

DATA of Plano

Parshas Vayechi | 14 Teves 5779 | December 22, 2018

Friday Evening

Candle lighting and Mincha: 5:06

Shabbos Day

Shacharis: 9:00

Latest time for shema: 9:56

Learners' Service: 10:45

Kiddush following services

Mincha: 4:40

Maariv / Shabbos ends: 6:10

Kol Hane'arim: 7:15

From the Desk of Rabbi Yogi

The Power of our Surroundings



I always imagined I'd be the same person I was outside of yeshiva as I was in yeshiva. Of course, yeshiva is a hotbed of religious passion and zeal, a place where one's highest aspiration is to become as the great Torah teachers and sages who surround you. The beit midrash (the study hall) is filled throughout the day and much of the night with both the young and the old hunched over ancient, sacred tomes, plumbing their depths and delighting in new Torah discoveries. It wasn't difficult to get caught up in the spirit of the place. On the contrary, one had to essentially and willfully remove oneself from the spiritual gusto to avoid being swept up in its wings.

Of course, I didn't realize at that time just how much of my own religious devotion and iron-willed Torah-study focus was a product of living in that rarified, supportive environment. I, like others, regarded my essential "self" and my value system as essentially one and the same; wherever I'd go my core tenets and commitments would surely follow. And so, I surmised, if daily exertion in Torah study and fastidious attention to Jewish practice lay at my spirit's ideological core, no circumstances that

life outside of yeshiva might throw my way could, in any meaningful way, derail my life's determined course.

I look back at my younger self now and realize how very naive I truly was!

Little did I know at the time just how much of my twenty-six year old self would leave the larger yeshiva bubble along with me, fully intact, and how much of what I thought of as myself remained in reality as a free agent, susceptible and impressionable to outside influence and pressure (such was the case, even as I was solely transitioning to a spiritual "safe-space" in communal Jewish education).

Life in my new, smaller learning environs was an adjustment to say the least. It's simply not as easy to remain as motivated in a beit midrash filled with eight people instead of a couple hundred. And the sheer intellectual and spiritual "competition" (what the Talmud refers to as "kinat soferim" - the spiritually beneficial jealousy of the wise) that permeates and animates the the

yeshiva student in yeshiva - Well, that was now, mostly a thing of the past. It was a path of least resistance to find comfort in one's newfound status as a learned person in this smaller enclave and to forget just how recently one had been sitting near the base of the totem pole of Jewish knowledge back in yeshiva. And that allowed for the slow setting in of spiritual stagnation and plateau.

This new environment would bring with it challenges to the religious life that I didn't know existed and certainly wasn't prepared for. A new set of tactics, I would quickly discern, would be needed to meet this new spiritual test head on if I were to take the advancements I had acquired during my yeshiva years along with me into my second act.

Humans are deeply impacted by their environments and social circles. This much is well documented in both the social sciences as well as our own tradition. Pirkei Avot, for example, exhorts us on the one hand to "Let your home be a meeting place for the wise; dust yourself in the soil of their feet, and drink thirstily of their words" (1:4), and on the other side to "distance yourself from an evil neighbor and do not befriend the wicked person" (1:7). We human beings, after all, are ever-malleable in our natures, both for the good and the bad.

Maimonides, too, eloquently noted that "It is natural for a man's character and actions to be influenced by his friends 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, he should keep away from the wicked who walk in darkness, so as not to learn from their deeds..."

Stuck in a place where you can't escape negative influences? Maimonides suggests you "go out to caves, thickets, and deserts [rather than] follow the paths of sinners..." (De'ot 6:1). In such a degenerate society, returning homo-sapien habitation to

caves suddenly seems a great feat of human advancement!

And so, even as motivational speaker Jim Rohn may not have had humanity's spiritual and ethical characters in mind when he uttered his now famous words, "You are the average of the five people you most associate with," we certainly ought to!

It was only recently, though, while studying the weekly parsha, that I fully realized the utter extent of the impact that one's environment has upon the individual.

It had been a long, twenty-two year period of estrangement since Yaakov had last seen his embittered brother Esav. And last Yaakov knew, Esav was still out for his blood for stealthily wresting away his birthright blessing from their aged and blind father. What could Yaakov say or do these many years later to appease or disarm a blood-thirsty Esav and hope to escape this fateful meeting with his life and the lives of his family?

The text records that Yaakov devised a plan. He split up his children into their maternal groupings, each one a distance from the other, ensuring the survival of at least some of them in case of a military attack. He prepared long lines of lavish gifts for his brother, the better to soften a long-hardened heart. And finally, he commanded his servants ahead of him to share his carefully prepared words - words which on a surface level seem utterly unremarkable and flat.

"“Thus shall you say to my master to Esau, 'Thus said your servant Jacob, "I have sojourned (“garti”) with Lavan, and I have lingered until now”" (Breishit 32:5).

Yaakov had indeed lingered these many years with Lavan, his wicked father-in-law. He had diligently tended his father-in-law's flock day and night, and in return earned the right to marry his two daughters Leah and Rachel and acquire a sizable portion



of livestock for himself.

But Rashi is more concerned with the hidden layers of meaning behind Yaakov's words. The word "garti" ("sojourner"), notes Rashi, has the same numerical value as "taryag" (613). In other words, Yaakov's words to Esav could equally be read "(Know that) I have kept the 613 commandments while in Lavan's house."

This short and effective line was a warning shot!

For Yaakov was letting Esav know that G-d and His protective wings were still spread over him. Yes, it is true, that he had been living in the shadow of a wicked man for over two decades, but no, he had not adopted his father-in-law's evil ways along the way and subsequently fallen out of G-d's graces. "I wouldn't mess with me if you know what's good for you!" was Yaakov's subtle yet pointed intent.

What I find amazing, and that which I had never satisfactorily considered in the meaning of Rashi's commentary, is the clear implication that Esav considered it a real and ever-present possibility that Yaakov, the crown jewel of the Forefathers, the one whom the Torah describes as "the dweller of

tents" (a reference to his constant presence in the house of study) and the husband to two of our saintly Matriarchs might have lost his spiritual way due to those years lived in close proximity to a wicked man!

And Yaakov, in seeming agreement as to the possibility of such a personally calamitous eventuality, feels the need to dispel those considerations!

What the Torah is teaching us is that nobody, no matter who you are, what family you come from or what you've accomplished in your lifetime is immune from the forces of their environment! If Yaakov Avinu is it risk so are we all!

How vigilantly must we then be in guarding against the negative influences of the societies in which we live and how equally determined we must be to find and secure spiritually and ethically rich friends, communities and environs in which to spend most of our time. As long as we don't imagine ourselves more powerful than the forces around us, we can, at a minimum, do our part to stack the decks of influence in our favor.

SAVE THE DATE

- ◆ **Crash Course in Hebrew Reading**– Monday evenings beginning January 7th.
- ◆ **Women's "Soup and Swap"** – Wednesday evening, January 9
- ◆ **DATA Teen Club Holocaust Museum Tour**– January 13
- ◆ **Next Men's Partners in Torah**– Wednesday evening, January 16
- ◆ **Sunday School Shabbat Dinner**– January 18th
- ◆ **Women's "Wine and Paint Night"** - February 2
- ◆ **DATA Teen Club Yoga for Girls**– February 3
- ◆ **Women's NY Trip**– February 29 - March 4
- ◆ **Dallas Stars Kosher Game Day**– March 17th
- ◆ **Champions Shabbaton**– TBA

Check out our website at www.dataofplano.org for:

- Registration for all upcoming programs
- Payment portal (pledges, donation, membership, tuition)
- An interactive map of the Plano eruv
- Links to Jewish and kosher institutions in the Dallas area
- The weekly newsletter and an archive of previous issues
- Community calendar of events
- "DATA Bytes" Blog
- Halachik times for Plano available at your fingertips
- Audio gallery with "Sounds of DATA of Plano"
- Sunday school information and registration
- And more...



CRASH COURSE IN HEBREW READING

Learn Hebrew in just over a month.

MONDAY EVENINGS
BEGINNING JANUARY 7TH | 7:30-8:30 PM
3251 INDEPENDENCE PARKWAY, PLANO

t



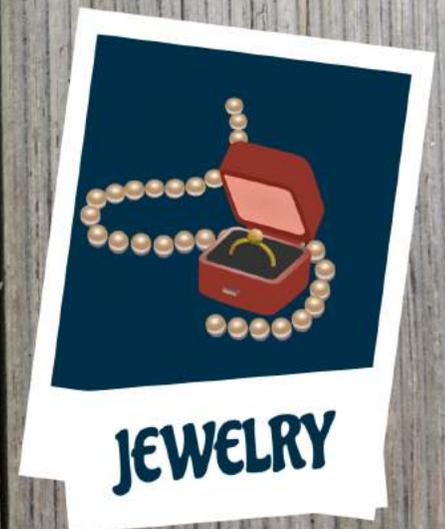
This course is free for qualified registrants. For more information or to register, email enissel@dataofplano.org.



SOUP AND SWAP

January 9th – 7:30 pm

Enjoy a ladies' evening out with a hearty soup bar, a Judaic and accessory swap, and the inspiring story of Shifra Robkin's recovery from illness.



RSVP to tnissel@dataofplano.org

Complete program information and rules will be provided upon registration



WOMEN'S NEW YORK TRIP

FEBRUARY 28 - MARCH 3



Exquisite Restaurants



New York Shopping



Private Meetings with
Jewish Womens' Leaders



Volunteering



Broadway Show



COST: \$500 per person (plus airfare). Includes accommodations, transportation and attractions.
For more information, contact dzakon@dataofplano.org



DATA Teens

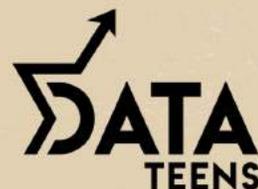
Holocaust Tour

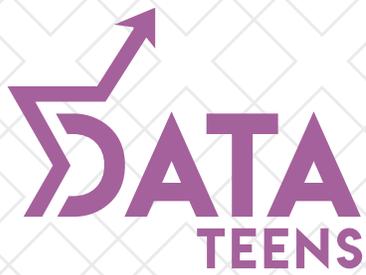
AT THE DALLAS
HOLOCAUST MUSEUM
2PM TO 4PM

SUNDAY
JAN 13, 2019

RSVP REQUIRED: OFFICE@DATAOFPLANO.ORG

Join Jewish Dallas-area teens ages 13-15 on a private tour of the museum, including the current exhibit "Let Me Be Myself: The Life Story of Anne Frank". Afterward, experience a meeting with a holocaust survivor and hear his story.





Connecting with Judaism and each other

TEEN CLUB

Monthly club meetings to discuss relevant teen topics with a Jewish twist and engage in meaningful projects with other Jewish teens.

Co-Ed Programs

Holocaust Museum *January 13*

Israel Advocacy *March 31*

Feed my Starving Children *August 25*

Girl Talk

Yoga and Dealing with Life's Stresses *February 3*

Krav Maga: Protecting Yourself Physically and Emotionally *March 24*

Mother-Daughter Communication Workshop *May 19*

Membership Fee: \$50

www.dataofplano.org

Committee

HEATHER BEHR · VIRI FELDMAN · JULIE GOTHARD · YANA MINTZKOVSKY · LILY ROUSSO · CORRIE SHORES · DEVORAH ZAKON

