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*With  
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ב"ה

Parshas Shoftim

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## The Royal Beginning

The crossing of the Jordan River into Eretz Yisrael, led by Yehoshua after decades of wandering in the desert, was one of the most surreal moments in our history. All of the pain, anxiety, and frustration of the last forty years coming to an end; and all of the excitement, nervousness, and anticipation was pulsing through our veins. The moment we were dreaming of was finally happening.

But what took place smack in the middle of the river was strange.

While marching through the river, Yehoshua screamed for all to halt.

“Stop!” he roared.

After getting everyone’s attention, he declared:

“My fellow Jews, before we enter the land, Hashem wants us to erect twelve stones, one for each shevet, and write the Torah on each one. He wants us to place them in the ground in the middle of the river. We are to leave them there forever.”

So, in one of the most unusual events in Jewish history, the entire Jewish people stood in the middle of the miraculously split Jordan River, found twelve stones, inscribed the Torah on each one of them, and then planted them all in the ground. They then got up and walked for the very first time into Eretz Yisrael, the river crashing back down on the path they had just walked, swallowing the stones whole.

What exactly were those stones supposed to do? What good were stone monuments that got flooded mere minutes after being erected? Wouldn’t waiting to erect those stones until after we crossed the river and entered the land make a lot more sense?

## To Start an Empire

As strange as it seems, our head-scratching mid-river behavior was actually precisely on theme with a major concept found throughout Judaism. A theme that is likewise found in this parshah.

The parshah discusses the coronation of a Jewish king. Buried in the middle of all the king's rules and regulations is an innocent-looking pasuk that subliminally contains a powerful ingredient for the king's success. The pasuk (17:18) states, "*V'haya k'shivto al kisei malchuso*" — as the king sat down on his throne for the very first time, he was to write a small Torah scroll and clutch it close at all times, not going anywhere without it. Meetings. Trips abroad. Battlefields. The Torah scroll was to remain bound to his arm.

At first glance, this seems to mean that after ascending the throne and establishing his kingship, the king was to write a sefer Torah. But if you look a little closer, points out Rabbi Tzvi Einstadter, a Rebbi in Ner Yisrael in Baltimore, the Torah seems to go out of its way to specifically command the king to write the Torah precisely as he is in the process of sitting on his throne. The Torah seems to be saying that the success of the king is predicated on the injection and infusion of Torah into his kingship — literally as he sits down on his throne. Not five days later. Not when the party stops. Not when he gets comfortable. From the very first minute.

As Rav Einstadter explains, the yetzer hara (evil inclination) plays a deceptive psychological trick on us. It's called the power of "later." Instead of telling us to push away obligations entirely, he merely tells us to do them later. By mentally pushing things off until later, we satisfy our inner conscience, telling ourselves that we will do it — just later — and at the same time we don't actually have to exert the effort in doing it. This psychological trick is devastating, for *later* is often the first step to *never*.

The Torah is telling us something powerful. At the very beginning of each of the many stages of our lives there must be an infusion of holiness, and waiting beyond the beginning means waiting far too long.

### Don't Wait!

While we were marching through the Jordan River to the Promised Land, Hashem commanded us to stop. He wasn't going to allow us to walk into the land, get comfortable, figure out where the coffee shops are, paint our homes, and build bakeries; oh, no! He wanted us to infuse the absolute earliest moment of our entry into the Holy Land with

Torah. He wanted us to inject holiness and sanctity from the get-go. Right in the middle of the raging river. Not a moment later.

We weren't erecting those twelve stones to be a tourist attraction for our grandchildren. We knew that those stones wouldn't be seen by human eyes the moment we walked out of the river. We were writing those stones as a way of injecting holiness into us. The writing itself infused us with holiness, ensuring that we would come into the land as people spiritually "on fire".

### **Matzoh: A Lesson of Quickness**

We eat matzah on Pesach because we didn't have enough time to bake regular bread when we fled from Egypt. Ever wonder why Hashem couldn't have given us a mere 18 more minutes when leaving Egypt to bake some normal bread? Days prior, Hashem showered ten miraculous, earth-shattering plagues on the Egyptians, and now suddenly He won't give us enough time to bake a decent loaf of bread? Why is that?

The answer is a fundamental concept in Judaism. Hashem was declaring to all of us on that fateful night, our last one in Egypt, that if you want to change, if you want to get out of this spiritual wasteland, do it *now*. Not tomorrow. Not in twenty minutes. Now. Because later is the first step to never.

Chometz is the symbol of waiting. It's the symbol of fermentation. It's the symbol of later. The very infancy of the Jewish people had to be infused with zerizus (alacrity). Not lethargically trudging our way to spiritual freedom, but running to it, from the first possible moment.

From the very inception of our people, Hashem wanted us to know that when it comes to spiritual change, the very beginning needs to be infused with holiness. Waiting 18 minutes for a fluffy loaf of bread is allowing the germ of *later* to take root.

### **The Bais HaMikdash: A Building of Later**

Allowing *later* to take hold sometimes has devastating consequences. For example, the building of the Bais HaMikdash took seven full years to complete. One would expect that the completion of the greatest building in the history of our planet would warrant unparalleled festivities and attention. And yet, what happened on the very first night of the Bais HaMikdash's existence? Instead of a night dedicated solely to the inauguration of the Bais HaMikdash, infusing it with holiness and purity, King Shlomo was distracted at his own wedding party celebrating his marriage to the daughter

of the Egyptian Pharaoh. A wedding ceremony about which the Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 12:5) says King Shlomo was more excited about than the inauguration of our holy Bais HaMikdash.

What occurred on the very first morning of the Bais HaMikdash's completion, the culmination of hundreds of years of spiritual blood, sweat, and tears? Shlomo HaMelech sadly slept in and came late. Late to the very first korban tamid. The Gemara (Shabbos 56b) says that on that fateful day, Hashem sent the Heavenly angel Gavriel to plant a reed in the ocean. That reed grew to become a famous peninsula which would house a city that would be inhabited by the people who eventually destroyed the Beis HaMikdash. That reed grew into Italy, the home of the future Roman Empire, the destroyers of our holy city.

Each and every one of us is in essence a king of our own kingdom. If we infuse our beginnings with an injection of holiness and purity, that creates a bedrock upon which magnificent spiritual infrastructure can be built. But if we let the power of *later* grab hold, we often never shake it loose. We tell ourselves, "I'll start davening with concentration when I get to high school," and then we say, "I'll start when I'm in bais medrash or seminary"; then we tell ourselves, "I'll start when I'm married," and after that it's "when I'll have a child," and then it's "when I marry off all the kids." An innocent *later* when we were 14 pushed us all the way to our deathbeds.

It's much like driving a car. When you're on the highway going 75 miles per hour, in order to turn onto the exit, you only need to move the steering wheel a mere few inches and the car moves hundreds of feet to the right or to the left. But when you are on a side street going six miles per hour, even moving five feet requires you to turn the wheel significantly.

Similarly, when one is young and youthful, or when one is beginning a spiritual stage and is filled with fresh enthusiasm, infusing that moment of energy with holiness and spirituality can accomplish far more than trying to do so late in the game.

### **The U.S. Army's Commanding General**

The commanding General of the United States Army once got up to give a speech to a new batch of soldiers all hoping and dreaming of climbing the ladder of the United States Armed Forces. He looked at them and said, "All of you here have dreams of rising in the ranks —good for you. But there is only one way of doing that. It's with one mantra that will take you to the heights you wish to climb. There is only one secret to establishing yourself in the United States Army,

the most powerful army in all of human history.” All the soldiers leaned in with curiosity as to what his secret was. He paused and said:

“The only way to change the world ... is to wake up every day and make your bed.”

Make your bed?! How insignificant! How petty and inconsequential! What did he mean by that?

He explained: “If every day, from the very get-go, you establish yourself as a man who is organized and clean, a man who respects himself and carries himself with dignity, then a foundation of self-worth is laid within you upon which greatness can be properly built. But if from the very beginning there is laziness and disorientation, then the foundation is wobbly and anything built on top risks crumbling.”

### **The Start of All Halacha**

The very first halacha in the entire Shulchan Aruch is the charge for us to be misgaber k’ari, to wake up and a roar like a lion. Not lethargically. Not unenergetic. Not waking up like a man who looks like he just limped back from the Vietnam War. Like a lion.

Of course, we feel groggy; of course we need coffee. What it means is that we should inject our day from the get-go with holiness. It means that we should say a meaningful modeh ani; we should start our day with a small thought of the greatness of Hashem, or concentration when we say asher yatzar.

The Kav HaYashar (2<sup>nd</sup> perek) says that the very first thing one should do when he wakes up in the morning, even before reciting modeh ani, is to look at the mezuzah. To infuse our souls with holiness right away. No time to lose. We wake up every single day and build a foundation upon which our spiritual building can rest.

The same Mishnah in Pirkei Avos that tells us to be strong like a lion also tells us to be kal k’nesher, light as an eagle. The eagle is one of the only birds in the animal kingdom that has spontaneous flight. All other birds need to take off like an airplane and rise in slow increments in order to attain maximum height. Not so the eagle. It can flap its wings and go upwards, no runway necessary. The Mishnah is telling us to be like an eagle that jumps up right away. Be like an eagle that zooms upward, and not like an airplane that ascends slowly. Don’t wait for months, years, or decades to attain spiritual greatness. Do it now. Jump up and fly.

### **The Breaking Glass**

The same way a king begins his empire with an infusion of holiness, so do we begin our marriages.

At every wedding there is a strange custom practiced. Right at the end of the chuppah, the chosson raises his foot and stomps on a glass. Demonstrating our concern for the broken Bais HaMikdash, we break a glass after singing a somber tune under the chuppah. This shows Hashem that the destruction of the Bais HaMikdash has never left us.

What happens after that is puzzling. The breaking of the glass — which is supposed to remind us of the sadness of the destroyed Bais HaMikdash — became the ultimate party starter. There isn't even five seconds between the breaking of the glass and the eruption of singing and dancing that ensues. What was supposed to inject an element of sadness became the ultimate trumpet of joy. Aren't we completely avoiding the message the glass breakage is trying to give us?

The answer is that the Bais HaMikdash was destroyed mainly because of a lack of simcha, a lack of enthusiasm, of spiritual zest and zeal. A new home being built by a newlywed couple is an erection of a miniature Bais HaMikdash, a spiritual cocoon in which God feels welcome and proud. If a lack of simcha was the catalyst for the Bais HaMikdash's destruction, then the remedy for its rebirth must be simcha. Hence, the absolute, immediate first moment the glass is broken, signifying the conclusion of the chuppah and the official start of the couple's new life, we inject into that marriage, into that mikdash me'at, spiritual simcha. A new palace of God on this earth must be infused with simcha from the very first minute, thus concretizing it as God's palace forever.

We don't wait ten minutes, we don't wait one minute, we don't even wait ten seconds. Because when it comes to spirituality: Jews. Don't. Wait.

### **The Spiritual Collapse of Elisha ben Avuya**

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this concept in all of Jewish history is the story of Elisha ben Avuya. Elisha ben Avuya wasn't just a great Tanna and Rabbinic sage, he was one of the greatest sages in a generation consisting of our history's greatest sages. He was one of only four people recorded to have entered Gan Eden (Paradise) while still living in this world (Chagigah 14b).

And yet tragedy struck. He walked away and left it all. Falling off the mountain of spiritual greatness, he climbed atop the mountain of sin. He murdered a child. He frequented harlots. So bad was Elisha, and so catastrophic was his descent from spiritual prominence, that the Gemara does not even refer to him by name; he is simply referred to as "Acher" ("the other").

The moment he left the Jewish fold, he was welcomed with open arms by the Roman elites and was instantly propped up as a prized philosopher who finally saw the light. A man who rose to such unimaginable spiritual heights could not have fallen any lower than he did.

Yet he had one disciple who wouldn't let go. He had one talmid who wouldn't move on. The famous Tanna, Rabbi Meir, one of the leading figures of the Mishnah, was the prized disciple of Elisha and continued to run after him, hoping to squeeze out more of the amazing spiritual information still stored within him. Despite leading a life of murder and adultery, Rabbi Meir wouldn't leave his rebbe. He would beg him to return. He would cry for his repentance. Nothing changed.

One day, out of curiosity, R' Meir asked Acher what caused his demise. What was the catalyst for his unbelievable fall. Elisha turned to R' Meir and said, "I'll tell you exactly. When I was born, my father invited all the major rabbis to attend my bris. The most prestigious members of the Jewish community were there. Right when we were about to begin, the two biggest Talmudic scholars at the time, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, walked in talking words of Torah. They sat down on a bench and a blazing fire surrounded them. My father, dumbstruck, asked them what that fire was, and they explained that it is the fire of Torah that surrounds those who learn it properly. After the collective jaw-dropping that took place amongst the attendees of the bris, my father got down on one knee and whispered into my ear that I, too, should learn Torah in order to receive such a fire and the honor that comes with it. My father injected in me the desire for prestige and honor. My entire spiritual edifice was built upon a foundation of haughtiness and greed." Thus, one of the greatest sages of all time had a wobbly start, which led to a horribly catastrophic end (Tosafos, Chagigah 15a, citing the Talmud Yerushalmi).

### **Elisha'S Last Word**

Pirkei Avos is a collection of the one or two most profound sayings of various Tannaitic Sages. When Elisha was asked, later in life, to contribute his most profound saying, he responded, "The most seminal nugget of wisdom that I can offer humanity is the following: Those who learn when they are young are like ink on a clean page; those who don't, are like ink on a smudged one. Beginning at the beginning is the secret to longevity."

The harrowing parting words of one of the greatest sages of all time who lacked only one thing — a proper beginning.

We are here today as practicing Jews because our beginnings were infused with holiness. We are children of fathers who stayed up the whole night of our bris learning with us and singing to us and injecting us with holiness from the start. We are children of holy mothers who would crouch by our cribs, watching us sleep, and beg and cry and plead tearful prayers for our spiritual health. We are grandchildren of holy bubbies who would light the Shabbos candles and cry rivers of tears, injecting holiness into our childhood. We are students of Rabbeim who walked into our kindergarten classroom, and with faces beaming a heavenly shine, lovingly taught us the alef-beis. We are students of teachers who — while we were still innocent and pure — showed us the sweetness of a blatt Gemara and the holiness of a kapitel Tehillim. We are chassidim of Rebbes who lovingly cut our three-year-old hair and bentched us with their holy hands, injecting us with kedusha and tahara. We are descendants of Yitzchok who injected into our beginning the ability to die for G-d's glory. We are descendants of Yosef who injected into our beginning the herculean ability to overcome immoral temptation. We are descendants of Dovid who injected the infancy of our kingdom with the ability to stare down giants and fear no one.

We are Jews today living a life of Torah because, precisely as we were born anew after the Holocaust, we had giants of men injecting holiness into us at the time of our inception. The Munkatcher Rebbe's roar for Shabbos. Reb Aharon Kotler's unwavering war to spread Torah. The Lubavitcher Rebbe's unflinching mission to find every last Jew, leaving no stone unturned. Reb Moshe Feinstein's bringing the torch of Torah greatness and firmly planting it on American soil. We are here because we had them at our beginning. We are here because our inception was injected with holiness, and we know that for spiritual growth, the time to infuse holiness is at the beginning. We are here because we know that beginning after the beginning is beginning far too late.