In Your Face

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When the Jews were told to build a home for G-d in the desert, they were instructed to build it out of acacia wood.

How did they get large trees, big enough to construct a large structure, in the desert?

Rashi tells us that Jacob, before entering Egypt, knew that the move to Egypt would only be temporary. One day his descendants would leave Egypt, become G-d’s nation and build Him a home. So he took trees with him from Israel and replanted them in Egypt. He instructed his children to pass along a message from generation to generation, that when they leave Egypt they should take these trees along.

That was really nice of Grandpa Jacob. But was there no more efficient way to do this? Couldn’t the Jewish people have purchased acacia wood from one of the civilizations they passed on their journey through the desert? Did Jacob really have to uproot, import and transplant trees? Did the Jewish people really have to tend to them for 200 years, chop them down, and carry them out in their hasty departure from Egypt, through the sea, through the desert, until they were finally needed?

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I have a friend¹, a very successful Chabad Rabbi, who built a huge empire of Jewish activities. He has this picture on his desk.

Print the picture at bottom of this document. Show students. Ask: Why do you think this is on his desk?

Yes, it has a good message, to go out of his comfort zone. But surely, the first time he saw this sign, he learned the message. Why did he print it, frame it, and put it on his desk?

¹ The legendary Rabbi Dov Yonah Korn. G-d bless him!
That’s right, because what he learned can get buried in the back of his mind by all the new things he is learning, by all the new experiences he is experiencing.

By having it on his desk, in his face, it is a daily reminder of this message. It makes it real to his life.

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Jacob was a wise man. He knew that in the darkness of exile, the Jewish people would need something tangible to hold on to. Something clearly visible as a reminder that they were not doomed to slavery. That they were a people with a glorious destiny. That they would one day build G-d a home. That they would one day return to their homeland, Israel.

So Jacob took trees from the people’s homeland and planted them for the purpose of that future, for that eventual divine home. Every time Jews walked by these forests, they remembered that there was a future in which they would return to their homeland. They remembered that they would build G-d a home².

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College can be hard on our Judaism. Often when it comes to Jewish practices, students tell me, “I used to do this Jewish practice or that one... But since I came to school, I stopped. It’s too hard, it’s not available here, I don't have time anymore, etc.”

It is important to plant Jewish reminders in your room. A pushkah-charity box, a mezuzah, or a holy book—a siddur or Chumash—on your night table or desk. This way, regardless of the cloud of work hovering above your head, or the fog from parties and other pastimes, as soon as you enter your room you will see a tangible reminder of your Jewishness. A reminder that you belong to a holy nation and have a mission to make your surroundings, and the world, holy.

(After Shabbat, take a picture of a Jewish item in your room, and post it on the Chabad FB page).

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In our long and sometimes very dark exile, G-d did the same³.

In the Shema, it says when you will be exiled, you shall wear Tefillin. Tefillin is like the wedding ring that reminds us we are not alone; we are in a relationship with G-d. We are not a persecuted people; we are a holy nation.

Similarly, the Midrash states us that G-d tells the Jewish people, “If you kindle the lights of Shabbat, I will show you the lights of Zion”. When we light Shabbat candles, we remember that this light helps usher in the light of Moshiach and redemption from our dark exile.

Our destiny is not dark. We are light. And we will yet see beautiful light. We will see the light of our homeland, and the light of God’s home.

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² Based on Likkutei Sichos Chelek 1, Pages 146-147

³ I would recommend choosing only one of the two last segments as your ending (either about having something Jewish in their room, or about Tefillin and Shabbat candles).
Make an effort to put on Tefillin (guys), light Shabbat candles (girls), so you will be reminded of this reality very often, in very real ways.

DO ONE THING EVERY DAY THAT SCARES YOU.