

# THE Jewish OBSERVER

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GENERAL STUDIES  
IN THE YESHIVA:

## A NEGLECTED FRONTIER

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### Statement of Policy

The Jewish Observer has devoted a great deal of space to the perils of the Internet and to the need for everyone to be extremely vigilant in its use. We have echoed the pleas of our *gedolim* that it should not be in use, unless it is an unavoidable necessity, and then only with all suitable safeguards. While its dangers must be recognized and con-

trolled to every possible degree, our *gedolim* recognize that many people and businesses require its use, and therefore it has not been banned. This is why we accept advertisements listing website addresses, but in no way does this imply that the *gedolim* or The Jewish Observer condone casual use of the Internet.

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## GENERAL STUDIES IN THE YESHIVOS:

## A NEGLECTED FRONTIER

## Introduction

To be successful, schools must have a clear, internally-crafted set of curricular standards and objectives, argues Professor Richard Elmore of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.\* Defining a secular program for a secular school is difficult enough. School leaders must create a unified set of beliefs about students' needs and learning objectives that fit the diverse needs of their community, but the public school community is not usually committed to a belief system shared by all of its members. Doing this in a yeshiva is even more difficult, for a different reason. The primary goals of a yeshiva education are religious in nature. We want to produce *bnei* and *bnos Torah* who will carry our revered traditions into the next generation. Often, secular studies conflict with our goals as religious Jews.

Because of this conflict, our yeshivos may be ambivalent about their secular programs. Often, *menahalim* (principals) will acknowledge with resignation that secular studies are required by the government, so they readily hand over their curricular decisions to external agencies like the state Department of, or local Board of, Education. Without an internally agreed upon set of curricular standards, chaos can reign, with a constant clash between educators who wish to remain true to

the state-established curriculum and those who feel that much of the state-sponsored material is unsuitable for our yeshiva students.

Students are often caught in the middle. Those interested in the secular material may hear disparaging comment from their *rabbe'im* regarding the secular program in their schools. (I know of a case in which a *rebbe*, wishing to have some fun with his class, added the "v" to the teacher's instruction on the blackboard to "omit" a certain question on an exam.)

Students disinterested in working for an entire day may try to discredit their secular program by telling their *rabbe'im* about the "offensive" material being presented to them in class by their teachers. (Too often, this is done on the day before a big exam so that they can avoid studying for the test.)

One solution commonly utilized in many of our Bais Yaakovs and *chadorim* is the censorship approach: the current public school curriculum is thoroughly analyzed and assessed for inappropriate content. Improper books are removed, and unacceptable sections in the science and social studies texts are deleted. The curriculum offered still meets state objectives, and children can still be taught to pass state exams. The problem with this approach is that while we may have defined what we do not want taught, it does not mean that we have established a coherent curriculum of material that we do want taught. In the absence of

Mr. Altabe serves as the principal of General Studies of Yeshiva Darchei Torah, Far Rockaway NY. His article, "Secular Studies: A Crisis Within Our Schools," was featured in *JO*, Sept. '01.

\* In a 1999 article published by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

clearly defined expectations and standards, it is no wonder we find frustrated instructors and principals teaching unruly students.

**Wanted: Positive Rationales  
For Secular Studies**

**W**e need positive rationales for teaching secular studies in our schools. In schools with well-functioning secular departments, you will find a well-defined, clear set of goals and objectives in secular studies that does not infringe upon the overall goals of the *limudei kodesh* department. In the more successful schools, the secular goals complement the religious goals. For example, communication skills, especially in writing, are emphasized as a means of proper expression. Connections are readily made, where possible, between the secular curriculum and the Torah curriculum. Such schools see their children as whole entities, are vigilant about any conflicts presented, and have no ambivalence regarding the purpose of their secular classrooms.

Rabbi Ephraim Kletenik, of Yeshiva Tiferes Tzvi in Chicago writes in the pages that follow of his experiences as General Studies Principal. His approach to applying the standards of *middos* and *derech erez* which are in force during *limudei kodesh* to that time of the day set aside for secular studies is an essential element in enhancing the secular studies department of a yeshiva. When our students understand that our behavioral expectations of them is the same regardless of whether it is 9 a.m. or 4 p.m., when they understand that they are expected to strive for excellence in all of their *limudim*, and when this message is clearly articulated by all of the stakeholders in the school from the *menahel* to the rebbe to the teacher to the parent – then it is more likely that the child will take his secular studies more seriously.

Creating a secular studies curriculum that adheres to state standards, while at the same time promoting Jewish religious values, is a far more ambitious project.

If done properly, however, our children can benefit from a complete program free of ambivalence. When the goals of the General Studies complement those of the Religious Studies, we can develop realistic expectations of our students. In the pages that follow, Rabbi Moshe Eisemann analyzes just such an ambitious program presented in *The Emperor's New Clothes Revisited*, by Mrs. T. Gootblatt.

While I do not necessarily endorse all of the proposals in Mrs. Gootblatt's work,

I wholeheartedly appreciate the effort she has made in creating a secular program that fits into the overall religious program for her fictitious school. She has created a secular curriculum that has defined purpose without ambivalence that can be adapted by many of our schools, as they seek to define their own rationales. If we view this important work as a working model for our own endeavors, then all yeshivos, regardless of community, can hope to create secular programs that work. ■

# Simcha Guidelines

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- The Vort celebration is to be discontinued. The *L'chaim* (held at the time that the engagement is announced) should also not turn into a Vort.

## THE WEDDING

- Only 400 invited guests may be seated at the *chassuna seuda*.
- The *kabbolas panim* smorgasbord should be limited to basic cakes, fruit platters, a modest buffet, and the caterer's standard chicken or meat hot dishes.

- The menu for the *seuda* is limited to 3 courses followed by a regular dessert.
- No Viennese table and no bar.

## THE MUSIC

- A band may consist of a maximum of 5 musicians (one of the musicians may act as a vocalist) or four musicians and one additional vocalist.
- A one-man band is recommended.

## FLOWERS & CHUPA DECOR

- The total cost of these items for the entire wedding should not exceed \$1,800.

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# Enhancing GENERAL STUDIES in Yeshivos

## I. INTRODUCTION TO THE MISSION

One of the major challenges facing *yeshivos* and day schools across the country today is the negative attitude that *talmidim* have towards secular studies. Many of the boys have no interest in learning the material, and their behavior often results in a *chillul Hashem*. What are the causes of this problem? What are some possible solutions? These are the questions that I would like to explore in this article.

Let me begin with my own introduction to this problem. I had been the 7th grade rebbe at our school for nine years. One sunny day in June 1998, the *menahel* (principal) approached me with a very serious look on his face. He said to me, “Rabbi Kletenik, how would you like to be the General Studies principal next year?”

I was almost speechless, as many thoughts came to mind. I told him that I needed time to consider the offer.

For about a week, I kept thinking of reasons not to take the job. I knew that

the boys misbehaved during General Studies, and that teachers were constantly quitting. Like many *rebbe'im*, I did my job, and pretended not to see what was going on in the afternoon. I was a successful rebbe, and I didn't want to jeopardize my relationship with the *talmidim* by giving them *mussar* about their behavior.

My thinking changed during the second week. As a rebbe, I was supposed to be a father to my *talmidim*. If my own children were having a problem during General Studies, wouldn't I be concerned? A rebbe cannot just teach material to his students. He must be involved in every aspect of their lives. Just as I worried when I would find a *talmid* not eating lunch or having social problems with his classmates, it was also incumbent upon me to care about the way he acts during General Studies. I decided to take the job.

My first priority was to identify all the problems with the secular program. Some problems were obvious, but many others only became apparent after a while. I scheduled meetings with each of the General Studies teachers to hear what they had to say. I learned a great deal from

these meetings, as well as from my own observations during my first year on the job. Let us review these issues.

## II. THE INHERENT PROBLEMS

- The first problem is that secular studies are secondary. *Limudei Kodesh* (sacred studies) are much more important than *Limudei Chol* (General Studies). Our *talmidim* interpret this to mean that General Studies are not important at all. They therefore feel that there is no reason to take them seriously or to behave.

- A second problem is that the boys have a lack of awareness of many important concepts in Judaism. They do not fully comprehend how terrible the *aveira* of *chillul Hashem* is, or what its ramifications are. They do not understand “*Derech erez kadma leTorah* – Respect and proper character are prerequisites to Torah.” They assume that as long as they are learning well with their *Rabbe'im*, nothing else matters. They have no knowledge of how *Chazal* want us to relate to non-Jews.

- A third problem is that the General Studies teachers are often made to feel

Rabbi Kletenik is a 7<sup>th</sup>-grade *Rebbe* and principal of General Studies at Yeshiva Tiferes Tzvi in Chicago.

as if they are second-class citizens. In most yeshivos, they get paid much lower salaries than the *Rabbe'im*, and they have no benefits. Frequently, they walk into their rooms in the afternoon to find the place a mess. The Rebbe's *sefarim* are all over the desk, the board has not been erased, and the floor has more than its share of trash.

To make matters worse, some *Rabbe'im* may walk into the room during General Studies to pass out worksheets they forgot to hand out in the morning, or to call out individual boys for private discussions. They fail to realize how such actions demoralize the General Studies teachers. It also reinforces the opinion of the students that General Studies are unimportant

- A fourth problem is that it is very difficult to find competent teachers who can command the respect of the boys. We are looking for part-time teachers who are willing to work for low wages and receive no benefits. Although it is possible to find married women who are willing to work for a few hours a day, we only allow men to teach in the upper grades. Yet, as soon as a man comes in for an interview, we become suspicious. *Why isn't he looking for a full-time job?* Ultimately, we compromise, and hire teachers who are not fully qualified. The *talmidim* notice the inadequacies in their teachers, and respond by being uncooperative.

In addition, there are many differences between our values and those of the outside world. Even the most educated non-Jew or irreligious Jew may discuss topics that we do not approve of or use language that we consider vulgar and offensive. When they do these things, they lose respect in our eyes and in the eyes of the students.

- Also, the differences between our cultures make it difficult for them to understand us or our students, and they often mistakenly think that they are being treated disrespectfully. Let me illustrate:

*When, as principal, I met with each of the teachers, one session was with a non-frum, middle-aged lady who had been a fourth-grade teacher in our school for many years. As she entered my office, I said,*

*"Good morning. Please have a seat."*

*She looked at me sternly and said, "Rabbi Kletenik, we have been teaching together in this school for the last nine years, and this is the first time you have greeted me properly."*

*I was astonished. The truth is that every time I passed her in the hall, I would nod politely, and say hello. She obviously did not understand that in our circles, men and women do not socialize, and therefore all of my interactions with her in the past had been brief.*

Our students encounter the same problem. They are misunderstood. Teachers often complain to me that our boys are argumentative. I thought that they meant that the boys would argue about the amount of work that was being assigned. They explained that when they would state an opinion in class about a certain matter, the boys would disagree. They considered this to be argumentative.

I explained to the teachers that this is not disrespectful. On the contrary, as a rebbe, I encourage my *talmidim* to disagree with me when I am teaching them *Gemora*. I want my boys to develop their analytical thinking skills, and not accept every opinion that they hear.

- Finally, the truth is that our boys have a very long day, and are tired by the time General Studies begins. Many of them simply lack the patience or energy to

embark on another three hours of learning, especially if it is boring.

### III. SOME SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

Last year, I completed a two-year program given by Torah Umesorah called the Principals Fellowship. As part of that program, I undertook an independent research project under the guidance of a mentor – Rabbi Dov Leibenstein, a supervisor for the Associated Talmud Torahs of Chicago. Together, we designed a program to deal with the problems mentioned above. With the help of my *menahel*, Rabbi Zev Meisels, we implemented many parts of this program in our yeshiva and, *Baruch Hashem*, we have met with great success. Discipline problems have decreased dramatically. I presented these ideas at last year's Torah Umesorah National Convention, and I would like to share them with the reader.

#### *The Role of the Menahel*

In order to solve any of the problems mentioned above, the General Studies principal must have the full cooperation and involvement of the *menahel*. The *menahel* cannot turn a blind eye to what is happening in the afternoon.

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## Discipline

The school's discipline system must deal with infractions in behavior that occur during General Studies the same way it does with those that occur during *Limudei Kodesh*. In our school, a boy who misbehaves during General Studies is not eligible to be on the honor roll or to serve as valedictorian at graduation.

Every teacher must have a list of rules that he communicates to the students on the first day of school, including the consequences of misbehavior. The disciplinary consequences should consist of three or four steps. A copy of the rules should be submitted to the principal for approval.

Once a teacher has gone through those steps with a particular student, and the behavior has not improved, the student should be sent to the office *with a written explanation of what has occurred*. One should not rely upon the student to explain what he has done. Our school has a detailed Discipline Referral Sheet for this purpose.

There are progressive consequences that result from such referrals. We have nine steps, including speaking to the student, writing an assignment, meeting with the parents, detentions, suspensions, and finally expulsion. A copy of the referral sheet is sent to the parent, and a copy

is put in the student's file. This system is highly effective, if used properly.

## Reaching the Talmidim

The *Rabbe'im* must teach their *talmidim maamarei Chazal* – statements of *Chazal* – dealing with *middos* (positive character traits), respect for others, *kiddush Hashem*, *derech eretz*, and how these relate to proper behavior during General Studies.

• Our mission in life is to be *mekadesh shem Shamayim*. As the *Gemora* says (*Yoma* 86a), the way to fulfill the *mitzva* of *ahavas Hashem* is to inspire others to love *Hashem*. "A person should learn Torah, serve *talmidei chachamim*, and conduct his dealings with people in a pleasant manner. What will people say about him? 'Fortunate is his father who taught him Torah. Fortunate is his Rebbe who taught him Torah. See how pleasant are the ways of this person who learned Torah, and how refined are his deeds!'"

The *Gemora* goes on to say: "If a person learns Torah and serves *talmidei chachamim*, but does not deal pleasantly with people, the reaction will be different. People will say, 'Woe to his father who taught him Torah. Woe to his Rebbe who taught him Torah. This person who learned Torah, see how corrupt are his ways and how ugly are his deeds.'"

• How severe the *issur* of *Chillul Hashem* is! As the *Gemora* says, "Even if a person does *teshuva*, goes through Yom Kippur, and endures suffering, he does not receive atonement for *chillul Hashem* until he dies." This is the only *aveira* in the Torah for which a person must die before he can be forgiven. Regarding the *Mishna* in *Pirkei Avos*, "Im ein derech eretz ein Torah," *Rabbeinu Yona* says that if a person aspires to become a *talmid chacham*, he first must improve his character traits; the Torah will never inhere within a person who does not possess good character.

• *Gedolim* throughout the ages went out of their way to be polite and courteous to non-Jews; invariably, Jews derived benefit from such conduct.

• These lessons should be supplemented by speakers from the community asked to address these topics. We have invited *Kollel* heads, *Roshei Yeshiva* and *Rabbanim* to speak to our *talmidim* about proper conduct during General Studies.

## The Role of the Rebbe'im

The *Rabbe'im* are responsible – and should demand – that their *talmidim* conduct themselves with *derech eretz* toward the General Studies teachers. Our *Rebbe'im* hold their *talmidim* accountable for their behavior during English, and receive daily reports from the English teachers. If a boy misbehaves, he must answer to his Rebbe. *Rabbe'im* should see to it that the boys clean up the room and erase the board, and should ensure that the *talmidim* are sitting quietly when the English teacher enters the room. Additionally, the *Rabbe'im* should avoid infringing upon the English teacher's time.

## Children With Special Needs

The above measures will help improve the behavior of the average student, but those who suffer severe emotional and/or social problems will need the help of professionals. Many of these students also have academic issues, which, if left unaddressed, will lead

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to discipline problems, especially during General Studies.

It is important for schools to have adequate funding allocated for remedial and social services to help these students.

Our school engaged a *mashgiach* this year to deal with these students. He coordinates the services they receive, while maintaining constant contact with the psychologists, social workers, and parents.

### Curriculum

We must be realistic about our goals in General Studies. In three hours, we are attempting to teach our students material to which the public schools devote an entire day. It is our task to design a curriculum that is suited to our students. Great emphasis should be put upon math and the development of reading and writing skills, with relatively less time devoted to science and social studies. With the help of a *frum* educational consultant, we designed such a syllabus.

The books and materials must be interesting and less detailed, and the teachers should conduct many hands-on activities, which will captivate the attention of the boys. Science fairs, spelling bees, and oral presentations help keep the boys focused on their schoolwork.

### The Importance of Secular Studies

In their minds, the boys question why it is important for them to have a basic knowledge of secular studies. I devote time to explaining to our *talmidim* how each subject will be of use to them in the future.

• Let us start with English: Those who want to become *rabbanim* and *maggidei shiur* need to have effective communication skills to make themselves understood. In addition, they will be able to influence others. Witness the revolution that ArtScroll has created in America through its ability to bring Torah to the English-speaking world!

• As for science, the *Rambam* (*Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah* II:2) says

that a person comes to *ahavas Hashem* by contemplating the wonders of nature. This can be accomplished through study of science.

• The Torah tells us “*Zechor yemos olam...* Remember the ancient days, understand the years of generation after generation.” According to the *Ramban*, this calls for examining history to see how *Hashem* manages the world in accordance with the needs of the Jewish People. A knowledge of history would then be necessary in order to develop gratitude to *Hashem* for all the good He has bestowed upon us throughout the ages.

• There are many *Gemora* discussions that require a knowledge of math, such as in *Sukka* and *Eiruvim*.

### Improving the Quality of the Staff

We should try to hire as many *frum* teachers as possible. They understand our boys much better than non-*frum* and non-Jewish teachers do, and the boys respect them much more. In order to attract them, we must pay higher salaries and provide benefits. We should also offer tuition reductions to parents who are qualified and willing to teach in our schools. When I became the General Studies principal six years ago, there were three *frum* teachers on our staff. Today we have thirteen.

Where it is necessary to hire non-*frum* and non-Jewish teachers, we must take great care to ensure that they are decent people. Background checks should be

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# Megillas Rus

## An Ode to the “Ordinary” Life

### THE HUMBLE GARB OF GREATNESS

Other works of the Prophets describe miracles, prophecies, and great historical events. *Megillas Rus*, however, is a celebration of the ordinary. The emotions and pathos of the story – lost love, isolation, obstinate pursuit of an ideal, and resilience – are universal. On its pages unfold a familiar life: one of turmoil and tranquility, degradation and triumph. But to fully appreciate the true beauty of *Rus*, one must be attuned to its delicate nuances. There is a gentle theme that runs through it: an ordinary life can be sublimated and become extraordinary by absorbing the spirit of G-dliness and Torah.

The heroes of this saga are not only the nation's leaders and scholars, but also

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its people of no particular status going about their daily business. Yet, the sages found basis for proper conduct and legal procedures from their actions.

We read of laborers toiling in the fields, harvesting the crops. But instead of coarse language, they greet each other with the name of *Hashem* on their lips<sup>1</sup>. The book bursts forth with acts of kindness: a mutually loving and loyal relationship between mother and daughter-in-law; the dignified manner in which Boaz dispenses charity to his poor relatives; and the kindness of Rus to her mother-in-law and later to Boaz, by choosing him over much younger suitors.

The townsfolk did not merely mumble "*Mazel Tov*" by rote at the *simcha*. Upon Boaz's betrothal to Rus, the townsfolk recited a lengthy, original rendition.

All the people at the gate and the elders answered, "We are witness! May G-d make the woman who is entering your house be like Rachel and Leah,

both of whom built up the house of Israel. May you prosper in Ephras and establish a name [for yourself] in Bethlehem. And may your house be like the house of Peretz, whom Tamar bore to Yehuda – through the offspring which G-d will grant you by this young woman."<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, after Rus bore a son, women said to Naomi:

"Blessed is G-d, Who has not denied you a redeemer today! May his name be established in Israel. He will revive your soul and sustain your old age, for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, gave birth to him."<sup>3</sup>

These acts of kindness may not seem to be of earth-shattering import, but they are not described in the *Megilla* just to confer a warm feeling upon the reader. More importantly, the *Megilla* seeks to impart an important lesson by the very fact that these minute acts of compassion were deemed worthy of inclusion in the Divine script.

This itself is one of the lessons of *Rus*. Imagine having lived in the time of Rus in Boaz's neighborhood. And a relative of yours from Yerushalayim drops in for a visit. He asks you, "What's new in town?" Would you reply, "You know what! Boaz invited a poor woman to eat together with him, and he gave her some toasted grain!" To us, this is a Jewish behavioral norm: neither extraordinary nor newsworthy. Yet the *Megilla* describes this and other acts in detail to demonstrate that if we live our day-to-day, mundane lives according to the Torah, it is of monumental importance. *Shmuel Hanavi* penned this seemingly minor detail in the *Book of Rus* to impress upon us that every small act of kindness and decency is worthy of inclusion in the eternal Torah, and is definitely precious before *Hashem*.

Rabbi Yitzchak said, "The Torah teaches us [by detailing the kindness of Boaz to Rus] that when a person does a *mitzva* [such as an act of kindness and charity to one's fellow man], he should do it with a fully joyous heart. For if Boaz had known that *Hashem* would write about him, 'He handed her parched grain, and she ate and was satisfied and there was left over' (*Rus* 2,14), he would have fed her fattened calves."

Rabbi Levi said, "In the past, a person would do a *mitzva*, and the prophet would write it. Now that there

are no prophets, when a person performs a *mitzva*, who writes it? Now, *Eliyahu the Prophet* and *Moshiach* chronicle [the deeds of men of all generations] and *Hashem* signs it."<sup>4</sup>

#### THE PROFOUND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SEEMINGLY ORDINARY

At times, we may feel that our uneventful lives do not amount to much. But just as Boaz's and Rus's seemingly insignificant acts of kindness planted the seeds which later heralded the birth of King David and, ultimately, the arrival of *Moshiach*, so too, each of us in our small way, in our private lives, are rectifying the world and bringing it closer to the ultimate redemption.

Naomi's life clearly illustrates this point. Naomi, bereaved of both her husband and children, expresses the pain and anguish of her tormented soul. "Do not call me 'Naomi – pleasant one,' call me 'Mara – the embittered one,' for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me<sup>5</sup>." A portion of Torah therefore deserving of study, it teaches us that one is permitted to cry out in pain. The Torah allows for the expression of human emotion, and does not demand that we transform ourselves into *mitzva* automatons. Then, her next sentence demonstrates her noble Jewish spirit,

when she accepts her decree as being from *Hashem*.<sup>6</sup>

Even though Naomi viewed herself as utterly useless and empty<sup>7</sup>, her name means pleasant, and she fully lived up to her name. Naomi's character was so attractive, that Rus was drawn to her like a magnet. The verses make clear that Rus's willingness to convert to Judaism was not based on her intellectual assessment of the truths of Judaism alone. Rather, it was Naomi's persona that Rus found so compellingly appealing.

When Naomi attempted to dissuade Rus from following her, Rus adamantly replied,

"Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back from following you. For where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people; and your G-d is my G-d. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May G-d do this to me – and more! – if anything but death separates me from you!"<sup>8</sup>

It was not merely the Jewish G-d and the Jewish people that Rus wished to embrace. Rus wanted to bond with Naomi's G-d and Naomi's people. So while Naomi lamented, "*Hashem* has sent me empty," her life was far from it. The fact is, it was Naomi who orchestrated Rus's conversion and marriage, which directly led to the birth of the ancestor of *Moshiach*.

After the birth of Rus's son, Oveid, Naomi took the child, held it to her bosom and became his nurse, inspiring the neighborhood women to joyously proclaim, "A son is born to Naomi!"<sup>9</sup>

Rabbi Tzaddok Hakohein states a principle: whatever is written in the Torah is true, not only in the narrative sense, in that those comments were actually made, but also that it is intrinsically true. The cunning remarks of Lavan and the crude scoffing of Pharaoh could not have been recorded by the holy Torah had their statements not been inherently true. Therefore, if the Torah writes that the people said that Naomi was the mother of Oveid, then that is the truth. The Torah deemed Naomi also to be his true mother.

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## CHILDREN OF A SPIRITUAL KIND

While Naomi's motherhood can be attributed to her raising the young Oveid, it can be understood on a deeper level as well. A childless person lives on a different plane, a more spiritual dimension, than most. While everyone knows the fruit of one's spiritual labor is reserved for the World-to-Come, many are blessed with a foretaste of those sweet fruits even in this life. And those fruits are one's children. The Torah likens offspring to the fruits of the vine and of the olive tree<sup>10</sup>. Those precious fruits link us to our sense of eternity, and provide a tangible intimation of the rewards awaiting us in the next world. One who lacks children lacks the physical support system that was designed to make the Divine service a naturally joyous experience<sup>11</sup>. On the contrary, it is not surprising to find Naomi's bitter, self-deprecating sentiments echoed by anyone faced with similar life circumstances:

Rabbi Yehuda said, "When a person leaves this world without children, he cries from pain and anguish."

But the Midrash continues:

*Hashem* comforts him and says, "My child, why do you cry? Is it because you did not bear fruit in this world? Your fruit is greater than children." He asks, "*Ribbono shel Olam*, what fruit did I bear?"

*Hashem* replies, "Your good deeds are your offspring."<sup>12</sup>

Because the physically childless perform their life mission under super-human conditions, their reward likewise transcends the physical world. Precisely because this thought is so difficult to internalize, it is a recurring theme in the words of the prophet Yeshayahu:

Let not the barren one say, "Behold I am a shriveled tree." For thus says *Hashem* to the barren ones... who choose what I desire and grasp My covenant tightly. "In My house and within My walls I will give them a place of honor and renown, which is better

than sons and daughters; eternal renown I will give them, which will never be ended."<sup>13</sup>

"Sing out, O barren one who has not given birth; break out into glad song and be jubilant, O one who had no labor pains, for the children of the desolate wife outnumber the children of the populated wife," says *Hashem*.<sup>14</sup>

The *Chasam Sofer* explains that these verses demonstrate that there are two distinct types of children: physical and spiritual<sup>15</sup>. Whereas the barren may not have children in the

physical sense, they are by no means childless. Parents who are physically childless bring down souls from heaven just as their friends who push strollers do. These spiritual children are created through their parents' steadfast service to *Hashem*, despite their constant indescribable pain and humiliation. Such souls are so lofty, they cannot be contained in a corporeal form, which is why the prophet says they are "better than sons and daughters" – they are greater than their physical counterparts. Each

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such spiritual child, says the *Chasam Sofer*, “equals tens of thousands of physical children born with flesh and blood.”

In yet another vision, the prophet Yeshayahu depicts a scene from the time of the future redemption, which at first glance defies comprehension:

And you will say in your heart, “Who has begotten these? For I have been bereaved and alone, an exile and a wanderer – so who has reared these? Behold, I have been left by myself; where are these from?”

For thus says *Hashem*: “Behold, I will raise My hand towards nations, and will hoist My banner towards peoples, and they will bring your children in their arms, and your daughters will be carried on their shoulders.... Then you will know that I am *Hashem*, and those who put their hope in Me shall not be ashamed.”<sup>16</sup>

Is it possible that a mother be unaware that she bore children?

The *Shomeir Emunim* writes that these verses deal with the spiritual children discussed above:

When, unfortunately, one is a companion to pain and misfortune – owing to childlessness or any other trying circumstance – this is often accompanied by feelings of inadequacy and a sense of lacking any constructive accomplishments in life. One many feel hopeless, broken, unnecessary and useless. Even one’s prayers, Torah study, and good deeds begin to feel hollow and appear pitifully meager.

But one may fail to see [explains the *Shomeir Emunim*,] that for every pain that assaults a Jewish soul, especially at times when one feels disconnected from *Hashem*, as if He were neglecting him, and yet one accepts this without complaint or anger against *Hashem* – and all the more so if it is accepted with a measure of love and joy – this engenders a glory to *Hashem* of the highest magnitude. In fact, the simplest person at the lowest spiritual level can accomplish more under such circumstances than can a great *tzaddik* in a normal situation. Many “lost souls” that have not found rectification since the beginning of creation, are now rectified through this supreme level of faith.

When *Moshiach* comes, *Hashem* will reveal to them the myriad children they created. They will stream to such a person from all sides of the earth, just as children come to embrace their beloved parents after a long separation. He will stand agape with wonder looking at these beautiful creations, and marvel, “Who has begotten me these? I was bereaved and alone. They certainly cannot be mine.” But he or she will be considered the true parents of these thousands of souls.<sup>17</sup>

*Megillas Rus* describes a natural world, as perceived through the limited vision of mortal men. In that world, Naomi thought she lived a bitter and wasted life. But little did she know that from the vantage point of Heaven, a dimension that transcends all physical laws, she actually was the grandmother of the King of Israel.

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## LIFE BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

In *Megillas Rus*, no angels inform Naomi that her actions shake the very heavens. No prophets reveal to Boaz and Rus the royal destiny of their future offspring. The heavenly curtains descend and veil any inkling as to the goings-on in the heavenly realms. Instead, the backdrop of *Megillas Rus* presents familiar episodes of Jewish life. It details seemingly ordinary daily activities, from the laborer's greeting to the townsfolk's blessings. It is this limited vantage point of man, not the infinite view of G-d, in which the perspective of *Megillas Rus* is based. From a human point of view, life is often dry and ordinary or – as was the case with Naomi – sometimes even dark.

Perhaps it is precisely for this reason that *Megillas Rus* is read on Shavuot. On this day, we merited to receive the Torah on Mount Sinai through a miraculous revelation, amidst thunder and lightning. But from that moment on, we could no longer seek *Hashem* amidst the fire of miracles, the thunderous sounds of prophecy, or the whirlwind of momentous historical events. For the most part, it is in the quiet, day-to-day life that we can find our personal pathways to *Hashem*.<sup>18</sup>

When *Hashem* spoke directly to the Jewish nation on Mount Sinai, they felt a rapture so intense that it caused their souls to momentarily depart from their bodies<sup>19</sup>. They epitomized a state known as *deveikus* – the ultimate blissful experience of connecting with the Divine. Achieving *deveikus* is one of life's primary goals; as the *Mesillas Yesharim* writes, "All of one's actions should be directed to being drawn near to the Blessed One, until he is pulled to Him as is metal to a magnet."<sup>20</sup>

If so, should not the thrust of our efforts be spent to seek those activities that provide immediate spiritual satisfaction? Isn't spending hours upon hours in sublime meditation more inspiring of *deveikus* than spending hours debating the halachic legalities surrounding whether the handkerchief used in a monetary transaction

belongs to the buyer or seller? Why sweat the small stuff – say, looking for tiny thrips in my salad – when I can use that time expressing my love for *Hashem* by performing a spontaneous dance interpretation of *ma'amad Har Sinai*? Paradoxically, humbly serving *Hashem* in an ordinary fashion in an ordinary world, through the voluminous minutiae of *halacha*, is what breaks the barriers that stand between ourselves and our Creator. This is what leads to *deveikus*.<sup>21</sup>

### THE ORPA SYNDROME: FOCUSING ON *DEVEIKUS*

*Deveikus* is one of the most lofty aims of Divine service. But as *Megillas Rus* points out, it can also be a potentially dangerous weapon. The ecstatic experience of *deveikus* can also take the form of *shochad* – bribery – against our Divine obligations. For example, one immersed in Torah study may find it so pleasurable, that he is tempted to look into a *sefer* during *kriyas haTorah* (communal reading of the Torah), something prohibited by *halacha*. In such a case, the *deveikus* generated from the love of Torah results in its own defection.<sup>22</sup>

At times, performing *Hashem's* will requires foregoing the act most conducive to *deveikus*:

*When Rabbi Reuvain Grozovsky traveled with his father-in-law, Rabbi Boruch Ber Leibowitz, to raise funds for the Kamenitz Yeshiva, they stopped in a Paris hotel for Shabbos. Shabbos morning, Reb Reuvein entered one of the men's rooms, and to his great consternation, the electric bulb went on automatically. He understood that by his walking out of the room, the electric bulb would be turned off. Reb Reuvain spent the entire Shabbos locked in.*<sup>23</sup>

The risk of focusing on *deveikus* was realized in one of the most tragic figures in the story of Rus: Orpa. After the death of her husband, she too began accompanying Naomi to the Land of Israel, presumably contemplating embracing Judaism. At that historic

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moment, she stood at the threshold of eternity. But while Rus remained adamant in remaining with Naomi, Orpa returned home.

The prophet concludes her life story here. One would imagine that this precious soul, who came so close to Judaism, would devote the remainder of her life to goodness, serving *Hashem* faithfully as a righteous Gentile. But the sages relate the sad end of her life story; on the day she parted with Naomi, she plunged from the heights of spiritual greatness to the depths of moral depravity.

Perhaps her erratic behavior can be understood in the following light. As anyone who has merited the experience can testify, being in the close presence of a spiritually elevated person can be one of life's greatest pleasures. Upon entering his proximity, one can feel like one has stepped into an elevator, within moments feeling oneself being lifted effortlessly to dizzying heights<sup>24</sup>. But therein lurks a hidden danger, which can be termed the Geichazi Syndrome<sup>25</sup>. Being in constant contact with a holy person can become an intoxicating experience. The vicarious spiritual stimulation of living through one's rebbe can sometimes blanket any feelings of inadequacy for one's personal failings.

Orpa experienced the joys of a Jewish life. She enjoyed the true love of a Jewish husband, the pleasantness of a *Shabbos* table, and felt irresistibly drawn to her mother-in-law's holy personality. She did fall short of committing herself to the responsibilities that Judaism entails. But her brief encounter with Judaism gave her a taste of *deveikus*. Merely subscribing to the seven Noahide laws now appeared to her dry and spiritually unfulfilling. She craved the spiritual "high" that only Judaism can provide. As she could no longer get it through holiness, she attempted to duplicate the ecstasy through a quick fix by throwing herself into the excesses of depravity<sup>26</sup>.

In the secular world, the search for spirituality has become a popular trend. But "spirituality" does not nec-

essarily mean to them what it means to us. To them, it may represent the nadir of hedonistic pleasure seeking. The Hollywood pop star who goes to Kabbala classes wants the best of both worlds: to enjoy all the pleasures this world has to offer, together with the ecstasy that only spirituality can provide. "Kabbala" is the perfect forum for connecting with G-d on your own terms: no commitment, no responsibility – just an exhilarating, soul-soaring thrill ride.

#### THE MEANING OF "RUS"

What is the significance of the name "Rus"? Rabbi Yochanan said: "For she merited that David descended from her, who 'sated' the Holy One, Blessed be He, with songs and praises."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Rus* 2,4

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 4,11-12

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 4,14-15

<sup>4</sup> *Midrash Rabba, Vayikra* 34,8

<sup>5</sup> *Rus* 1,20

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 4,7; *Bava Metzia* 47a

<sup>7</sup> See *Rus*, 1,21

<sup>8</sup> *Rus* 1,16-17

<sup>9</sup> *Rus* 4,17

<sup>10</sup> *Tehillim* 128,3

<sup>11</sup> See *Devarim* 14,26; 16,14

<sup>12</sup> *Midrash Tanchuma, Noach* 2

<sup>13</sup> *Yeshayahu* 56,3-5

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* 54,1

<sup>15</sup> *Nidda* 13b

<sup>16</sup> *Yeshayahu* 49,21-23

<sup>17</sup> *Shomeir Emunim* p.79

<sup>18</sup> See *Melachim* 1,19, 11-12

<sup>19</sup> *Shiur Hashirim Rabba* 5,6

<sup>20</sup> The Torah was given to us so we can experience the *deveikus* of Sinai in our daily lives. In a certain respect, the Torah gives one the ability to recreate the Sinai experience on an even higher level. On Mount Sinai, "my soul departed when He spoke" (*Shir Hashirim* 5,6). The Torah enjoins us to achieve *deveikus* and *still* be connected to one's physical body! It is told that certain great *tzaddikim* had no difficulty in attaining a state of *deveikus* that made their souls soar back to heaven. The Torah's obligation of "*vechai bahem* – and you shall live by them" dictated otherwise; one must *live* the precepts of the Torah, not die as a result of them. They therefore had the difficult task of reining in their souls from leaving their bodies.

<sup>21</sup> See *Nefesh Hachaim* 4,1

<sup>22</sup> The *Beis Haleivi* attributed the success of secular Jews to the merit of their strict adherence to the law of not studying Torah in places where

Rabbi Dan Segal asked, What did Rus do in particular to be deserving of bearing a descendant who was capable of satiating *Hashem*? He answered that it was in merit of her *determination* to cling to *Hashem*, despite all the obstacles that stood in her path. Naomi had attempted to dissuade her from accompanying her; she had no marriage prospects awaiting her; no promising future to look forward to. But she stood steadfast despite all difficulties<sup>28</sup>. Serving *Hashem* in the face of insurmountable hardships is the greatest human quality, and in that merit, Rus bore David. Her act of devotion, without the aid of *deveikus*, brought into the world the sweet singer of Israel, who satiated his Creator with sublime songs of *deveikus* to *Hashem*. ■

one is prohibited from doing so. Needless to say, this is not intended as cause to disdain someone guilty of this relatively minor flaw. If one possesses love of Torah to the extent that he has such a temptation – that in itself attests to his spiritual state. If only this author merited having such evil inclinations....

<sup>23</sup> *All for the Boss*, p. 65

<sup>24</sup> Naturally, only a sensitive soul would be attuned to this sensation. Someone once brought the secular author, Franz Kafka, to a *tisch* of the Belzer Rebbe זצ"ל. Widely recognized as one of the greatest *Chassidic* Rabbis in pre-War Europe, even the Nazis referred to him as the *Wunder Rabbiner*, the "wonder rabbi." When Kafka left the *tisch*, he remarked to his companion that it was no more inspirational to him than if he had witnessed a tribal ceremony.

<sup>25</sup> Geichazi was the disciple and *shamash* of the prophet Elyahu. Though he merited a closer relationship to his master than Elyahu's other disciples, his behavior was most contemptible.

<sup>26</sup> I once encountered a former *chavrusa* of mine, who later became hooked on drugs ל"ר. In the course of our conversation, he confided to me, "The high I got from drugs was no greater than the thrills I experienced during the time we spent together engrossed in a *Gemora*. But I no longer had the time and patience to break my head and delve so deeply into a *sugya*. So I took the easy way out to escape the pain of my life's difficulties, and turned to drugs. I envy you that you are still able to learn *Gemora*. You are still able to get a high from Torah, without the debilitating effects I get from drugs."

<sup>27</sup> *Berachos*, 7b. The name "Rus" is related to the Hebrew word for sated, *ravah*.

<sup>28</sup> *Rus* 1,18

# A Tallis, A Wedding Dress, and the “Mama Rachel”

On *Taanis Esther*, a new beautiful *paroches* (curtain) was placed on the front of the *aron hakodesh* in the sanctuary of *Kever Rachel*, where the Matriarch Rachel is buried. There were over four hundred people in attendance and there wasn't a dry eye amongst them. What caused this great outpouring of emotion at what is usually a joyous event? It was not the ceremony of hanging the *paroches* that brought with it a flood of tears, but what the *paroches* was made of.

The heart-rending story of this *paroches* took place several months ago, when a remarkable young woman so full of life and anticipation took an evening stroll to a café with her father to share a special few moments together only hours before he was to have escorted her down the aisle to her *chupa*. As that renowned *baal chessed*, Dr. David Applebaum ז"ר, joined his daughter Nava ז"ר on that fateful evening, a *pereh*

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*adam* (savage) blew himself up in Café Hillel, and the *kalla*, her father, and several other *kedoshim* joined a long list of Jews who were killed *al kiddush Hashem*.

## The Dilemma

As the Applebaum family, with remarkable strength and *bitachon*, began to rebuild their lives, they were faced with a dilemma: What should they do with Nava's beautiful wedding dress that was faithfully waiting on its hanger for its owner to claim it?

Nava's family could not remove it; they could not even bring themselves to touch it. It was not just a dress; it represented *kedusha* and *tahara*, sanctity and purity. It was to grace a *kalla* at her *chupa*, the holiest moment in a person's life. Yet, for reasons that we are not privileged to understand, she was instead selected to reach a level of *kedusha* that transcends the *kedusha* of the *chupa* a thousand fold.

(Reb Chaim Volozhin ז"ר explains that there is a designated place in *Shamayim* for those that die *al kiddush Hashem* that no other person can reach, even if he/she lived for a thousand years.

For this reason, the Belzer *Rebbe*, Reb Ahron ז"ר, used to tell his *Chassidim* who had lost relatives in the Holocaust that they need not observe a *Yahrzeit* for them. A *Yahrzeit* is to give an *aliyas neshama* to the deceased. Since those who perished *al kiddush Hashem* cannot possibly reach any higher in *Shamayim*, there is no need for a *Yahrzeit* observance.)

And so their dilemma was, *What should be done with her wedding gown?* An idea was presented to create a *paroches* for an *aron hakodesh* with a portion of Nava's wedding dress as its centerpiece. Not just any *paroches*, but the *paroches* on the *aron kodesh* in *Kever Rachel*. When it came to installing this *paroches*, this normally joyous event filled the room with *kedusha*, with *tefillos* and with tears. Tears that flowed for a dress that did not merit to be stained with her *kalla's* tears under the *chupa*. Instead, it will be stained with the tears of countless Jews who pour out their hearts to *Mama Rachel* each and every day.

To many people who heard this brief news items, it was little more than a good story. In truth, it is an event that resonates with great depth and

meaning which have been the source of our people's strength throughout our history.

Permit me to explain.

### A Source of Strength

Chazal point out a key difference between *Moshe Rabbeinu* and *Shmuel Hanavi*. When Moshe wanted to speak to *Hashem*, he had to go to *Hashem* (to the *Ohel Mo'eid*). By contrast, when *Shmuel Hanavi* had need to speak to *Hashem*, *Hashem* came to him. *Chazal* explain that the reason for this was *Shmuel Hanavi's* extraordinary love for *Klal Yisroel* that went beyond conventional guidelines: When Moshe wanted to speak to *Bnei Yisroel*, they came to him, as befits the deference due him. Therefore, when he wanted to speak to *Hashem*,

he in turn had to go to *Hashem*. *Shmuel Hanavi*, however, went to *Bnei Yisroel*, and, in turn, *Hashem* came to him.

The source of *Shmuel Hanavi's* abundance of love for *Bnei Yisroel* is found in a fascinating *Midrash*. His mother, Chana, had made a special *begged* (garment) for him. This garment was filled with so much love from mother to son, that as he wore it every day, he felt enveloped in his mother's great love for him, even long after she had departed this world. Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz ז"ל explains that *Shmuel Hanavi* could not help but be filled with that love, which manifested itself in his going to *Klal Yisroel* to speak to them, rather than having them come to him.

*In our growing-up years, my siblings and I merited having a wonderful grandmother, "Bubbie Goldie." She was not a learned person, and, like so many of her generation, had to leave everything behind when she fled Vienna, just one step ahead of Hitler ש"י. She struggled every day to provide for herself and for her family. She especially dedicated her skills as a seamstress to her grandchildren. She would spend every day off from work sewing new clothes, or mending old ones for us. We took it for granted.*

*Whatever tore, Bubbie Goldie could fix.*

*Only later, after seeing this Midrash, did I truly understand her. She wasn't just sewing for her family; in the spirit of*

*Chana, she was putting all her love and dedication to her family into her every stitch. This commitment was her legacy.*

This is akin to what took place at *Kever Rachel* on *Taanis Esther*. It wasn't just a *paroches* that was dedicated. And it's not just that a dress was used to make it. It was a gathering together of so much emotion and so much pain that was invested into one white dress, and then transmitting it to the *Mama Rachel*.

It was taking the excitement and anticipation of a *kalla* named Nava as she went for her fitting; the *kedusha* of a dress to be worn under the *chupa* and under the stars; the tears and the pain of a dress longing for its owner; and taking all of that and wrapping *Mama Rachel* with it.

It's in keeping with the ancient tradition in *Eretz Yisroel* where *kallas* come to *Kever Rachel* during the week before their wedding to invite *Mama Rachel* to participate in their *chupa*. Except here, Nava, in a sense, has come to *Mama Rachel* and has joined her *le'netzach netzachim*, for eternity. The love of Chana in the *begged* for her son, and the *kedusha* of Nava in her wedding dress, will be spread to all who come greet her.

### And Then There Was a Tallis

A brief story about another *begged*; this one not a wedding dress, but rather a *tallis*. During a recent trip to *Eretz Yisroel*, I made every attempt to *daven vasikin*, at sunrise each morning at the *Kosel Hamaaravi*. As someone once remarked, "Going to the *Kosel* anytime is *kodesh*. Going to *vasikin* is *kodesh kadashim*."

There are many different *minyanim* to choose from. I chose one that many Americans select. It is referred to as "Lieutenant Birnbaum's *Minyan*," because he carefully holds and monitors the *neitz* clock, which marks the moment of service, on his *shtender*.

As I tried to *daven* properly on the first day, I could not help but be drawn to a haunting yet powerful voice coming from another *minyan*. My eyes followed my ears to the source of that inspiring heart-rending *davening* at the rear wall.

I noticed a short man with long hair and a long beard leading the *davening*, which I later learned, he does each and every morning. My eyes rested on his *tallis*. It was yellowed, wrinkled and held together by threads.

His *tefilla* was so powerful that I could only concentrate on him and his depth of *tefilla*. After several inquiries, I was told that he is a brilliant *talmid chacham*, well versed in *nigleh* and *nistar* (both revealed and esoteric lore), and the author of several *sefarim*. He is the son of one of the Sephardic *gedolim* of our time and a son-in-law of another.

Several years ago, after numerous barbaric terrorist bus attacks, he vowed to spend his days in complete prayer to bring an end to the suffering of *Acheinu Bnei Yisroel*. He arrives at the *Kosel* each night before *Chatzos* (midnight), recites *Tikkun Chatzos* while sitting on the ground, and says *Tehillim* until *Shacharis*. He lead the *neitz minyan* each morning, then goes to *Kever Rachel* to continue his studies and *tefillot*.

I wondered "How many tears, *tefil-*

*los*, and *taanios* (fasts) did this *tallis* play a role in?"

At that moment, I felt that I needed that *tallis* for myself. I approached him one morning after another *Ne'ila*-type *Shacharis davening*, and respectfully asked if I could purchase him a new *tallis*. He shook his head "No." Not giving up, I explained that it was not for him that I wanted to purchase a new *tallis*; it was for the *kavod* of his *tefilla*. He again quickly motioned with his hand: "No." Not giving up, I tried a third approach, to which he finally said, "*Adoni, ha'im atta rotzeh letza'er ot?*" (Sir, do you want to cause me great pain by taking away my personal *tallis*?) I then realized: this is not only a *tallis*, it is a *paroches* on an *aron kodesh*. It's a *begged* to wrap all those tears of *Tikkun Chatzos*, of *Yidden* suffering, of his majestic *tefillot*, and to preserve them to present to *Moshiach*. For the remainder of the trip, I watched him closely with great awe and respect for that weathered *tallis*.

The *Navi* tells us that "*Rachel mevacha al baneha* (Rachel cries for her children)" and that *Hashem* responds to those cries.

*Mama Rachel*, where are your tears? And why haven't they ended our suffering? Why is there no "return of your children to their borders"?... Maybe *Mama Rachel* is waiting for us to cry along with her.

And so, *Mama Rachel*, wrap yourself in the new *paroches* at your side, made from Nava's wedding dress; warm your wailing with the torn *tallis* of this *tzad-dik* who sits each and every day at your feet.

Let your tears mingle with theirs. Feel their pain and let them feel yours. Help them – and us – bring an end to our pain and suffering. And, Nava, together with your saintly father from your special place above, turn to our Great Matriarch and beseech her, "Cry, *Mama Rachel*, please cry." ■

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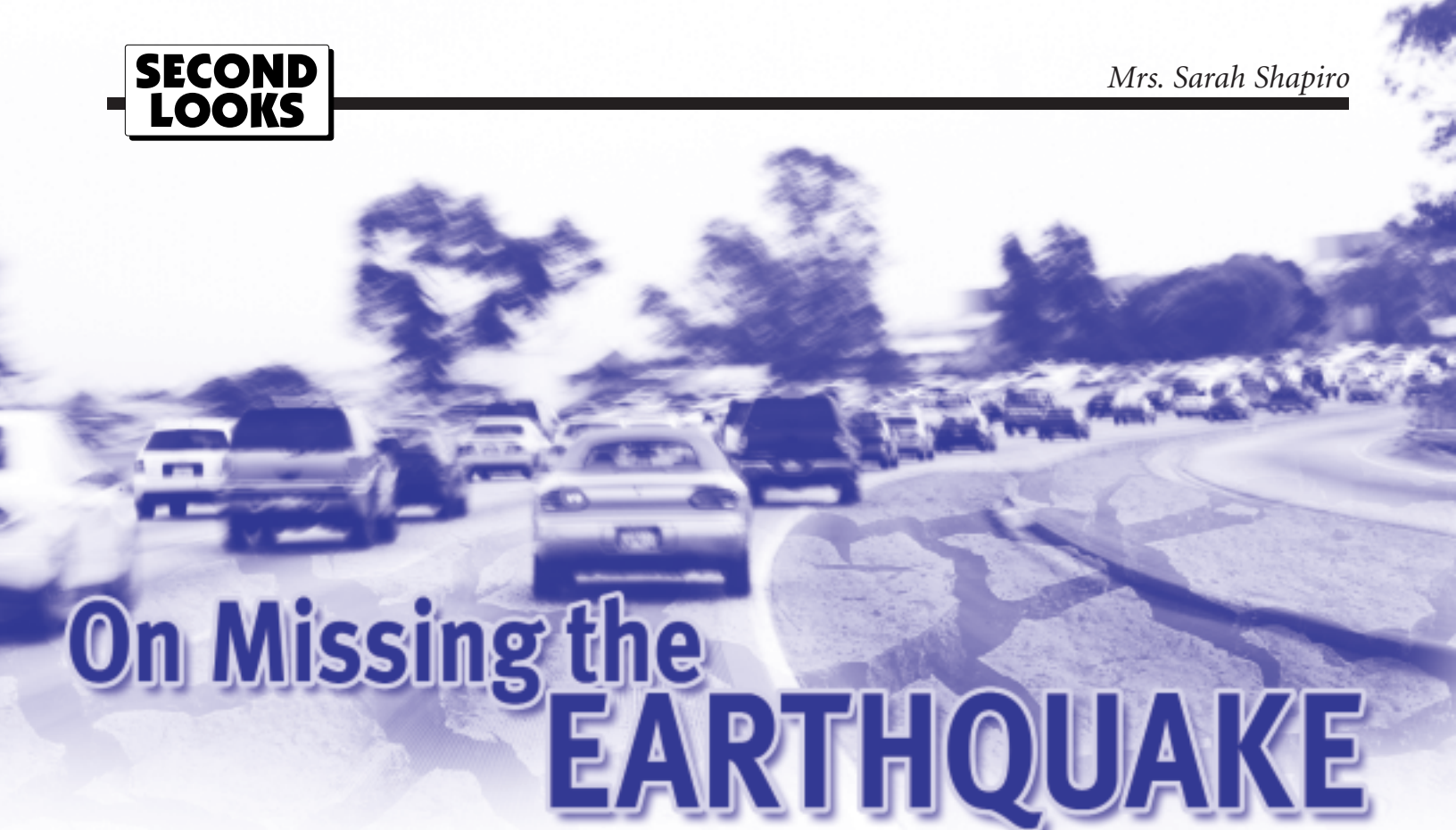
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# On Missing the EARTHQUAKE

Thunder irons out the wrinkles in a man's mind (*Berachos* 59a).

I was in the back seat of a taxi trying to figure out one of the functions of my new cellular phone when the driver suddenly put on the brakes. "Did you feel that?" he said.

"What?"

"An earthquake!"

"An earthquake? Are you sure? I didn't feel anything—"

"Yes! An earthquake!"

Come to think of it, a bump bump bump bump – which had registered to some very slight degree on my consciousness as a speed bump a few moments before, and which would otherwise never have been recalled – was retrieved now from my sense memory. Could that have been... an earthquake? So totally absorbed had I been in the petty task at hand – trying to set a different ring-tone — that whatever message I could have derived from the vast, turbulent shifting of the earth beneath our feet had, in my case, not arrived at

its destination: my heart. My heart, at the time, had been fast asleep.

It had reached its destination elsewhere, though, as I would later learn. Cabinets in Israel had swung open, floors rolled, walls trembled, windows cracked, and people recounted how they'd grasped in an instant (or, were grasped by) some of the basic truths we must normally work years to acquire: that we are not in control; the permanence of the physical world is an illusion; the only reality is *Hashem*.... Ideas that slip easily off the tongue until something happens that actually brings them terrifyingly to life. It has been said that not to believe that all things are for the good is equivalent to *apikorsus*, since all things come from G-d. On this occasion, the kindness was bestowed with the utmost gentleness, for people got the awakening without the pain. I envied them. The truths were delivered free of charge – no one was hurt – with just enough power to jolt us temporarily from the slumber which human beings love.

The taxi driver was turning up the radio. "You see? They're already talking about it. It was an earthquake. And look over there, see? They're letting the children out of school."

Sure enough, a flood of excited *cheder* boys was spilling out onto the sidewalks, their young faces altered by fear and uncertainty.

\*\*\*

It's nine a.m. the following Sunday. Around 8:30, I was in the middle of composing a sentence about the irony, and foolhardiness, and danger, of imagining I want a wake-up call in this land where there's no dearth of wake-up calls, where wake-up calls are a dime a dozen, and are issued in abundance, unceasingly — when I realized that for several seconds, like an insistent mosquito's whine in the back of my thoughts, there had been growing in the distance a familiar loathsome sound. Just as those speed-bumps had come to my attention only with hindsight, so did the noise of ambulance sirens not immediately gain entry into my consciousness, so thick is the cocoon that guards me.

I turned on the radio.

The futile hope: that there would be no news.

The suicide bombing was carried out on the bus line that one of my daughters takes to work each morning, and the

Mrs. Shapiro of Jerusalem is a frequent contributor to these pages, including "The Bicycle at the Beginning of Time" (Feb. '04). Her most recent book is *A Gift Passed Along: A Woman Looks at the World Around Her*, published by ArtScroll.

only reason I wasn't hysterical right now is that although by this hour she has usually left the house, today she's still here. A while ago (glad for an excuse to keep her off the bus), I had asked her to please wait. I, too, had to go downtown this morning; we could share a taxi.

Upon hearing the news, I went frenziedly down a mental checklist, as usual, and called everyone in my family, and all my friends who would be outside at this hour, simultaneously chastising myself for the growing relief that permeated me. Shame! How dare I feel relief?

But that's the way it goes. No sooner is the cocoon torn open than it instantly starts spinning itself back into being again. Cocoon upon cocoon upon cocoon.... When one *Motza'ei Shabbos*, the #2 bus, on its return trip from the *Kosel*, was bombed right down the street from us and several of our neighbors died, my densely-wrapped mind was soon reassuring me that I take that bus in the morning, not at night. On another occasion, a suicide bomber walked into the midst of a group of children in an adjoining neighborhood, and sooner or later, my thoughts about this, too, were falling into place in their normal, crazy line-up, assuring me that it had happened three blocks away. In other words, my brain – poor, frightened creature – stubbornly and dumbly insists, each and every time, on missing the point.

But who would say it is not *Hashem*

Who designed our minds in this fashion? Could we lead our daily lives otherwise?

What is this dream we're dreaming? How can we awaken ourselves, so as not to need these unrelenting blasts?

\* \* \*

The day after the quake, snow fell. White quietness...How we in the Middle East crave its soft beauty. Actually, it was a hard-driving icy sort of snow, but still...it did have some stillness to offer, and a day off from school, and work.

While everyone in the house was still asleep, I went merrily out into the pale, freezing air before dawn and waited, and waited, for the #2... until I remembered, of course, that the buses wouldn't be running today. Good riddance! How wonderful!

But then, upon arrival by foot at the *Kosel*, the normal entrance was sealed off like a crime scene! Peering over the blockade, I saw in the murky half-light that the whole expanse in front of the women's section was strewn randomly with some sort of big black concrete blocks. I instantly assumed that Arabs must have thrown them down at the Jewish worshippers from the Temple Mount area overlooking the Wall, as once, a few years ago, they had hurled stones!

But no... That's not how it was. It was probably the earthquake, and perhaps the

snow, and perhaps, too, the long-unsupervised and illegal renovations undertaken by the Palestinian Wakf – who knows? – that had finally loosened the structure of the old ramp leading up to the mosque, and caused its collapse. Had there not been such an icy snowfall on the night it happened, could someone have been there when the horde of lethal rocks tumbled down, scattering in all directions?

No one was hurt.

I entered the portion of the men's section, which had been redesigned and sealed off to accommodate the now-displaced women, and was seized by a childish glee at trespassing on this territory where in thirty years I had never once set foot. How silly, I told myself. Why are you so happy?

I turned to go.

At that moment, someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was Udel, one of the women who's been *davening Shacharis* at the *Kosel* for years. "If you walk across the men's section," she said in an undertone, "you can get a new *daled amos* in *Eretz Yisroel*."

Back I went into the newly opened area, and walked back and forth and back and forth, and back and forth and back and forth – as delighted with myself, and the world, and G-d, as a child who's just taken her very first step.

Please awaken us, our Father in Heaven, with gentleness, far beyond what we deserve. ■

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