

## You stretched out Your right hand – the earth swallowed them. (15:12)

*Rashi* explains this *pasuk* as sort of a reward for the Egyptians, because they had acknowledged Hashem's justice, when (ibid 9:27) they proclaimed, *Hashem HaTzaddik*, "Hashem is righteous." He showed His infinite mercy by allowing them to be buried following their ordeal. This is the meaning of, *tivlaeimo aretz*, "The earth swallowed them up." A powerful lesson may be derived from here. Regardless of who a person is, his previous negative actions notwithstanding, when he acts appropriately, when he performs a positive act that either serves as a vehicle for glorifying Hashem or assisting a (fellow) Jew – he will be rewarded commensurate with his current actions.

We see that Hashem rewarded the Egyptians with a proper burial, despite their nefarious past. Once they declared, *Hashem HaTzaddik*, they glorified His Name. For this, they were rewarded. Interestingly, they did not do much. They reacted to the wondrous miracles that were shaking up their country. Such a reaction was, for the most part, inevitable. Yet, Hashem rewarded them, because every good deed deserves to be rewarded.

We observe also that one never knows the effect of a positive action. They said only two words, but these two words had a positive cosmic effect, which was reciprocated with an incredible reward for a people whose negative actions had been beyond contempt. Hashem looks at the benefit engendered by a person's action. If it has had a positive effect on someone else's life, it will certainly generate great reward. The following episode, related by Rabbi Berel Wein and quoted by *Horav Moshe Toledano, zl*, is a classic example of this concept.

Rabbi Wein had occasion to *daven* in a large *shul* in Yerushalayim in which the worshippers sat by tables one facing another, rather than on rows of benches (back to back). Thus, when one faced the fellow opposite him, he would get a very clear view of his face. At the beginning of *davening*, a tall man with blonde hair walked in with his three sons, who were also blonde. They all had blue eyes. Rabbi Wein could not help but notice their Aryan looks. While he was used to seeing people from diverse and somewhat "not-mainstream" backgrounds, he was not accustomed to seeing an Aryan countenance in *Eretz Yisrael*.

It was not simply their unusual appearance (unusual to meet them in a *shul*), it was the way in which they *davened*. They prayed with amazing intensity and unusual fervor. The children acted with impeccable manners, taking every word of the prayer service seriously. Rabbi Wein was sufficiently impressed, to the point that he asked his friend about this family. His friend replied that the father was a microbiology professor at Hebrew University. His life story was truly unique, but if Rabbi Wein wanted to hear, who better than the man himself to relate his background.

Rabbi Wein agreed, and his friend called out, "Avraham, I would like to introduce you to Rabbi Berel Wein. He would love to hear your life story."

“Sure, I would be happy to tell you about my background. I am sure it is quite different than anything that you have ever heard before. I was born and raised in Germany; hence my Aryan features. My father was a captain in the dread S.S. They were the worst of the worst. It was their function to exterminate the Jews. He served ‘with distinction’ throughout the entire war and somehow managed to elude discovery. His sins were reprehensible, but, like so many others, he avoided detection until sometime after the war. My father was finally apprehended, judged and sentenced to only ten years in prison. Apparently, due to his already advanced age, any sentence more than ten years would have been considered a life sentence. In the end, he served only four and a half years.

“My father never spoke about his past. I knew nothing about his evil past and how he spent his war years. I knew that he was a decorated soldier, but was totally ignorant concerning for what it was that he had been decorated. During the trial, the newspapers maintained a running account of his life story. You cannot imagine the shock, hurt and shame that enveloped me when I read what kind of fiend my father was. When the family visited him in prison, he refused to see me. He was ashamed, and he did not want his precious son to see him in a prison uniform. The one good thing that resulted from the ordeal was that – after much study – I realized how cruel the Nazis had been.

“I was now very troubled. If my father had risen to such a lofty position in the hierarchy of the S.S., perhaps I, too, carry that murderous gene within me. Would I, too, become a murderer? Would I view anyone who was not Aryan as a parasite worthy of being stomped to death? I felt the need to study the Nazi mindset, the psyche of a cultured nation that overnight threw away their morals and future to become murderous beasts of the lowest order. I decided to go to Israel to study the people, to get to know them, to discover what it was about this peace-loving nation that invoked so much gentile hatred.

“I began to study Judaism, its laws, philosophy and culture. I was so impressed that I fell in love with the religion, and I decided to remain in *Eretz Yisrael*. I applied for citizenship. After two years of intense study of Judaism, I was determined to become a *ger*, to convert to the religion which I had come to love so much. A number of years after I converted, I received my doctorate in microbiology. The next step was to find an appropriate wife whose ideals coincided with mine. I was blessed to meet a wonderful woman who also hailed from Germany, closer to Alsace Lorraine. Like me, she is a *giyores*, convert, whose love of Judaism parallels mine.

“I am certain that a psychologist would posit that my entire transformation from a German youth, son of a Gestapo officer, was a response to my overwhelming guilt. It is not true. I view my conversion as part of my destiny, as a milestone along my journey to become a devout member of *Klal Yisrael*. We neither speak – nor think – of our roots. As far as we are concerned, we are a devout, committed Jewish family.

“One year ago, I received a message from Germany that my father, who was already ninety years old, was ailing. The end appeared to be near. My wife felt that this would be an appropriate time to

return to Germany and make amends. At first, my response was negative. I feared returning to the country that I had begun to revile so vehemently. Why would I want to return to the country that was responsible for the wholesale murder of six million of my co-religionists? After a while, I realized that I had nothing to fear. I was no longer a part of that world. I was now a member of *Klal Yisrael*.

“I took a one-year sabbatical from the university, and, together with my family, flew to Germany. We traveled to Darmstadt, my hometown, to the nursing home where my father was now a patient. It was an image to remember: a Jewish father and mother together with their three sons, the boys bedecked in conservative clothes, long *payos* and large velvet *yarmulkes*. Obviously, the blond hair and blue eyes were dead giveaways. Indeed, as we walked through the nursing home, through this bastion of German culture, we stood out – with pride and dignity.

“When my father first saw us, he looked away. He could not bring himself to embrace or kiss any of his grandsons – or his son, for that matter. Something was bothering me. My father lived a very evil life; yet, he lived to be over ninety years old, a very ripe old age, even by contemporary standards. He merited to see three grandsons who became *bnei Torah*, fully committed Jews, a *nachas* to their parents and community. How did he merit such good fortune?

“I explained to my father that, as Jews, we believe that nothing just happens without rhyme or reason. Everything comes from the Almighty for a specific reason. Therefore, if you merited long life and such grandchildren, you must have done something special during your life to have warranted such reward.

“My father slowly replied, ‘I cannot think of anything that I did in my life that might be considered of a positive nature. I was no different than most of my compatriots. We thought we were the best, the Aryan race, and everyone else was a parasite not worthy of living. Perhaps, however, there was one thing that I did which might be worthy of consideration. We were in Frankfurt rounding up Jews, when I had the singular opportunity to spare three little Jewish children who were hiding in a Catholic orphanage. For some reason which, until today, I did not understand, I allowed them to escape. I have no idea whatever happened to them, whether they survived the war or not. I just know that I let them live’.

“I thought a moment about my father’s ‘good deed’ and I said, ‘You know, had you saved four children, quite possibly you would have had four grandchildren sitting here today.’”

The story is intriguing. Imagine the seed of an accursed Nazi converting to *Yiddishkeit*, who today is a devout contributing member of his community. His children – like the man and his wife– are deeply committed Jews, whose life revolves around Torah, *avodah*, *mitzvos* and good deeds. Why? Because the grandfather, a man who was a member of the most cruel, despotic collection of human refuse – a Nazi who murdered Jews – saved three children. He merited to have three vibrant, staunchly observant, Jewish grandchildren.

One never knows how much he achieves with every single positive endeavor: a visit to the hospital to encourage someone; giving assistance to the elderly – not only by helping them up the stairs, but by asking them about their lives, learning with them, making them feel relevant. We conjure up every excuse known to mankind just to get out of doing the little things that are not always so *geshmak*, pleasant, and do not garner much attention for us. Hashem does not view them as little, because those who are affected by them do not consider them to be little. Indeed, those “little things” can be life-altering.