

BUILDING TORAH IN A PLEASANT LAND

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Yissachar is a strong donkey, who rests between the borders. And he saw rest, that it was good, and the land that it was pleasant, but he bent his shoulder to accept [the burden] and became an indentured servant." [49:14]

In describing his son Yissachar, Yaakov describes prophetically how Yissachar's sons would conduct themselves in the Land of Israel. They were Torah scholars, who bore the burden of Torah and studied it intensely. The children of his younger brother Zevulun became merchants, and used their wealth to support the Torah learning of Yissachar. So the verse tells us that though Yissachar could have rested or engaged in agriculture, he instead devoted himself to the most difficult task of all.

The Rebbe of Belz, Rabbi Aharon Rokeach zt"l, parsed this verse in a different way after the Holocaust.

The Rebbe, who before the war had tens of thousands of Chassidim in Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, was pursued relentlessly by the Nazis. He was forced to cut his beard and disguise himself as a peasant, hiding himself in a cellar in an outlying village. When the danger grew still worse, several of his Chassidim helped him to escape, endangering their own lives in the process.

According to stories told by the Chassidim later, the Rebbe's rescue was one miracle after another. The problem was traveling across borders without identification. If they were stopped and captured, they could easily have been shipped back to Poland and murdered by the Nazis. And in order to reach Israel, they traveled over the Polish-Slovakian border to Hungary, Romania, Turkey, Syria and Lebanon, finally arriving at the northern border of the Holy Land.

Every time they approached a border, which was usually overrun with patrolling soldiers, the skies darkened, and an intense rain began to fall. The soldiers, of course, went for cover -- they could hardly see very far even if they stayed outside. And in this way, the Rebbe and his Chassidim were able to cross the borders without difficulty. And as soon as the danger passed, the clouds parted and they traveled on, enjoying extraordinarily pleasant weather until they reached the next border.

When they reached the Land of Israel, then called Palestine, in 1944, the Rebbe settled in Tel Aviv and many of the Chassidei Belz then in Israel moved to be close to him. At the end of the war, surviving Chassidim reached the Rebbe there, and told him of the horrors which had occurred. Tens of thousands of Belzer Chassidim were among those who perished in Treblinka and Auschwitz. The

Rebbe's own family was wiped out, his only son murdered in Belz itself.

After mourning his horrific losses, the Rebbe turned to his brother, and said: "Our family is no longer alive. The majority of Chassidei Belz are lost -- but there are many who survived the fires of Europe. We must restore the trust and faith of Belz; we must build anew. And we must build here, in the Land of Israel, the home of Jews and Judaism."

And here is how he interpreted the verse, "And he saw rest, that it was good, and the land that it was pleasant, but he bent his shoulder to accept...."

"Physical rest, one can find in America -- but the pleasantness, the goodness of Judaism, especially when there is a need to bend and accept a burden, that, we find in the Land."

Good Shabbos,
Rabbi Yaakov Menken