

Fascinating INSIGHTS

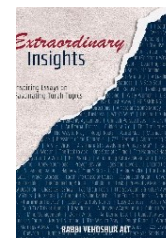
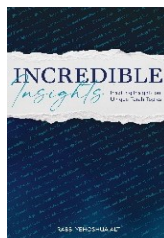
י"ט שבט תשפ"ב

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The First IDF

The Vilna Gaon, the Baal Shem Tov and the Chassam Sofer¹ were three leaders of the Diaspora that had such a longing for Eretz Yisrael and they instilled this love in their followers. These, in turn, spearheaded the first major waves of European immigrants to the Holy Land. The students of the Vilna Gaon laid the foundation for the Ashkenazic yishuv in Yerushalayim. In 1808, ten years after the Vilna Gaon died, his student, R' Menachem Mendel of Shklov, led a pioneering group of immigrants to Eretz Yisrael. They were followed by a second group in 1809 led by R' Saadya, another student of the Vilna Gaon and R' Nossion Nota, the son of R' Menachem Mendel of Shklov. At the end of the year, a third wave numbering 70 people arrived, led by R' Yisrael of Shklov, author of the Pe'as Hashulchan. The first chassid that moved to Eretz Yisrael was the brother-in-law of the Baal Shem Tov, R' Gershon Kitvor who arrived in 1742. In 1777, three students of the Maggid of Mezerich—R' Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, R' Avraham Hakohen of Kalisk and R' Yisrael Palitzker—arrived at the head of 300 immigrants and settled in Tzefas and Teverya.

The first Jewish defense force in Israel was known as the Jewish Guard. It began almost immediately with the arrival of the students of the Vilna Gaon and the Baal Shem Tov. When it became apparent that the Turkish authorities were either unable or unwilling to deal with the Arab marauders, these settlers realized that an armed Jewish defense force was needed to prevent victims. The Guard's headquarters was located in the Old City of Yerushalayim and it was commanded by some of the most outstanding students of the Vilna Gaon.

One morning in 1820, R' Hillel Rivlin (1758–1838), the leader of Yerushalayim's Ashkenazic community and the head of its first beis din was about to leave his home for shacharis when he was approached by a solitary, letter-bearing Bedouin. The letter revealed that a party of Jewish immigrants had been captured by an Arab gang and they were demanding ransom. R' Hillel convened an urgent meeting of the community leaders and the Guard. It was decided that two men, seemingly bearing the ransom money, would accompany the Arab emissary, while all the members of the Guard would secretly follow them to the bandits' camp. They arrived at the camp which is near what today is Bnei Brak. In a surprise assault, the Guard members destroyed the camp and freed the prisoners. The bandit chief as well as many of his band were killed and the remaining members barely escaped with their lives. When the victorious Guard returned to Yerushalayim together with their rescued captives, they found the community still steeped in fasting and prayer for the success of the mission.

In the summer of 1873, the Old City of Yerushalayim was terrorized by a powerful gang of Bedouin bandits named Jehart-Al-Harabiah. Attacking Jewish homes became an almost nightly occurrence. At an urgent meeting at the home of Yerushalayim's Rav, R' Meir Auerbach, it was decided to attack the gang at its hide-out. The night before the planned attack was declared "watch night" and Yerushalayim's citizens gathered in the shuls to recite Tehillim and daven for the success of the mission. On the night of the 18th of Sivan, groups gathered into shul to spend the entire night in tefilla. At midnight members of the Guard launched a three-pronged attack on Jehart-Al-Harabiah stronghold, north of the city, and inflicted heavy casualties.

¹ The first of the Chassam Sofer's students to emigrate to Eretz Yisrael was R' Moshe Zaks in 1830. The students of the Vilna Gaon and the Baal Shem Tov arrived in large groups, thereby creating a popular aliyah

movement among their respective communities in Europe. The students of the Chassam Sofer however came individually and banded together only after their arrival in Eretz Yisrael.

Within a half-hour, the enemy camp was decimated with nearly 150 of them dead. For many years, “salvation night” was celebrated in Yerushalayim on the 18th of Sivan.

Mountain of Manslaughter

Hashem’s offer of the Torah to the nations was declined. Those from עשו asked what the Torah contained and were told לא תרצה, don’t kill. That was an overwhelming challenge for them as עשו was an איש יודע ציד, Esav knew how to hunt. His bracha was על חרבך תחיה, to live by the sword! In fact, Esav is called an איש שדה, man of the field, which is an acronym for דם האדם, spilling the blood of man (i.e. murder).² Those from Yishmael refused because of לא תנאף, don’t commit adultery.³ Why is it that when the Jews were offered the Torah, they weren’t given that which challenged them?

The Avnei Neizer⁴ explains why the first mitzva the Jews were commanded at Har Sinai was the mitzva of Hagbala, setting boundaries around the mountain.⁵ This was so that the nations of the world shouldn’t have a claim that this that they didn’t want the Torah is because they were told the mitzvos that were against their nature. They could claim that if Hashem would have given the Jews a mitzva that was against their nature, maybe the Jews also wouldn’t have accepted the Torah. Therefore the mitzva of Hagbala was the first mitzvah because this is the opposite of the Jews’ nature. This is because all they yearn for is closeness to Hashem, and now, they were commanded to keep a distance.

Rashi⁶ cites the phrase רצוננו לראות את מלכנו, our will is to see our king. This is why boundaries were set—הגבלת את העם—so that we shouldn’t ascend the mountain or touch its edge,⁷ as we have a magnetic pull towards Hashem. And we know כי לא יראני האדם וחי, one can’t see Hashem and live.⁸

This is comparable to one who places a magnet close to metal. It pulls itself toward the metal. Similarly, if Hashem revealed Himself to us, our Neshama would leave us because of the “magnetic” pull. It therefore is no surprise that the next word is רצוננו לראות את (והגבלת את העם סביב לאמר)—an acronym of מלכנו.

Powerful People

The Rambam⁹ writes it is natural for a man’s character and actions¹⁰ to be influenced by his friends¹¹ and associates and for him to follow the local norms of behavior. Therefore, he should associate with the righteous and be constantly in the company of the wise, so as to learn from their deeds. Conversely,

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Rabbi Alt merited to learn under the tutelage of R’ Mordechai Friedlander ztz”l for close to five years. He received semicha from R’ Zalman Nechemia Goldberg ztz”l. Rabbi Alt has written on numerous topics for various websites and publications and is the author of three books including the recently released Extraordinary Insights, in addition to being the host of The Fascinating Insights Podcast. His writings, some of which have been translated into Yiddish, Hebrew, German and French, inspire people across the spectrum of Jewish observance to live with the vibrancy and beauty of Torah. He lives with his wife and family in Kiryat Yearim (where the Aron was for 20 years [Shmuel 1, 7:1,2]) where he studies, writes and teaches. The author is passionate about teaching Jews of all levels of observance.

² Rabbeinu Efraim, Breishis, 25:27. See Breishis 9:6.

³ Shemos, 20:13. See Avoda Zara 2b.

⁴ Shem Mishmuel, Shavuot, תרפ”ג, שבת בתלמי, תרפ”ג.

⁵ Shabbos 87a.

⁶ Shemos, 19:9, see 19:21 Rashi.

⁷ Shemos 19:12.

⁸ Shemos 33:20.

⁹ Hilchos Daos 6:1

¹⁰ Man’s ethical makeup is a combination of character and action (See the Rambam in Sefer Hamitzvos, מצוות עשה, 8).

¹¹ Just prior to the passing of R’ Avraham Jungreis, the father of Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis, he asked to be carried to his sefarim shelves. He kissed each sefer goodbye and said, “These are my best friends. It’s very difficult to say goodbye.”

¹² Now we can have more Kavana when we say at Shacharis מֵאֵדָם הִרְחִיקוּנוּ מֵאֵדָם, רַע וּמְחַבְרֵי רַע, distance us from an evil person and an evil companion.

¹³ Avos 1:7. When the American soldiers went into combat in World War Two, 25% of them were unable to kill their enemy, since it’s not easy psychologically to kill another person. The Americans hired a team of mental health professionals—psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers—to teach these soldiers how to kill, in which they were successful. Years later, during the Vietnam War, the Americans again

he should keep away from the wicked, so as not to learn from their deeds.¹² For this reason, we are instructed to distance ourselves from a bad neighbor and to not associate with the wicked.¹³ This is just as it says ... הוֹלֵךְ אֶת הַחַכְמִים יִחְכֵם, one who walks with the wise will become wise while one who associates with fools will suffer.¹⁴

Studies show that we pick up the moods and habits of the five people we spend the most time with. The energy of those that we surround ourselves with makes an enormous impact. Their positivity becomes our positivity. Their tendency to dream bigger leads to the expansion of our dreams. Their positive outlook on the world and on others becomes our perspective as well. And their encouragement and belief in us becomes the impetus for us to view ourselves in a brighter light. And when we are surrounded by the wrong people, the opposite is true. This is the intent of רְבוּשׁ לְצִים לֹא יֵשֵׁב,¹⁵ praiseworthy is the one who doesn’t sit in the company of scorners. Don’t hang out with negative, cynical people as they drain your energy and get you down.

In Soviet Russia, there were Jews that assembled in secrecy in a basement in order to learn together and strengthen each other in religious observance which was against the Russian government. This secret meeting grew larger to the extent that it couldn’t contain them all. One week several new interested participants arrived during the shiur. However, there was no room for them. In the basement was a long-time member named Boris who because of his weak religious background, couldn’t comprehend the learning that took place. As a result, some senior members murmured to each other that maybe they should ask him to leave in order to create space for someone who would grasp the learning. Boris overheard this exchange which caused him to then address the crowd. He rolled up his sleeve showing his many scars. He explained what happened. He was once sitting in a café in Moscow and unbeknown to him there was a group of revolutionaries present plotting against the Russian government. Suddenly, the KGB entered and started beating everyone. Boris said to a KGB officer that he was just eating lunch there and had no connection with these revolutionaries. The KGB officer responded, “If you are sitting with the group, then you are part of the group.” And he continued to beat Boris, leaving him with scars. Boris then said, “Even if I can’t grasp all the learning but being with the group makes me part of the group.¹⁶ I want to sit with these Jewish revolutionaries here in this basement.” That night, those present learned more from this story than the shiur that took place.

began this program with the mental health professionals. However, this time, it was immediately canceled. This was because there was no need for this program since it was the first war fought by a generation raised on watching television. As a result, they already knew how to kill because they saw many murders on television. What can be said of today where the youth spend an immense amount of time surrounded by such violent scenes and murders in movies they watch, video games they play and the like? (This doesn’t even include foul language, criminal behavior and other negativity they are exposed to from this.)

¹⁴ Mishlei 13:20.

¹⁵ Tehillim 1:1.

¹⁶ This idea is also brought forth from the following: Depending on the passport one holds is the number of destinations he can travel to. As of 2021, the best passport to hold is from Japan, as one with a Japanese passport gets visa-free or visa-on-arrival access to 191 destinations around the world. With a passport from the United States or the United Kingdom, one can get access to 185 countries. On the other hand, one in possession of an Afghan passport has access to just 26 countries. So while a person from Japan, the United States or the United Kingdom may be wicked, he is granted access to nearly all countries. On the other hand, a good person from Afghanistan has limited access. This is because if he is part of them, he is classified as one of them.