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G-D SAVES THE OVERDOER

Vayeitzei

Staying at Your Post

Good Shabbos!

This past week, thousands of Chabad shluchim, emissaries, converged on Brooklyn, New York for the annual International Convention of Shluchim. It's probably one of the most spectacular events in the Jewish world, and one of the most unique in the world at large.

One of the Chabad rabbis attending the Convention is a rabbi who lives near the border with Chechnya, in the city of Derbent in the region of Dagestan, Russia.

Now, many of you have not even heard of Dagestan, never mind Derbent. But the interesting thing is that this city, of all places, has had a Jewish community for centuries—some say for 2,000 years, actually.

Not only that, but the Chabad rabbi who serves as its emissary is not an American, a European or an Israeli by nationality but actually a native-born son of Dagestan.

Rabbi Ovadia Isakov was born and raised in Derbent. As a child, all he knew was that he was Jewish—whatever “Jewish” meant. In his youth, he was discovered to have a talent for art and thanks to that, he got a scholarship from an art academy in Moscow.

Rabbi Isakov's spiritual awakening came on the heels of a meeting with special guests at the academy, during which a professor introduced young Ovadia as “one of the finest Muslim artists.” Ovadia clarified that he was a Jew, and in response, the professor said, “If you are a Jew, then where are your strings?”

The professor, of course, was referring to tzitzis.

At that point, Ovadia Isakov realized that he didn't know anything about his own Jewishness, and so he approached the Chabad center in Moscow.

The young man gradually got closer to Chabad and moved on to study in a yeshivah. He received ordination for rabbinics and for shechita, or kosher slaughter. After he got married, he returned to the city of his birth to serve as the little community's rabbi and shochet.

In recent years, the Muslim community grew stronger and stronger in Dagestan, resulting in increasing anti-Semitic attacks on Rabbi Isakov.

In the summer of 2013, Rabbi Isakov returned home one night from the slaughterhouse. It was one o'clock in the morning. He parked his car and noticed that someone was sitting on the front steps of his house. When he got out of his care, the man on the steps got up, approached him and shot him once. But Rabbi Isakov had moved a drop to one side, resulting in the bullet not hitting him straight through the heart but off to the side a bit.

Rabbi Isakov started running and shouting. The neighbors opened their windows, and the Muslim terrorist ran and Rabbi Isakov gravely wounded. They rushed him to the local hospital in critical condition, did surgery on him, and then transferred him in a medical jet to Israel.

He was still in critical condition when he arrived in Israel, but after a few days, a miracle happened and he opened his eyes and began to speak. And at the 2013 Shluchim Convention, Rabbi Isakov stood healthy and well at the speaker's podium.

What's interesting is that immediately after he opened his eyes in the hospital and managed to say a few words, the Israeli media was there to interview him. One reporter asked him what his plans were for the future. Rabbi Isakov had difficulty speaking, but he immediately replied that he planned to go back to his shlichus assignment. He had four kids in Dagestan, the oldest eight and the youngest eight months, but he was going to stay at his post.

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

In this week's Parshah, we read about how Yaakov Avinu, our patriarch Jacob, left the Holy Land of Israel and when to Charan, which is somewhere in the north of Syria today.

Now, as a general rule in halachah, it is prohibited for a Jew who lives in the Holy Land to leave it. The Jewish law allows one to leave the land only in specific circumstances. One of them is getting married—if a person cannot find a match in the Holy Land, he can leave so as to be introduced to the right one, and then come back with her (Rambam, Laws of Kings 5:9).

Yaakov Avinu met that criterion, and so he left the Holy Land at the instruction of his father Yitzchak, who told him, "Rise up and go to Padan Aram... and take for yourself from there a wife from the daughters of Lavan, your mother's brother" (Bereishis 28:2).

So Yaakov gets to Charan, and there, next to a public well, he meets Rachel. Later, he asked her father Lavan to give her to him as payment for the work that he would do for seven years. Lavan agreed.

Seven years thus went by, but then, Lavan tricked Yaakov and gave him not Rachel but Leah as a bride. When Yaakov came with the complaint, "Why did you deceive me?", Lavan offered that he was prepared to give Yaakov Rachel indeed if Yaakov would agree to work for her for another seven years. And so Yaakov married Rachel right then and there, and stayed on for another seven years of work as his part of the deal.

So 14 years had now gone by when Yaakov finally fulfilled his obligations to Lavan. He really could have left Charan and gone back home to the Land of Israel with his entire family. And so he said to Lavan, "Send me forth and I will go to my place and my land" (Bereishis 30:25).

In reality, after Lavan asked him to stay, he remained in Charan for another six years. But then he began hearing anti-Semitic claims of from the extended family. Lavan's sons claimed that all the wealth that Yaakov had earned was because of their father—and the atmosphere in the house suddenly changed for the worse.

But even that wasn't enough to convince Yaakov to leave Charan. It was only after G-d revealed Himself to him and told him explicitly, "Return to the land of your fathers" (Bereishis 31:3), that Yaakov decided to leave Charan.

So we can ask the question: Why did Yaakov not leave Charan at the first opportunity he had after he had fulfilled his obligations to Lavan, his father-in-law? Meaning, after 14 years, he should have packed up and gone! Why did he hang around another six years?

To answer this, allow me to mention a halachah that few people know.

The Rambam writes that “just as one is forbidden to leave the Holy Land for the Diaspora, so too is it forbidden to leave Babylon for any other country, as it is written, ‘To Babylon they shall come, and there shall they be’” (Laws of Kings 5:12).

What this means is that when the Jewish Nation was exiled from the Holy Land after the Destruction of the First Temple, the Prophet Jeremiah prophesied that they would come to Babylon—and that until G-d would redeem them from there, they were said to remain there and be forbidden from leaving Babylon for any other place. Why so? Rashi explains that “there were yeshivahs that spread Torah there” (Talmud, Tractate Kesuvos 111a). This means that at the moment that Babylon established a Jewish community, that place became considered to some extent like the Holy Land itself. And so, a Jew was forbidden to leave Babylon. (See Likuti Sichos Vol. XVIII, pg. 399.)

The Rebbe adds and explains that this is true not just for Babylon but for every place in the world where there is a Jewish community. As the Meiri writes in Kesuvos: “Because every place where wisdom and fear of sin can be found, its status is that of the Holy Land.”

We saw this perspective from the Rebbe. The Rebbe demanded of community leaders and rabbis to not leave the places where they were serving as rabbis and leaders—since their communities were depending on them. Because if they were to leave, it would certainly have a bad influence on the community. And so the Rebbe argued that they were forbidden to leave the battlefield. The Rebbe said repeatedly that a rabbi who leaves his pulpit and runs to Israel is like a deserter who flees the battle for Jewish identity and the battle against intermarriage and assimilation.

During the Cold War era, the chief rabbi of Romania, which, of course, was a satellite state of the Soviet Union at the time, was Rabbi Moshe Rosen.

In 1961, Rabbi Rosen came to visit the Rebbe and told him that he was considering moving to Israel. The Rebbe told him that the Previous Rebbe had great pain over the fact that he was forced to leave Russia—and so he, Rabbi Rosen, who had the capacity to make a difference on the other side of the Iron Curtain, should certainly remain there.

Some ten years went by, and Rabbi Rosen came back to the Rebbe again and told him that he wanted to leave and go to Israel. Again the Rebbe pressed him to stay. When Rabbi Rosen asked him, quoting the Torah, “When will I, too, do for my household?”, the Rebbe replied, “When you get to my age, we’ll review the matter again.” Rabbi Rosen was 70 years old at the time and the Rebbe was 80.

So another ten years went by, and Rabbi Rosen, now 80 years old, came back to ask the Rebbe again.

At the time, the Rebbe was a few months away from 90, but the Rebbe again asked him to please stay in Romania. And so, Rabbi Rosen served as the Chief Rabbi of Romania until his very last day (*Admorei Chabad V'Yahadus Romania*, pg. 31).

We might say that Yaakov Avinu remained in Charan for the same reason.

During the first 14 years in which he had to stay there, he had effectively created a “Jewish community” out of his own family. And so when Lavan himself said, “I have divined, and the Lord has blessed me for your sake” (Bereishis 30:27), meaning that Lavan himself had been influenced by Yaakov and had begun believing in G-d, at such a juncture, it was forbidden for Yaakov to leave the place. And so only when G-d explicitly commanded him to return to the Holy Land did Yaakov leave Charan.

In Chabad circles, there’s a saying that a Chabad shliach is like a nail without a head—you can pound it into a wall, but once you do, you’ll never get it out. And so, my dear fellow Jews, we’re here, “nailed in” together for life—and so let’s at least have as much fun as we can get away with.