

USING OUR HIDDEN FORCES TO CHANGE FOR THE BETTER

(BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

The Sages have said that while in Egypt, the Children of Israel breached 49 gates of impurity and Hashem had to hasten their departure to prevent them from breaching the 50th gate. On the other hand, we find many statements that teach the opposite, accounts describing how great and meritorious the Children of Israel were in Egypt. In fact our Sages have said that while in Egypt, the Children of Israel were saved on account of various things, including the fact that they did not change their names, their language, or their manner of dress. They also refrained from immorality and talebearing (i.e., speaking Lashon Harah), and they continued the practice of circumcision. Hence they strengthened their sanctity in order to do Hashem's will and observe the principles of Judaism.

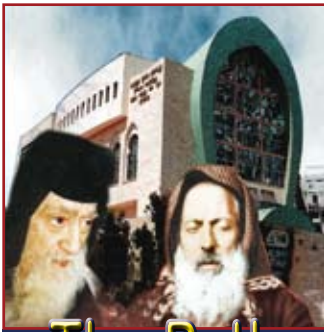
Furthermore, the performance of these mitzvot is precisely what testified to the piety of the Children of Israel. When a person's spiritual level diminishes and he completely changes his way of life, he starts modifying his appearance by shaving, wearing different clothes, and speaking another language in order to forget his people and distance himself from Hashem. As for the Children of Israel, although they experienced a tremendous spiritual decline, they still maintained their Jewish character and did not mix among non-Jews. This is alluded to in the verse, "These are the names of the Children of Israel who came into Egypt with Jacob; every man came with his household" (Exodus 1:1). "These are the names" – they retained their Jewish names; "who came into Egypt" – although they came into Egypt, they did not resemble the Egyptians in terms of dress; "every man came with his household" – with his family, without talebearing, and they kept the language that they spoke at home. The Ba'al HaTurim adds to this by noting that the first and last letters of the expression Israel habayim ("Israel who came") form the word milah ("circumcision"). He also notes that the last letters of the expression et Yaakov ish ("with Jacob [every] man") form the word shabbat. That being the case, it is hard to imagine that the Children of Israel could have observed all these practices while still being so far from Hashem that they arrived at the threshold of the 50th gate of impurity! Even if they had repented on Shabbat HaGadol, how could they have again breached 49 gates of impurity and be in such danger that their departure from Egypt had to be hastened, as it is written: "They could not delay" (Exodus 12:39)? Could they not have remained connected to Hashem through bonds of love? We also need to understand what our Sages meant by saying: "The Children of Israel were chamushim [armed]" [Exodus 13:18], the word chamushim evoking chamesh [five], which indicates that only one out of every five of them left Egypt, the others having died during the plague of darkness." Since those who survived were tzaddikim, how could they have breached 49 gates of impurity? This question is especially relevant given the Sages' statement that Egypt's ministering angel begged Hashem: "Those are idolaters and so are these" (Zohar II:170b). How was this possible? Since those who survived in Egypt were tzaddikim, how could Egypt's ministering angel accuse them of idolatry before Hashem? If we say that they had repented, how did they manage to elevate themselves so quickly to the 49 gates of purity in order to receive the Torah – and even earlier to bring the Passover offering? From where did they find the strength and determination to elevate themselves from their impurity and reach such a state of holiness?

We may explain this according to what the masters of Mussar have written, namely that in each person there exist hidden forces that are awakened when he begins to recognize his Creator. In my humble opinion, this hidden strength is really a person's

soul, a spark of divinity that is hewn from the Throne of Glory, helping to change a person for the better. Even when a person is immersed in impurity, he is not completely cut off from Hashem, for there still remains a thread that connects him to his Creator. As the Sages have said, "The transgressors of Israel...are full of mitzvot as a pomegranate [is of seeds]" (Chagigah 27a). Even if these mitzvot are done out of self-interest, they will lead to an unselfish attitude. If a single mitzvah can help a person change for the better, how much more will many mitzvot – as many as the seeds of a pomegranate – help him change for the better? All the deliberate sins that he committed in life will then be transformed into merits.

According to this, we can easily understand how the Children of Israel said, "We will do and we will hear" despite having breached 49 gates of impurity. The answer is that they were able to draw upon the hidden forces that are found in every Jew – forces that come from the good dwelling within them – a power that only needs to be awakened. It is in this way that we can understand the statement of the Sages, "If this repulsive wretch [the evil inclination] meets you, drag him to the Beth Midrash" (Sukkah 52b). How can a person, a being of flesh and blood, drag the evil inclination, a fiery angel, to the Beit Midrash? The answer is that when a person wants to conquer the evil inclination, the forces hidden within his heart will be awakened. By means of this strength, he can overcome the evil inclination despite the fact that it is made of fire. He can even drag it to the Beit Midrash.

Rabbi Israel Salanter once asked how we can appraise the forces that lie dormant in man. He replied by stating that we can actually see them in action. Suppose that a man has a son and a student. Suppose further that his son does not follow in his footsteps, but instead does whatever suits him, meaning that he abandons the study of Torah and does not observe the traditions of his ancestors. This will cause great anguish to his father. As for the man's student, he brings him great satisfaction every day, asking pertinent questions, answering in accordance with Halachah, and possessing a thorough knowledge of the Torah of his teachers. The man will be delighted with his student and love him as his own son. Therefore if we were to ask whom he loves more, the answer would obviously be his student. Yet what would happen if a fire were to suddenly break out in the middle of the night as all three of them slept? The man would get up in a panic and run to save...his son! This is because his love for his son lies deep within his heart, and in a time of crisis it awakens. In order for a person to sense the forces that lie dormant within him, and in order for him to awaken and bring them into action, he must at least perform a small mitzvah. Thus the Sages have said, "Present to Me an opening of repentance no bigger than the eye of a needle, and I will widen it into openings through which wagons and carriages can pass" (Shir Hashirim Rabba 5:3). In that case he fulfills the teaching of the Sages, "If one comes to purify himself, he is helped" (Shabbat 104a). What will help him are these spiritual forces. Without them, a person would obviously be unable to conquer his evil inclination, whose strength is overwhelming, since its sole purpose is to immerse a person in impurity and constantly make him stumble. It even dwells between the two openings of the heart (Berachot 61a), hiding there in order to make a person sin. Therefore only Heaven can help him use his hidden spiritual forces to purify himself.



The Path To Follow

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GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

Speech is Silver, But Silence is Golden

The evil inclination fools people by deluding them into thinking that they cannot avoid the sin of Lashon Harah. This is a mistake, for if people did not have the power to avoid this sin, Hashem would not have enacted several negative and positive mitzvot regarding it in His Torah. Instead He would have simply stated that it was good to avoid. Some claim that only the great men of Israel can avoid Lashon Harah. However we see that people have the ability to guard their tongues if they just pay close attention to speaking as little as possible, for excessive speech leads to sin.

Similarly, when a person is standing before a judge, he responds as briefly as possible because he knows that he will be judged by his words. He therefore tries to avoid being misunderstood. This is how a person must always speak, being careful not to misplace even a single word. He must pay great attention to what he says, for in the end he will have to render an account for every word he has spoken.

– Zachor L'Myriam 3

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

Who Performed Miracles for our Fathers

During the entire time that Moses spoke to Pharaoh, he only asked him to let the Children of Israel travel into the desert for three days in order to bring offerings to Hashem. As such they would become free men by the word of Hashem, not slaves who were set free by the word of Pharaoh. When they left, Pharaoh knew that they had no intention of returning. He also knew that Hashem, Who had performed great miracles for the Children of Israel in Egypt, would nourish them in the desert. Yet Pharaoh thought to himself, “They never asked for more than three days in the desert, and they are still obligated to serve me!” Hence Pharaoh sent along some messengers on horseback with them. They were to return from Israel’s camp and tell Pharaoh what they were doing. The Children of Israel did not prevent these messengers from accompanying them.

On Nissan 18, which was a Sunday, the Children of Israel began preparing their things and animal to leave. The messengers that Pharaoh had sent with them said, “Your period of freedom has ended. Now the time has come for you to return to Egypt, as you have said: ‘We will go for a three-day journey.’” The Children of Israel replied, “When we left, did we leave with Pharaoh’s permission? We left by force!” The messengers replied, “Whether you want it or not, you will eventually follow Pharaoh’s commands!” The Children of Israel struck these messengers, injuring and even killing some. Those who survived returned to Pharaoh and reported that Moses had told the Children of Israel, “Turn back to Egypt, so that Pharaoh will not say that you are fleeing. Let him encounter you near his country, and if he has something to say, let him come and say it.” Moses then blew the shofar and they returned before Pi-hachiroth, a day and a half away from Egypt. Those lacking in faith began to pull out their hair and tear their garments, for they thought that Moses was bringing them back to Egypt. Finally Moses said to them, “Hashem said to me that you are free men! The reason we are returning is to deceive the Egyptians.” The messengers went to find Pharaoh and told him that the people were fleeing. Pharaoh prepared his chariot, took his people, and pursued the Children of Israel, catching up to them by the sea at Pi-hachiroth. During the seventh night, on Nissan 21 (which was a Wednesday), the Children of Israel descended into the sea, and in the morning they emerged and saw the great power that Hashem had used against the Egyptians. Moses and the Children of Israel then sang the Song of the Sea.

– Sefer HaToda’ah

A Pearl From the Rav

How did the Children of Israel succeed in maintaining their distinctiveness in Egypt?

The Sages have said that the Children of Israel were rescued from Egypt because they did not change their names, their language, or their manner of dress (Vayikra Rabba 32:5; Pesikta Zutah, Shemot 6:6). The Sages also said, “The Israelites were delivered from Egypt as a reward for the righteous women who lived in that generation” (Sotah 11b). We need to understand exactly how the Children of Israel managed to maintain their distinctiveness

in Egypt. Why did the Egyptians not prevent them from doing so, and why were they content on imposing hard labor on them? We find that the wicked Haman wanted to kill the entire Jewish people, as it is written: “Haman sought to destroy all Jews throughout the entire kingdom of Ahasuerus” (Esther 3:6). As for the Greeks, they wanted to completely eradicate religious belief among the Jewish people, commanding them to “write on the horn of an ox that you have no part in the G-d of Israel” (Bereshith Rabba 2:4). The Egyptians did not seek to kill them all or to eradicate their religion, nor did they prevent Jews from maintaining these three practices in any way. How could this be?

The Jewish people face three kinds of adversaries: Those who seek to kill them, those who seek to wipe out their religion, and those who ridicule Judaism. Which of these is the worst? It is those who ridicule and scorn Jews who study Torah and observe mitzvot. In fact an adversary that wants to kill inflicts suffering only once, and so too for an adversary that wants to eradicate religion. Such is not the case for one who scorns those who fulfill the Torah. He pursues them day after day, and they constantly live in the shadow of death, meaning prolonged torture. That is what the Egyptians did to the Children of Israel. Although they did not prevent them from preserving their distinctiveness, they constantly ridiculed them when they saw that they were learning Torah and observing mitzvot. There is no greater affliction than this, yet the Children of Israel persevered, as the Sages have said. Although the Egyptians constantly scorned them each day, they continued to accomplish all that they could.

Our Defenders

There is tremendous significance behind the strict measures that Jews maintain when cleaning their homes and kitchen utensils for Passover. Adhering to such strict measures awakens tremendous merit and annuls the evil designs of Israel’s enemies. When Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev saw women cleaning their homes and kashering their utensils on the eve of Passover – when he saw them scouring, scrubbing, and rinsing – he repeated what we say when the shofar is blown on Rosh Hashanah: “May it be Your will that the angels emerging from these actions ascend before the Throne of Glory and serve as our advocates.” This means that these strict measures for Passover create angels who serve as our defenders.

Fences All Around

Passover is surrounded by numerous fences and barriers, just as the Children of Israel placed many fences around themselves in Egypt, such as not changing their language or giving in to immorality. This occurred despite the fact that the Children of Israel disregarded the Torah’s primary mitzvot, as it is said: “Those are idolaters and so are these” (Zohar II:170b). Some say that they even transgressed the covenant of circumcision. Nevertheless they were rescued from Egypt by the merit of the fences that they had made for themselves. The existence of the Jewish people, meaning their resistance to mixing among the non-Jews that surround them, depends exclusively on such fences, for they strengthen their independence as well as their solitude. During the Babylonian exile, we see that despite the fact that the Children of Israel observed the Torah’s principle mitzvot, they failed to make fences for themselves, since they changed their language (“half their children spoke

in the language of Ashdod" [Nehemiah 13:24]) and some of them assimilated. They married foreign women and completely melted among the other peoples. Therein lies the power of fences, namely the ability to preserve the existence of the Jewish people and bring about their deliverance.

– Meshech Chochma

Worthy of Praise

A poor and needy man, who was also uneducated, suddenly became very wealthy. Although he was able to hire special teachers and became educated, he eventually lost all his money and ended up poor and needy once again. Nevertheless, every year he would celebrate the day that he became wealthy. People asked him, "Why are you celebrating? You're as poor as ever!" He replied, "It's true that I lost my money, but the understanding and education I acquired as a result of my wealth have stayed with me. It's therefore fitting that I should celebrate the day that I became wealthy." By celebrating the exodus from Egypt and recounting the glory of Hashem even today (despite having gone back into exile and being dominated by foreigners), it means that we are rejoicing primarily because by having left Egypt, we became G-d's chosen people and merited the holy Torah, which is ours even in exile. We rejoice especially because the spiritual level that we attained by the exodus from Egypt was not forever lost. This is why, as we read in the Haggadah, "Everyone who discusses the exodus from Egypt at length" – even in the darkest days of exile – "is worthy of praise." As such he proves that his joy is spiritual in nature. He proves that he is rejoicing in Torah and the service of Hashem, which we merited for all time because of the exodus from Egypt.

– Divrei Shaul

Praising Hashem and the Jewish People

Why do we call this holiday "Passover," whereas the Torah calls it "the festival of unleavened bread"? We know that Hashem is always glorified in the greatness of the Jewish people, and that the Jewish people are glorified in the greatness of Hashem. As our Sages put it, "What is written in the tefillin of the Master of the universe? He replied to him: 'Who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation on earth?' [I Chronicles 17:21]" (Berachot 6a). For their part, the Jewish people say: "Hear O Israel, the L-RD is our G-d, the L-RD is One." The term "Passover" evokes Hashem's praise, for He passed over the homes of the Jewish people and saved them. On the other hand, the "festival of unleavened bread" evokes the praise of the Jewish people, for they followed Moses into the desert without even bringing provisions with them!

Hence the Torah calls this holiday "the festival of unleavened bread," for it evokes the praise of the Jewish people, whereas they call it "Passover," for it evokes Hashem's praise.

– Kedushat Levi

Why the Festival of Unleavened Bread?

In the Torah and in our prayers, the Passover holiday is called "the festival of unleavened bread," for the Pesach offering was brought on the eve of Passover, and people were only allowed to eat it until midnight on the first night. Hence the holiday was named after the mitzvah that was practiced throughout the entire holiday, not just during its first few hours. – Dover Shalom

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

The Seventh Day of Passover

The seventh day of Passover is when miracles were performed for our fathers by the sea. The Torah states, "The seventh day shall be a holy convocation for you, no work may be done" (Exodus 12:16). In most places where the first Yom Tov of Passover is mentioned in the Torah, the exodus from Egypt is also mentioned. However in places where the Torah commands us to observe the holiness of the seventh day of Passover, it does not mention the miracle that occurred at that time, namely the splitting of the sea. Similarly, when the Torah recounts this miracle in Parsha Beshalach, no mention is made of the day on which it occurred, nor is there any mention of this holiday. It has already been said that no holiday was given to Israel in remembrance of its enemy's defeat, but rather as a remembrance of Israel's deliverance. This is because the Holy One, blessed be He, takes no pleasure in the demise of the wicked, and the Jewish people are not to celebrate a holiday for this reason. Hence the mitzvah of the last day of Passover was given to the Children of Israel before they knew that the Egyptians would be drowned in the sea on that day. This is why, even afterwards, the Torah conceals the connection between the sanctity of this day and the splitting of the sea.

The essential reason for the Children of Israel's joy on that day was because of the shira that Moses and the Children of Israel sang by Divine inspiration. They merited for their song to be inscribed in the Torah for all time, and the Holy One, blessed be He, and all His attendants listened to it.

Jews usually stay awake learning Torah throughout all, if not most, of the seventh night of Passover. They go from the Chumash to the Prophets to the Writings, the written Torah and the oral Torah, finishing with the words of the Zohar regarding the splitting of the sea.

This series of readings is called a tikkun, for the Jewish people did not achieve complete redemption on that night. Yet because they did this tikkun with great faith in Hashem and His servant Moses – and also because they were going to receive the Torah – their shira was forever set in the Torah. Each year on this night is a fitting time for the soul to grow in faith in Hashem and His Torah. As the Sages tell us, Hashem helps a person who tries to purify himself, giving him powerful support that never stops.

EISHET CHAYIL

Her Opinion Yielded to His

Upon the passing of Rabbi Meir Atlas, the father-in-law of Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman and the Rav of Shavli, the leaders of the Shavli community invited Rabbi Elchanan to succeed him, promising a good monthly salary. Although Rabbi Elchanan was not happy with the prospects of entering the rabbinate, his wife the Rebbetzin demanded that he accept the post that her father's passing had left vacant. The Rebbetzin argued that now, in their home in Baranovitch, their infant children might possibly die of hunger. At first Rabbi Elchanan absolutely refused the position, for how could he abandon his yeshiva? How could he suddenly enter the rabbinate, for which he felt antipathy? Yet his wife refused to stop insisting, until she eventually told him that she was going to see the Chafetz Chaim in Radin. She would seek his advice, knowing that her husband would do whatever the Chafetz Chaim said. When the driver arrived, the Rebbetzin saw Rabbi Elchanan standing in a corner, bent over and weeping. He was afraid that the Chafetz Chaim would order him to leave the yeshiva. Upon seeing this, the Rebbetzin changed her mind, paid the driver for his trouble, and never again raised the issue with her husband.

– Ohr Elchanan

A TRUE STORY

You Shall Tell Your Son on That Day

In the Etz Chaim Talmud Torah in Jerusalem, a difficult passage in the Gemara was being taught. As the teacher was trying to explain the issue at hand, he suddenly saw two boys playing games in class. The boys realized that their teacher saw them, and they understood why he was getting angry. In fact they were afraid that he was going to punish them on the spot, but instead he closed his Gemara and left the room. After a few minutes, the teacher returned and continued his lecture as if nothing had happened. At the end of class, as students were leaving for recess, he summoned the two boys and asked them if they knew whether they had done something wrong. They said that they did. He then asked them if they knew whether they deserved to be punished, and again they replied that they did. He told them that they would be physically punished (which they later were). The boys asked the teacher, "We know that we should be punished, but why didn't you punish us right away, when you saw us playing?" He replied, "At that point I was very upset with you, for I was going to great lengths to explain a difficult issue in the Gemara, yet both of you were playing! I felt that if I punished you then, it would have only been to satisfy my anger, not to teach you a lesson. So I left the classroom to settle down, and only later did I return. Now that I'm no longer angry, I can punish you for your education."

THE DEEDS OF THE GREAT

The Greatness of Torah

Rabbi Yochanan was once walking from Tiberias to Sepphoris along with his disciple Rabbi Chiya. ... They came to a vineyard dwelling and Rabbi Yochanan said: "This vineyard dwelling was mine, but I sold it in order to acquire the Torah." ... Rabbi Chiya bar Abba began to cry. "Why are you crying?" asked Rabbi Yochanan. He answered, "Because you have nothing left for your old age." He replied, "Is what I have done a light thing in your eyes? I sold a thing that was created in six days, and I acquired a thing that was given after forty days."

– Vayikra Rabba 30:1

It is further related of Rabbi Tarfon that he was once eating figs from his garden when his tenant found him and [not recognizing him] gave him a severe beating. However [Rabbi Tarfon] said nothing. When he felt that he was dying, he exclaimed: "Woe to you, Rabbi Tarfon!" at which point [the tenant] asked him, "Are you Rabbi Tarfon?" He replied, "Yes." [The tenant] arose, tore his hair, and wept. And why [did he not disclose his identity] all that [time]? Because he would not make use of the Torah. Hence the Rabbis declared: "Whoever makes use of the crown of Torah has no share in the World to Come."

Rabbi Yonatan ben Amram learned it from him, for it has been taught: Rabbi Hakadosh [Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi] ordered during the years of famine that his storehouses of wheat and foodstuffs be thrown open. What did he do? He issued a proclamation, "Let everyone enter who has studied Scripture, Mishnah, Halachot, and Aggadot, but the unlearned are not to enter." Rabbi Yonatan ben Amram pushed his way through and entered. [Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi] asked him, "Have you studied the Torah at all?" He replied, "No," whereupon [Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi] said to him, "What can I provide you with?" He replied, "Master, feed me like a dog or a raven." After he had given him food, [Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi] sat grieving and repenting. He exclaimed, "Woe is me for what I have done! I have given my bread to an ignorant person." Thereupon Rabbi Shimon his son said to him, "Perhaps he is Yonatan ben Amram, your disciple, who does not wish to ever derive material benefit from the honor of the Torah." On investigation, it was discovered that he was. [Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi] then issued a proclamation: "Let all enter." – Kallah Rabbati 52b

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

he Heart of Mankind

It is written, "Son of man, can these bones come to life?" (Ezekiel 37:3).

In the Kuzari, the Rabbi answers the king of the Khazars based on this week's Haftorah. The king of the Khazars asked him if it is accurate to say that since the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Children of Israel from their land, the Jewish people have become a body without a soul, with no chance of being healed or attaining their former glory. In response the Rabbi said, "Since we have gone into exile, we are not even worthy of being called a body, for we are but dry bones, like the bones that Ezekiel saw. Yet despite this, do not think that we are really dead. In fact, among the nations the Jewish people are like a heart in the body. It is the most delicate and fragile of all organs, but this is precisely what proves that it is the most important of all. It constantly endures all kinds of suffering, be it worry, grief, fear, or danger. Its nature is constantly changing, oscillating between abundance and want. It suffers from poor nutrition as well as fatigue and other bodily effects. These things are all felt by the heart, contrary to the others parts of the body, which suffer no ill effects from such actions and remain as they are. The truth is that we are worthy of these pains, whereas the entire world lives in peace and tranquility, for we are sensitive to the illness of sin. The suffering and trials that assail us have the goal of completely purifying us, cleansing us of every stain of sin. They prepare our soul in the service of G-d and the performance of the Torah's mitzvot. Because the Jewish people are cleansed and purified, humanity as a whole enjoys the abundance that G-d lavishes upon it."

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein

The gaon and tzaddik Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein Zatzal, known by everyone as "the Mashgiach," taught Torah and the fear of Heaven for decades in the yeshivot of Kletzk and Mir in Poland, as well as in the yeshivot of Mir and Ponevezh in Eretz Israel. All his classes were aimed at infusing students with faith in the Creator of the universe. When Rabbi Yechezkel spoke of faith, people had the impression that he concretely felt what he was discussing. The Chazon Ish Zatzal once said that there were three Mashgichim who infused the Jewish people with faith in Hashem: The tzaddik Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler Zatzal (the author of Michtav Me'Eliyahu), the tzaddik Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian Zatzal (the author of Lev Eliyahu), and the tzaddik Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein Zatzal (the author of Ohr Yechezkel). The Chazon Ish listed their qualities: With Rav Dessler, faith was felt in the mind, for his lectures plumbed the depths of the Sages' teachings. With Rav Eliyahu Lopian, faith was felt in the heart, for his lectures were given with fervor, delivered in such a way that it awakened the heart. As for Rabbi Yechezkel, the Chazon Ish said that a person could truly reach out and touch faith with his hands.

The Mashgiach of Ponevezh lost his mother at the age of five. His father remarried, and when the boy reached his Bar Mitzvah he was sent to work in a flower shop. As it turned out, he merited bringing the fragment smell of the fear of Heaven into the hearts of tens of thousands of people. Rabbi Yechezkel himself said that when he started working and earning money, all his money was stolen one Friday as he went to the mikveh. He then thought to himself, "If my money can be stolen all at once, it doesn't make sense for me to waste time earning it." He therefore decided to go to the Kelm yeshiva and learn from the Alter of Kelm. In fact he merited learning at the Radin yeshiva with the Chafetz Chaim himself!