, "is none other than Professor Shlanger — one of the most anti-Semitic intellectuals in the country. I have no idea what brought him here..."

The next morning, the professor returned. Again he stood silently staring at the Baal Shem Tov's praying and speaking. He left after the meal, and did not return again.

Three Questions on the Way Home

After Shabbos, the Baal Shem Tov and his pupil bade their host farewell, boarded their wagon and in less than five hours were back home.

"You see, I told you that you wouldn't have time to visit your parents." The Baal Shem Tov said with a smile. The young man, however, was burning with curiosity.

"Who was the old man whose house we stopped at on the way? Why did you wander into the forest to drink a cup of water, and what did we accomplish by spending Shabbos at the tailor's house?" he asked.

The Baal Shem Tov hesitated for a few seconds and then said:

"The man I spoke to is one of the thirty-six hidden righteous individuals in whose merit the world exists. He will be the first to know when Moshiach is supposed to arrive, and that is what we spoke about.

"The reason we stopped in the forest was because I saw that, since the beginning of creation no one had ever made a blessing on the water in that stream. In another few moments it would have been too late — the spring would have died without fulfilling its purpose in the world.

"And what we accomplished in the tailor's house you will know one day."

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Twenty Years Later

Twenty years later, long after the Baal Shem Tov had left this world, the disciple happened to be in the city of Minsk when a distinguished looking Jew stopped him in the street and asked him if he had been a pupil of the Baal Shem Tov and if he had ever spent a Shabbos in Leipzig with his master. When the chassid answered in the affirmative, the stranger embraced him and kissed him. "I was the professor who visited you that Shabbos. I was at a turning point in my life at the time, full of unanswerable questions as to my purpose in life. When I heard of how your teacher paralyzed those students I knew I had to see him for myself.

"The sight of his praying and teaching had such a profound effect on me that a few months later I disappeared from the University, moved to another country, and converted to Judaism. I don't know how your master could possibly have known that in a Jew-hater like me dwelled a Jewish soul crying out to be redeemed."

A stream awaiting a brachah. A person capable of transformation. The traveler saw detours; the Baal Shem Tov saw a mission.

We cannot see what the Baal Shem Tov saw. But the story can change the way we look at our own journeys. The purpose of a place may be greater than the purpose we wrote in our calendar.

And the result may take years to become visible. A sincere word or an example of avodas Hashem can begin something whose conclusion we will never witness.

THE DEEPER CONCLUSION

Learning Torah Is Already an Act of Elevation

Let us return to the question we began with. How did Rabbi Chiya and Rabbi Yehudah actually elevate what they encountered? The answer is that they learned Torah about it. As we sit here together at Shalosh Seudos, that answer has a special meaning for us.

When we learn the Torah's account of the generation of the Flood, we are learning holy Torah. We are taking an account of rebellion and using it to understand Hashem's will and to serve Him. On the deeper level we have been discussing, that learning reveals the holy spiritual root concealed behind the corrupted expression of their strength.

That is what the two sages were doing. They discussed the bones through Torah, and their Torah learning itself was an act of elevation. We can understand the practical result as well: the arrogance of that generation now becomes a reason for us to develop humility; its refusal to acknowledge Hashem now becomes a reason for us to acknowledge Him.

When we learn the Torah's account of a dark chapter, our learning itself can bring light.

Think what this means for our own learning. When we sit together and learn Parshas Noach, we are already doing something with the world Hashem has put before us. We learn to recognize Him, to refine our character, and to bring what we encounter into our avodas Hashem. What does Hashem want me to learn, and how should that learning change the way I act?

Into the Coming Week

As Shabbos draws to a close, each of us prepares to return to the places and responsibilities of the coming week. Some will be familiar. Others may be inconvenient or unexpected. We can enter them with a greater readiness to serve Hashem.

We need not claim to know why every difficulty happened. We can still ask what good we can do now. A waiting room can become a place of Torah. A conversation can become an act of kindness. A meal can become an opportunity for a thoughtful brachah. A difficult encounter can become an exercise in humility.

Hashem directs my steps. My task is to serve Him where those steps have brought me.

Sources: Me'at Min Ha'or, Parshas Noach, printed pp. 21-25; Zohar I, 62a; Tehillim 37:23; Ta'anis 20b; sichah of Shabbos Noach 5740. Story: Rabbi Tuvia Bolton, "The Baal Shem Tov's Mysterious Journey to Leipzig," Chabad.org. Practical examples and connecting paragraphs are the presenter's development.