



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

DISTRIBUTION DATE:

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 13TH 2018 – 5 KISLEV 5779

PARSHAS VAYEITZEI

SERMON TITLE:

Closeness to G-d through Self-Sacrifice

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Vayeitzei
Closeness to G-d through Self-Sacrifice

Good Shabbos!

On March 1, 1961, U.S. President John F. Kennedy announced the launch of the Peace Corps.

According to the president, this new group would be comprised of American citizens who would travel overseas to struggling countries and regions stricken by poverty so as to help and support them with educating, agriculture and health. These volunteers would assume the same standards of living by which their host populations lived—they'd eat the same food, work the same jobs, and speak the same language.

Most importantly, President Kennedy added, these volunteers wouldn't be paid salaries, and the work wouldn't be easy. He concluded the announcement that he hoped to recruit between 500 and 1,000 volunteers, and that he was sure that those volunteers would be found.

A few days later, Jews worldwide celebrated the holiday of Purim.

As was the Rebbe's holy custom, the Rebbe led a farbrengen with the chasidim the evening right after Purim. And then, deep into the night, the Rebbe took note of the fact that the President of the United States had just come out with a call for his country's citizens to go do volunteer work in undeveloped countries so as to help their people build normal lives. The Rebbe added that the President had said that they would not be getting paid, and even warned them that the work would not be easy.

The Rebbe went on to say that the Baal Shem Tov says that there is a lesson in the service of G-d that a Jew can learn from everything that he or she sees or hears in the surrounding world.

So the point is two-fold, the Rebbe said: One, that there are countries that are undeveloped—but spiritually, not physically; in these countries, Jews don't know anything about Judaism. And that leads to the second point—everyone here needs to take heed that if there is a country that has undeveloped Jews, then it's incumbent on them to travel to those Jews and share their Judaism with you.

But, the Rebbe went on, instead of people standing up and volunteering, we hear people asking, "Will we have a nice place to live? Will there be kosher food?" and other various excuses.

But here, said the Rebbe, G-d is sending us a message via the President of the United States, who declared in a loud voice that he's looking for volunteers and that he's sure that he'll get them! (And indeed, within a few days, he did get them.)

So in conclusion, the Rebbe said that the hope is that everyone will “translate” the message into his own language and understand that the Rebbe’s words were intended for him. (Toras Menachem Vol. 30, pg. 166.)

And so in August of 1961, the first contingent of America’s brand-new Peace Corp set out for Ghana in West Africa.

Fast-forward decades later.

In August of 2015, a Chabad shliach was sent to open a Chabad center in Ghana.

Well, when this young new shliach, Rabbi Majeski, was heading out to Ghana for the first time, the counter agent at the airport looked at him in wonder and asked, “Are you sure you’re going to Ghana?” And it was at that very moment that Rabbi Majeski understood that people don’t just go to Ghana—they only go there if they have a good reason.

A short time later, Rabbi Majeski was doing some minor shopping in Ghana. He noticed that a young white kid was looking at him. The young man—who, like him, was clearly not a native of Ghana—approached him and asked, “Are you a rabbi?”

Rabbi Majeski good-naturedly replied, “No, I just like dressing this way!”

The young man, named Andy Wisler, commented that Ghana was the last place in the world he expected to meet a Jew, and certainly not a rabbi.

As it turned out, Andy was a volunteer in the U.S. Peace Corps.

At the International Chabad Shluchim Convention in 2017 one of the guest speakers was that same Jewish Peace Corps volunteer, Andy Wisler.

At the time, Andy had been in Ghana for three years, and he shared with the crowd that the day he had met the Chabad shliach had changed his life forever. He had grown up in a house in which Judaism was not an important subject in life, and he had never given it any thought—but in the merit of Rabbi Majeski, and the Rebbe who had sent him, he had found his Jewish connection.

And then, Andy Wisler announced to a massive cheering crowd of shluchim and guests that his first aliyah to the Torah occurred in Ghana, and that the first time in his life that he put on tefilin was in Ghana. He added that as a volunteer himself in the Peace Corps, he could truly appreciate the sacrifice of the Shluchim.

Speaking of the Kinus Hashluchim, I want to share with you another story that I heard that touched my heart. It was related by a Chabad shliach in California, Rabbi Yonason Abrams.

Rabbi Abrams related how 21 years ago, there was a nine-year-old boy walking home from his local Chabad shul with his father after the hakafos on Simchas Torah. The boy asked his father, “Dad, can we bring the Torah scroll home?” The father said, “No, the Torah scroll belongs in the shul, in the ark!”

The boy burst out crying.

As it turned out, the boy’s mother was laid up at home with a dread illness, and the boy very much wanted his mother to have the chance to kiss the Torah scroll on the holiday like everyone else.

Now, the father understood what was really going on in his son’s heart. So the next day, as the mother was sitting at home, resting, she heard the sound of singing outside getting louder and louder.

Suddenly, the front door flew open, and in burst a group of dancing and singing Jews, with one of them holding a Torah scroll and another carrying her son on his shoulders. The entire community, men, women and children, had shown up to do the hakafos dancing in the lady’s front yard.

Sadly, she passed away three months later.

Now, the community that had come to dance on Simchas Torah was the Chabad community of S. Diego, California. The shliach in the story was Rabbi Yonah Fradkin, the head shliach of S. Diego, who has been there since the early 1970s to this very day. The young mother was Mrs. Chana Abrams—“and,” Rabbi Abrams concluded, “The little boy was me.”

Well, right after his Bar Mitzvah, a young shliach named Rabbi Yitzzy Hurwitz opened a Chabad center not too far from their house, in a nearby suburb called Temecula. Young Yonason became very attached to Rabbi and Mrs. Hurwitz, and he practically became their son—he would stay with them every Shabbos for an entire year.

A few years later, Yonason was now a young married man. At that time, tragically, when Rabbi Hurwitz had developed ALS, and he asked Yonason and his wife to basically take over the Chabad center so that its work could continue.

Concluding his remarks at the 2017 Convention, Rabbi Abrams shared that Rabbi Yitzzy was watching the Convention live from his bed. In response, the crowd took to its feet in a prolonged standing ovation to Rabbi Yitzzy Hurwitz as Rabbi Abrams wished him a miraculous recovery.

And that takes us right to this week’s Torah portion.

In this week's Parshah of Vayitzei, we read how G-d revealed Himself to Yaakov Avinu, our Patriarch Jacob.

Now, Yaakov was already 77 years old at the time, and it was the first time that G-d had revealed Himself to him. As long as he had been living surrounded by the warmth of family, with his parents Yitzchak and Rivkah, in the religious neighborhood of Beer Sheva, G-d had seen no need to speak to him. So when did G-d reveal Himself to Yaakov for the first time? That would be when Yaakov was prepared to leave Beer Sheva and go to Charan.

So, when does a Jew merit that G-d show Himself to him? When that Jew is prepared to present himself to another Jew. In such a case, G-d Himself leaves His place and descends to reveal himself to Jew who is prepared to leave his own place, go to Charan, and popularize faith in G-d among people who have never heard of G-d.

The second time that G-d revealed Himself to Yaakov was when Yaakov was on the way back home from Charan. As the Torah tells us in the Parshah of Vayishlach, "And G-d showed Himself to Yaakov while he was yet coming from Padan Aram, and He blessed him." And on that verse, Rashi says, "This was the second time for this location: One, on his way there, and two, on his return" (Bereishis 32:9). Both occasions were thus connected to Yaakov's going to Charan.

The third and last time that G-d revealed Himself to Yaakov was when Yaakov was on his way to Egypt. There, the Torah (Bereishis 46:2-3) tells us, "And G-d said to Israel in a night vision, 'Do not fear descending to Egypt, for as a great nation will I establish you there.' "

We thus have it that when was it that Yaakov merited G-d's revelation to him? Specifically when he left the Land of Israel and went to Charan, or when he left the Holy Land for Egypt—it is specifically when a Jew is ready to sacrifice of himself for another Jew; specifically then does he merit the revelation of the Shechinah (Divine Presence).

So when a Jew is ready to go on shlichus to Charan, "the fury of the world," he merits the blessing received by Yaakov—the blessing that the Rebbe adopted as the slogan of Chasidim of Chabad: "Ufaratzta yamah v'keidmah tzafonah vanegba"—and you shall burst west, east, north and south."

Good Shabbos!