

The General's Uniform

Horav Yaakov Galinsky, Shlita, relates a powerful incident which left a lasting impression, teaching him a powerful lesson about how one can endure even under the most vexing situations. The episode took place in a Siberian slave labor camp where Rav Galinsky and so many of our brethren suffered unbearable and inhuman pain and misery. The Russians did not single out Jews as the only enemies of the state. Whoever had the misfortune of falling into their clutches was imprisoned and relegated to performing backbreaking labor under the most brutal conditions. After a full day's work, the men would trudge back to their barracks to lay down on their wooden bunks and attempt to fall into a painfully fitful sleep.

Every night at approximately 2:00AM, one of the Polish prisoners would arise from his "bed" and remove a bag that was hidden beneath his bed. He would quickly remove what appeared to be some kind of a uniform, put it on, view himself in the mirror, quickly remove the suit, return it to the bag and go back to sleep. This went on every night. While Rav Galinsky was used to strange things occurring in prison, this man's actions were very puzzling. Sleep was very important to the prisoner's well-being. To force oneself to arise in the middle of the night just to put on a suit seemed irrational. There had to be an explanation that would shed light on this man's strange behavior.

One day, when they were alone, Rav Galinsky asked the man to explain his behavior, "Why do you arise in the middle of the night to put on your suit and view yourself in the mirror? Do you not value your sleep?"

"Yes, Rabbi, my sleep is very important to me, but so are my sanity and dignity. Let me explain. Prior to being taken captive by our Russian tormentors, I was a distinguished general in the Polish army. I had the respect of thousands of soldiers. Suddenly, our army was vanquished and I became a prisoner. The degradation and depravation to which they subject us is, in my opinion, a greater danger than the physical blows which they rain down on us on an almost constant basis. At all costs, I had to prevent them from getting into my mind and destroying it. Therefore, every night when everybody is fast asleep, I risk removing my general's uniform which I was able to retain in my possession. I don the uniform and look in the mirror. For two minutes, I see before my eyes my true self - my position and my status. I do not see a broken down, frail prisoner. I see a general in the Polish army! This is how I am able to maintain my sanity."

This idea applies equally to us. We are the descendants of a noble lineage with a compelling legacy for the future. If we visualize ourselves in our true uniforms, a uniform which exemplifies the Jewish essence and spirit, we will be able to transcend the society in which we live.