

In The Pizza Shop

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I just want to tell you about a conversation that took place in a pizza shop in Yerushalayim about a dog and a snowstorm. That's the sum total of my whole speech.

I'll start with the pizza parlor in Yerushalayim.

It was a week ago, Motzoei Shabbos. I had been with my wife, and Rabbi and Mrs. Fendel, at the Sheraton. We had met with Rabbi Heshy Weinreb and a number of other people to discuss Eretz Yisroel issues. On the way home to Har Nof, we decided to stop at the Pizza place in Center One.

At the next table five yeshiva bochurim are sitting. You could tell that they were American students who were in Eretz Yisroel on a one-year program. I noticed that my wife was looking towards their table and seemed interested in their conversation. I had this sinking feeling - that I knew what was coming. I hoped it wouldn't happen, but sure enough it did.

She innocently she turned to them and asked, "Where are you from?"

They start with Brooklyn, and then finally admit that two are from Flatbush, two are from Boro Park, one is from Monsey.

"Are you learning in Yeshiva here?" she asks.

"Yes." Somebody is showing interest in them. And they're thrilled.

"So in which Yeshivos are you learning?" she asks.

Today, B"H, there has been such an explosion of Torah learning I can't keep up with the number of yeshivos.

I'm waiting for the crucial moment, when my wife goes in for the kill. And then it comes.

Again quite innocently she asks, "Any of you plan on living here?"

Silence.

They're looking at her like she's from Mars or from Venus. One of them seems to find the courage and he says, "Live here? With the standard of living that they have in this country? We can't live on this standard of living." These fellows are serious.

My wife asks, "Well, tell me. What are you talking about? Give me an example. What's wrong with the standard of living? What are you really missing here?"

One of them who seems to be the spokesman for the group finally says, “We see Israeli children don’t have any toys. They can play with nothing and still be happy. Kids in America need toys.”

My wife says, “What are you talking about? I’ll take you to our grandchildren. They can almost open a toy store with all their toys.”

A few of them begin to look a little sheepish.

She keeps pressing. “What is there about the standard of living here that you find so difficult?”

One of them says, and this is the great statement that they all seem to agree with, “Well, you know, here you have to press a button and wait half an hour to get hot water. I can’t live with that.” And the rest of them chime in, “You know, press a button, wait half an hour. In America we have hot water all the time. Just turn on the tap and you have hot water.”

My wife has difficulty with answers like this. Chazal say, “Hanoshim mechavevos es ha’aretz.”

Women have a special love of Eretz Yisroel. I know it’s true.

She said to them, “Tell me the truth, after 120 years, the Ribono Shel Olam will ask you why you didn’t come to live in Eretz Yisroel. Are you going to tell Him because you have to press a button and wait half an hour for hot water?”

The silence was deafening. These fellows don’t seem to know what to answer. They looked somewhat embarrassed.

At this point, I felt it was time for me to get involved in the conversation, to turn up the heat a little.

I said to them, “You know that there is a mitzvah of yishuv ha’aretz, a mitzvah to live in Eretz Yisroel?” It was a rhetorical question. I didn’t expect an answer. I began to tell them, “The Chazon Ish in his Letters says, ‘The decision has already been accepted that the halachah is like the Rambam and the Ramban that there is a mitzvah of yishuv Eretz Yisroel.’ and everybody knows how much the Chofetz Chaim wanted to go on aliyah.” I thought that by telling them a Chazon Ish they would be shaken a little.

But no, they’re not at all shaken. So I kept going. The Chazon Ish was known to tell people who came to ask what should they do on the second day of Yom Tov when they were in Eretz Yisroel, “You people are always looking for reasons not to live in Eretz Yisroel. And we here are looking for reasons to make sure that every Jew should be able to come and live in Eretz Yisroel.”

Once somebody asked him a question, “What do I do on yom tov sheini? I am ‘da’ato lachzor’. I intend to return to Chutz Laaretz.” The inimitable response of the Chazon Ish, “Dos iz da’as? How can a Jew have da’ato lachzor? That you call intent? Impossible.”

And I thought that now I had just made major strides in convincing these five bochrim of the Mitzvah of living here. But they still didn’t seem to take it all seriously. Perhaps they didn’t understand just who the Chazon Ish was. So I said, “I personally asked R’ Yaakov Kamenetzky

before I went on aliyah twenty years ago, and he told me, “R' Sholom, you should know, I hold that it is a mitzvah today like it always was to live in Eretz Yisroel. And if I could I would go to the airport right now and get on to a plane and go, but I can't.” I didn't understand at the time what he meant by “I can't.” I subsequently understood what he meant.

These young men were still unimpressed.

Then I added R' Meir Simcha to my list of “defenders of the Land”. R' Meir Simcha, in a beautiful letter said, that from the time the League of Nations approved Eretz Yisroel as a homeland for the Jewish people, the mitzvah of yishuv Eretz Yisroel was back to what it originally was. He went on to say that there were two sins the Jewish people committed in the desert: the sin of the golden calf and the sin of the spies. G-d forgave the Jewish people for the sin of the golden calf but not for the sin of the spies. G-d was prepared to forego his own honor but He was not prepared to forego the honor of Eretz Yisroel.

By now I was beginning to get a response.

“Oh, the mitzvah of living in Eretz Yisroel? Yeah, but this is Israel. This is not Eretz Yisroel!” Mr. Spokesman said.

I controlled myself.

Another one of our young men said to me, “Well, you know, it may be a big sin to live in Eretz Yisroel anyway.”

I controlled myself again.

And these are innocent, lovely young people.

So I continued. I quoted R' Shlomo Zalman ZTZ”L. He was once talking to some bochrim from abroad who were asking him, “Is the mitzvah of living in Eretz Yisroel from the Torah or is it of Rabbinic origin?”

R' Shlomo Zalman, in his fatherly way, and with a smile said, “What difference does it make?” He wasn't interested in going into the whole discussion of the Mitzvah of living in Eretz Yisroel and pointed out that in Torah, on every page, the will of Hashem is clearly expressed. He wants Jews to live in Eretz Yisroel. That's all. That's G-d's will plain and simple.

My last attempt was to tell them the words of Rav Hutner in a letter. “Eretz Yisroel is acquired only through suffering - and if I was there and did not suffer then I did not acquire the Land. I was there, I saw, but I did not acquire Eretz Yisroel.” And he says, “I hope that the next time I come it will be al yedei yesurim, through suffering.” And he goes on to say, that as he writes these words, “The flame of the love of Eretz Yisroel burns in me.”

There are three gifts that were given to Klal Yisroel, R' Shimon ben Yochai says, they were only given through yesurim: Torah, Eretz Yisroel, and olam haboh.

One of these comments I made to the young people was, “Have you ever heard of anybody telling the Ribono Shel Olam, “You gave me a matonoh, Torah. No, thank you. You gave me a matonoh olam habo, no thank you. I’m not interested.”

Yet, someone said that through Torah and olam habo we will be zoche to Eretz Yisroel. What do you mean we will be zoche to Eretz Yisroel? Eretz Yisroel is acquired through yesurim. It’s part of the big three. It’s right up there with Torah. I would say that the bridge between Torah and olam habo goes via Eretz Yisroel.

You know what was depressing? And I was very depressed. Here were young men who had been raised in our institutions of Torah and that feeling, that has been part of the spiritual baggage of Klal Yisroel for 2,000 years doesn’t exist for them. They don’t have a clue. We regained Eretz Yisroel only because there were Yidden, poshute yidden, who loved Eretz Yisroel. These kids didn’t have a clue. How could they have gone through our institutions, our day schools, our yeshivos, our shuls and have absolutely no feeling, no sense of what Eretz Yisroel means to the Jewish people?

I think I have to lower my voice for what I’m going to say next. I’m terribly frightened of a condemnation of Klal Yisroel, G-d forbid. There’s another people that is ready to die and commit suicide for it, and there’s another people that’s not ready to give up the right of return. And we have the right of return, and we’re not returning. We have it. We haven’t even put it on the agenda of the education of our children. How can a young man go through elementary school, yeshiva high school, and be in yeshiva, and he doesn’t have a feeling for Eretz Yisroel at all? It’s nothing. Press a button and wait half an hour for hot water? That’s the sacrifice one should make for Eretz Yisroel!? Not too much to ask, is it?

Trust me. I’ve had many of these conversations with young people. It’s true across the board. We have failed terribly. And we have to do something about it... Now.

I’ll tell you a story about a dog.

While I was Rabbi in West Hempstead, a family of baalei teshuva moved in five doors away from us. We assisted them in koshering their home, teaching them about mikva. All of the things that go into it. The classic task of a Rabbi. We became very good friends.

One day they tell me, “Rabbi, we’re going on aliyah.” I asked them, why they were going on aliyah.

They said, “We’re reading the Torah every week and it seems clear that it’s G-d’s will.” It was the innocence of R’ Shlomo Zalman coming out from these baalei teshuva. “We’re learning the Torah! We see the Torah. Everything is Eretz Yisroel, so we’re going to Eretz Yisroel. It feels like the right thing to do.”

They had a dog by the name of Charlie. He was a collie, and he would snuggle up to me and we became friends, Charlie and I.

They went on aliyah, and they left Charlie with one of the neighbors. Every night I would take a walk, usually around 11:00 p.m. while trying to work out a shiur or a drosho. And I'd meet Charlie being walked, and he'd snuggle up to me. It became a ritual. We understood each other.

In November of 1981, we were in the throes of the agonizing decision of our own family aliyah. It's a very, very painful, painful decision to make. You try to figure out on paper: Will it work financially? What will happen to the children? Will they adjust, won't they adjust? There are so many fears.

It was a nice cool evening in the middle of November, and I was in physical pain because of the agonizing decision making process. I went out for a walk. And who is coming towards me? Charlie. Charlie snuggles in with his friend the Rabbi and the foster parents of Charlie tell me, "Rabbi, you won't believe what happened. We got a call today from Charlie's parents. They bought him a ticket! He's going to Israel!" I began to scream on the street. "That dog is going to live in Eretz Yisroel, and I won't?" Then and there I knew what our decision had to be.

Charlie put us over the top. If there's a heaven for dogs, he's in that Gan Eden. May that dog be remembered for good.

Everybody has a Charlie. Fortunate is the one that Charlie is a nice dog. There are other Charlies. The Ribono Shel Olam sends messages. It can be 9/11. It can be one of a thousand other things going on in a person's life. There are messages; there are sounds that the Ribono Shel Olam sends, calling people to come home to Eretz Yisroel. If you're tuned in you hear it. If you have reception, you're able to receive it, then you hear it. And if not, it goes over your head.

Now the snowstorm.

A few years ago my wife and I went to Galei Tzanz in Netanya for a Shabbos. It seems that some family had come to make a bar mitzvah, and we notice a Har Nof family among the guests. Around Seudah Shlishit the Har Nof family came over to tell us a story that the baal simcha had told them and here it is...

They say that they had mentioned to the baal simcha that their Rav from Har Nof, Rabbi Gold was in the hotel. He cried out, "Rabbi Gold from West Hempstead?"

He had been working out on Suffolk County several years ago and one Friday, it began snowing, and then sticking. There were reports on the radio that the highways were going to be closed. He realized that he might not make it home in time for Shabbos to Brooklyn, so he started to look for a place where he could stay over on Long Island. The only other thing that's important about this fellow is that he happened to be in the course of similar throes - what I went through in November of '81, he was going through in November or December of '82. His wife wanted to go on aliyah. He was very afraid of the step. Very difficult, and it's already coming to a point where their marriage is suffering because of this inner turmoil and strife.

Meanwhile, back to Friday afternoon. The snow was coming down; he wasn't going to make it home. He had heard the name "Rabbi Gold, West Hempstead." He called and called the number in the phone book. There was no answer. Desperately he began calling around, and he found out

there was another Rabbi there, Meyer Fendel who lived in West Hempstead. He called the Fendel home, and Rebbetzin Goldie Fendel answered the phone. He felt bad that he was trying to invite himself for Shabbos, so he explained, "You're not the first one I called. I called Rabbi Gold time and time again and there was no answer. So now I'm calling you; I'm stuck. I'm not going to make it back to Flatbush. I need a place to stay for Shabbos."

She said she'd like very much to help but her husband was away. She said that she would try to find a place for him. Which she did, of course.

He asked her, "What's wrong with Rabbi Gold's phone? It's not working."

She told him that Rabbi Gold didn't live there anymore. He went on aliyah. "And, by the way," she told him, "my husband is in Eretz Yisroel now to prepare for our aliyah."

She heard a cry coming from this fellow on the other side of the phone. "I'm going through the pain of a decision. The Ribono Shel Olam sent me a message. I want Gold, Gold is in Eretz Yisroel. I want Fendel, Fendel is going to Eretz Yisroel."

He made the decision, and he went on aliyah. He had another child that was born in Eretz Yisroel, and they were making the bar mitzvah in Galei Tzantz. This was Seuda Shlishit.

You can influence others by doing nothing. You can have an influence on somebody - I didn't do anything directly. Nothing at all!

He was waiting for the signal, so he heard my phone not answering.

I went down Motzoei Shabbos, and the whole family was lined up for pictures. I just stood there. They all looked and I just said to the father, "My name is Gold." Don't ask what took place then. It was the first time we were meeting each other.

We embraced.

There are Charlies. There are phones that don't answer. There are all sorts of messages that the Ribono Shel Olam sends. But we have to be tuned in. If we're not going to be tuned in, we're not going to hear it. And it's our responsibility to tune in our children, our students, our baalebatim. Chas v'sholom, there should not be a kitrug on Klal Yisroel, "I gave you Eretz Yisroel and you don't want it."

And, believe me, you can get instant hot water in Eretz Yisroel too. Believe me. The standard of living is fine. And Americans in Eretz Yisroel have made a tremendous contribution in all areas: education, science, technology, business, etc. You can come and accomplish great things. And we need religious Jews. We need them desperately. COME AND JOIN US.