



"Sabota" – the Shabbos man

Parshas Vayishlach

Leilui Neshmas Meira Chaya Nechama Bracha A"H
Bat David Mordechai V'Zelda Shaindel Sheychu

It was Shavuot night, the Beis Midrash was full and vibrant with people studying. I was looking for a place to sit. I then saw Rabbi Eliezer Nanas, I asked him to study with me, and he agreed. Since that day I have learned a great deal from him.

I told him about my "trials" at Migdal Ha'Emek- the difficulties I had experienced trying to impact the youth of that city. Rabbi Eliezer responded with a smile: "These are trials? These sound like a pleasure compared to what I have had to overcome."

He was seventy years old, and his eyes told of the hardships he had encountered throughout his life in Communist Russia, where he spent more than two decades in Siberia, incarcerated by the authorities for his religious activities.

"On Yom Kippur eve, in 1935", he told me, "I was arrested and taken to Rostov. I was placed in a closet and held there for 24 hours. That was my 'welcome to Siberia'."

"I quickly learned their methods and devised ways to counter them." He was sentenced a few months later to ten years with hard labor for teaching Torah to Jewish children.

He never forgot those days. He was constantly tested by his jailers, but withstood all their attacks and humiliations.

He refused to work on Shabbos, and encouraged other Jews to behave likewise. When the soldiers saw his refusal they took him to the camp commander. The commander announced that he had conspired against the authorities and was condemned to death. "I did not fear them", Rabbi Eliezer said, "G-d commanded me to observe the Shabbos, and thus I did."

He was stripped and tied to a pole. The frost bit at him. He had a sign hung around his neck: "Sabota" – the Shabbos man. The nickname stuck until his last days.

The following Shabbos he was placed on the ground and a soldier aimed his weapon at him. He was spared the last moment. On the third Shabbos he was placed in a coffin. They did all they could to brake his spirit. He encountered similar tribulations for the next decade, but he did not break. After his sentence was up he was notified that he was sentenced to another ten year imprisonment for religious activity in prison.

He was tortured for another decade. "I was in solitary confinement for 1,500 Shabbosim and holidays, but I still cleaved to my belief."

How did you hold up, I asked him? "When I was five years old my father and I visited the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The Rebbe told me that just as Pharaoh's sword had no effect on Moshe, so too the sword will have no effect on me."

When Yaacov meets with his bother Esav in this week's parasha he tells him: "I have sojourned with Lavan, and I have tarried until now."¹ Rashi commentates: "I lived with the wicked Lavan, but I kept the 613 commandments, and I did not learn from his evil deeds."

This statement is a bit odd, for it could work to Yaacov's detriment. Esav might have thought that while living with Lavan Yaacov may have learned to 'handle himself'. However, Yaacov announces that he has retained his faith and unique way of life, and that he poses no threat to Esav. Why did Yaacov compromise himself in such a way?

The Ba'al Shem Tov teaches us that G-d relates to person in the same way a person conducts himself. In a way, G-d mimics man's behavior. When man musters unnatural forces to overcome obstacles G-d likewise conducts him in a metaphysical manner.

This is what Yaacov has said to Esav: I have lived with Lavan for fourteen years and have encountered many bitter physical and spiritual hardships. It was not easy to maintain my belief there, and so I had to muster super-human forces to do so. If you confront me with 400 men I have a supernatural force on my side, and with Him I will be victorious. I have conducted myself in a metaphysical way all these years, and G-d will do the same for me, and my victory is certain.

We are taught in the Talmud this lesson: "Said Rabbi Papa to Abaye: How is it that for the former generations miracles were performed and for us miracles are not performed?...The former generations used to be ready to sacrifice their lives for the sanctity of G-d's name; we do not sacrifice our lives for the sanctity of G-d's name."² When one sacrifices his life for the sake of G-d he merits many supernatural miracles.

Eleven years after his release, in 1966, Rabbi Eliezer arrived in Israel. One year he flew to Crown Heights to visit the Rebbe. When he returned he was amazed: "The Rebbe told me that the twenty years I spent in prison were not counted to my quota of years on earth." He did indeed live a long life; 'Sabota' passed away at the old age of 100 on a Shabbos.

¹ Beresheit 32:5.

² Tractate Berachot 20a.

