

The Tree of Life

Prior to accepting his “shtele,” position, in Radin, the Chofetz Chaim was rav in Simiatitz, Russia. Horav Siegel happened to be in this city on the last Shabbos of the Chofetz Chaim’s stay, as he was taking leave of the community. It coincided with the Bolshevik revolution as the communists were taking over the government. They immediately seized everyone’s land and began hoarding food. People -- who simply wanted to survive -- would have to go to the commissar in every community to receive their rations. While this put a great strain upon the wealthy, we can only begin to imagine the overwhelming pressure this placed on the poor. Indeed, many people perished from hunger and deprivation, not able to obtain decent rations for their families. The Chofetz Chaim took upon himself the obligation to provide the basic necessities for the poor. He gathered flour from those who could spare a bit, while his daughter “Sarah’le” baked bread to distribute to the poor.

The time came for the Chofetz Chaim to leave this small town; the poor were hysterically afraid of what would happen now that their “source” of sustenance was departing. They pleaded with him brokenheartedly to provide for their needs. Obviously, the Chofetz Chaim did not savor this tragic situation. The Chofetz Chaim ascended the podium to deliver his last sermon. With tears streaming down his face, he begged for forgiveness from the community. He conceded that while he certainly did not hurt anybody financially, he might have offended someone’s dignity. We can imagine the tzaddik hador, the saint of a generation of tzaddikim, asking mechilah, begging forgiveness, from his community. Certainly, such a person never hurt anyone – even inadvertently. He closed by saying that they all, himself included, should cleanse themselves of any possible offenses to their fellow man, either by humiliating, or lashon hora, slanderous speech, – knowingly and unknowingly.

After the sermon, the kehilla, synagogue membership, davened Minchah, and a number of the shul’s dignitaries accompanied the Chofetz Chaim to his house for Seudah Shlishis. As they walked along the street, they met a Jewish young man, a powerful communist, the distinguished commissar of the town, who tragically had become an apostate. When the Chofetz Chaim saw him, he greeted him pleasantly, “Gut Shabbos.” The young man responded with the reverence reserved for a noted scholar, “Gut Shabbos, Rebbe.” The Chofetz Chaim then invited him to join him for Seudah Shlishis. The young man refused, stating that he had already “eaten” the third Shabbos meal. The Chofetz Chaim said that he would like him to join him at home for a little talk.

Indeed, all of the assembled were shocked at what was transpiring before their eyes. Their beloved rebbe, the gadol hador, was consorting with a known miscreant, a sonei Yisrael, Jew-hater of the highest order. Horav Siegel relates how the Chofetz Chaim’s gabbai, secretary, divulged to him this young man’s pedigree. His family was far from reputable; he, however, distinguished himself as a scoundrel and thief, a truly rotten apple from an equally contemptible tree.

He had been caught stealing one time too many and was sent to Siberia to be incarcerated for “life.” During the Bolshevik Revolution, however, all prisoners had been freed. His evil was now sanctioned by the government. He rose quickly in the ranks, achieving high marks for his “prolific” past. As evil as he was to the Jewish community before he had been jailed, his new position afforded him even greater opportunity to continue his nefarious activities – legally. This made the Chofetz Chaim’s invitation to him all the more intriguing.

Impossible to refrain from “listening” to the sounds of the conversation, those assembled in the house heard the following dialogue between the tzaddik and the alienated Jew: The Chofetz Chaim said, “I summoned you because I would like to make a request of you. First, I would like to tell you a dvar Torah.” “Rebbe,” responded the commissar, “I really do not think that I am ‘ready’ to hear a Torah thought.” “Do not worry,” said the Chofetz Chaim, “It will be simple but meaningful.” The Chofetz Chaim began by citing the pasuk which we have questioned. “Why”, asked the Chofetz Chaim, “was it

important to have the Eitz Ha'daas in the center of Gan Eden?" The Eitz Ha'daas, the Tree of Life, was the source from which spiritual life, Divine sustenance, flowed. Everyone is in need of this source of life; everyone seeks to fulfill the required course for achieving life. Because people are different from one another, there are also various ways available to be nurtured by the Tree of Life. Some reach it through Torah study; others through mitzvos; yet others through avodah, devotional service to the Almighty. There are people for whom acts of loving-kindness, charity, and promoting good-will are their tickets for achieving spiritual life.