

For it will not be forgotten from the mouth of its children. (31:21)

What is the secret of our continued survival? It is not as if we have acted perfectly as children of Hashem. Yet, we continue to survive, to endure the vicissitudes of life, until that day when we have completed our mission. Regardless how distant we have allowed ourselves to move away, how far we have fallen, how low we have sunken as a result of our collective sins, we still have one redeeming value, one merit, one blessing that accompanies us through the abyss of darkness that resonates through our life: the Torah. As soon as we return to the Torah, we are back home.

What if we have turned our backs on the Torah? It has happened. The secular streams have already denied the Divine Authorship of the Torah. Others have completely extirpated the Torah from their lives. It is not germane. The “progressive,” forward-thinking, Jew is held back by its archaic laws and beliefs. At the end of the eighteenth century, Germany was gravitating towards the tenets of the *Haskalah*, Enlightenment. Much of the Jewish population had already abrogated their relationship with Hashem. This was the religious scene that confronted *Horav S. R. Hirsch, zl*, when he established his nascent *kehillah*, community, in Frankfurt. He countered that, even if the Jewish People reneged the Torah, they would still have the *shiras haTorah*, song of the Torah, the word of Hashem that attests to our nation’s calling and Divine mission. The song of the Torah is its inner spirit, the Divine spark which is inextinguishable. It is the song that connects to the Divine spark within each and every Jew that will turn him back to the Torah, thus enabling him to receive its inspiration and enthusiastically carry out its tenets.

This Divine spark will keep awake the vital spirit that will not allow our nation to die. It will keep it strong, so that we do not falter in the face of oppression from without, and we allow for it to maintain a clarity of vision when the challenges come from within. The promise of *ki lo sishochach mipi zaro* guarantees that our nation will never entirely forfeit its calling, never totally forget its mission, so that it will endure until the end of time. There will always be a spiritual principle, which is protected by Hashem Himself, through which – again and again – we will be able to achieve spiritual revival.

After all is said and done, this is a difficult concept to acknowledge. Likewise, we find the *pasuk* in *Parashas Balak, Lo hibit aven b’Yaakov v’lo raah amal b’Yisrael*, “He perceived no iniquity in Yaakov, and He has seen no perversity in Yisrael” (*Bereishis* 23:21). How do we understand this, given that we have coreligionists who have fallen into the abyss of sin and perversity to the point that it is hard to believe that there is anything about them that is “Jewish”?

Or HaChaim Hakadosh explains that the sin which we see may, indeed, taint the external fabric of the *neshamah*, soul, thereby distancing the Jew from Hashem, but, at its very core, the nucleus of the *neshamah*, the *Pintele Yid*, there is a spark that cannot be smothered. We see the *shmutz*, spiritual dross, but a holy person whose perspective is not sullied with the physical sees

beyond and within. **Shem MiShmuel** explains that this is why Yitzchak *Avinu* embraced Eisav *ha'rasha*, whose iniquity was the source of evil which continues to plague us to this very day. Yitzchak saw only *neshamah*, soul, and, as such, he was able to delve beyond the iniquitous Eisav to see a holy *neshamah* which produced the many *geirei tzedek*, righteous converts, who have enhanced our nation.

While this sounds great on paper, and we have all been privy to instances of individuals whose religious observance was long ago at odds with Orthodoxy; yet, they came back – slowly at first, but, eventually, they returned. Spontaneity, however, whereby a *rasha meirushah*, one who is so devoid of *Yiddishkeit* that his self-loathing has translated itself into an animus for his own people which parallels – and often supersedes – the most depraved anti-Semite, who suddenly, in the spur of a moment, acts extemporaneously, such that the covert Jewish spark is revealed in all its brilliance – that is not common. I found such an incident, however, a story cited from Yaffa Eliach's, *Chassidic Tales of the Holocaust*, which demonstrates this phenomenon.

It was shortly before *Yom Kippur* in the Janowska Concentration Camp, where the **Bluzhever Rebbe, zl**, and a group of staunch *chassidim* were under the immediate control of a notorious Jew, Schneeweiss, a cruel and flagrant Torah violator, who took special pleasure in persecuting his coreligionists. The Nazis took perverse pleasure in terrorizing the Jews, and even inflicting death, especially during the holiday season, since this had a powerful effect on breaking their spirit. These *chassidim* were acutely aware that every day could be their last, and that the upcoming *Yom Kippur* would probably be their final one on this world. They went over to the *Rebbe* and asked him to implore Schneeweiss that he and his group of *chassidim* not be relegated to carry out any of the thirty-nine *avos melachah*, primary categories of labor, which are prohibited on *Shabbos*. This way, their transgression of the law on *Yom Kippur* would not be major.

The *Rebbe* was impressed with their request. Their request was a double hurdle for him. As long as the Nazis were not aware of his noble lineage, he had a chance of remaining among the living. They took a particular pleasure in killing the Jewish leaders. Furthermore, he knew quite well that Schneeweiss had nothing but contempt for Jewish tradition. The *Rebbe* decided to take his chances.

“You probably remember me. I am the *Rav* of Pruchnik, Rabbi Israel Spira.” Schneeweiss did not respond. “You are a Jew like myself,” the rabbi continued. “Tonight is *Kol Nidrei* night. There is a small group of young Jews who do not want to transgress any of the thirty-nine main categories of labor. It means everything to them. It is the essence of their existence. Can you do something about it? Can you help?”

The rabbi noticed that a hidden shiver went through Schneeweiss as he listened to the rabbi's strange request. The rabbi took Schneeweiss's hand and said, “I promise you, as long as you live, it will be a good life. I beg you to do it for us, so that we may still find some dignity in our humiliating existence.” The stern face of Schneeweiss changed. For the first time since his arrival at

Janowska, there was a human spark in it.

“There is nothing that I can do tonight,” Schneeweiss said. These were the first words he had uttered since the *Rebbe* had come to him. “I have no jurisdiction over the night brigade, but tomorrow, on *Yom Kippur*, I will do for you whatever I can.” The *Rebbe* shook Schneeweiss’s hand in gratitude and left.

That night, they were taken to work near the Lvov cemetery. To this very day, the *Rebbe* has scars from the beatings of that night. The next day he (Schneeweiss) took them to the S.S. Quarters in the camp, to a large wooden house: “You fellows will shine the floor without any polish or wax. And you, Rabbi, will clean the windows with dry rags so that you will not transgress any of the thirty-nine major categories of work.” He left the room abruptly without saying another word.

The *Rebbe* was standing on a ladder with rags in his hand, cleaning the huge windows while chanting prayers, and his companions were on the floor polishing the wood and praying with him. “The floor was wet with our tears. You can imagine the prayers of that *Yom Kippur*,” said the *Rebbe* to the *chassidim* who were listening to his tale while he was wiping away a tear.

At about twelve o’clock noon, the door opened wide, and into the room stormed two angels of death, S. S. men in their black uniforms. They were followed by a food cart filled to capacity. “Noontime, time to eat bread, soup and meat,” announced one of the two S. S. men. The room was filled with an aroma of freshly cooked food, such food as they had not seen since the German occupation: white bread, steaming hot vegetable soup, and huge portions of meat.

The tall S. S. man commanded in a high-pitched voice, “You must eat immediately; otherwise, you will be shot on the spot!” None of them moved. The rabbi remained on the ladder, the *chassidim* on the floor. The German repeated the orders. The *Rebbe* and the *chassidim* remained glued to their places. The S. S. men called to Schneeweiss. “Schneeweiss, if the dirty dogs refuse to eat, I will kill you along with them.” Schneeweiss pulled himself to attention, looked the German directly in the eyes, and said in very quiet tone, “We Jews do not eat today. Today is *Yom Kippur*, our most holy day, the Day of Atonement.”

“You do not understand, Jewish dog,” roared the taller of the two.

“I command you in the name of the Fuhrer and the Third Reich, *fress!*”

Schneeweiss composed himself, held his head high, and repeated the same answer: “We Jews obey the law of our tradition. Today is *Yom Kippur*, a day of fasting.”

The German took out his revolver from its holster and pointed it at Schneeweiss’s temple. Schneeweiss remained calm. He stood still, at attention, his head high. A shot pierced through the room. Schneeweiss fell.

The *Rebbe* and the *chassidim* stood as if frozen in their places.

They could not believe what their eyes had just witnessed. Schneeweiss, the man who in the past had publicly flaunted his transgressions, had just sanctified Hashem's Name and died a martyr's death for the sake of Jewish honor. "Only then, on that *Yom Kippur* day in Janowska," said the *Rebbe* to his *chassidim*, "did I understand the meaning of the statement in the *Talmud*: 'Even the transgressors in Israel are as full of good deeds as a pomegranate is filled with seeds' (*Berachos* 57a)."

This man became a *baal teshuvah* of sorts for the best reason: he felt his kinship with the Jewish People, with Hashem. He was inwardly motivated. We do not know what impelled him to act so long in flagrant violation of tradition, but, apparently, the real *Pintele Yid*, the spark of Hashem which is in all of us, finally came to the fore. We might ask ourselves: How often do we ignore the potential of greatness in others and in ourselves. We are only as limited as our perceptions.