

Do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make a great nation of you there. (46:3)

Yaakov *Avinu* needed reassurance. He was prepared for the worst, as he had already experienced so much hardship. It is no wonder, therefore, that when he was confronted with the beginning of what was to be *galus Mitzrayim*, the Egyptian exile, he was afraid. The Patriarch, however, did not fear for himself. His commitment and devotion to Hashem was unwavering. He feared for his children, his descendants who would be born into Egypt's depraved culture. How were they going to be able to withstand the onslaught of evil and licentiousness, as they confronted an environment permeated with spiritual defilement? He also saw the pain that his descendants would endure, the physical and emotional hardship that characterize exile. Hashem told Yaakov not to worry. In Egypt, he would become a great nation. While this is a wonderful blessing, did it ease the pain? A larger nation means that a greater multitude of Jews would suffer the angst of the exile. How was this supposed to calm Yaakov's fears?

Sforno explains that it was specifically in Egypt, as a result of the terrible exile, that Yaakov could be assured of his people's spiritual survival. In Egypt, they would be reviled, considered an anathema, to be tormented and degraded to the parasitic level, but hate is good! It keeps us away from the "others." Hatred protects us from intermarriage, guards us from getting too close and from learning to accept their culture as a way of life. Hatred creates boundaries. That is a good thing. Only in the Egyptian exile did *Klal Yisrael* have a chance for spiritual continuity and advancement. In Canaan, they were accepted. Their Canaanite neighbors were their friends – or, at least, they put on a good show. They would visit, have a barbecue, go to the ballgame – and then the intermingling would proceed from the innocuous to the serious. Acceptance leads to friendship, with friendship leading to the ultimate tragedy.

When *Klal Yisrael* loses their unique identity, when they begin to look, act, and speak like their gentile neighbors, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to achieve their spiritual goals. Isolation guarantees that we, as Jews, will be spared the indignity of being accepted as one of them. It is about time that we stopped apologizing for our uniqueness. Jewishness is not an accident of birth. Our Jewishness is an inherent gift of Heavenly design. Regrettably, some of our co-religionists do not see it this way. Unless the gentile accepts them as one of them, they feel they have failed in their mission of *tikun olam*. This is why they bend over backwards to expunge any vestige of distinction and uniqueness that individuates the Jewish nation, and them as Jews. They want to be friends with the gentiles, be accepted by them, even marry them. After all, the exile is over.

It is this pin-headed line of thinking that just about destroyed German Jewry in the nineteenth century and is continuing to do so today. We are a spiritual people, as well as a physical one. If there is no spirituality left, if the Jew has assimilated himself into the immoral culture that prevails in contemporary society, what is really left of him as a Jew? I have often asked this question of wonderful, well-meaning Jews who have assimilated: "Exactly what is there about your lifestyle

that denotes your Jewishness?” Sadly, the answers are often the same, and they do not reflect any practice that is intrinsically Jewish.

Horav Moshe Shternbuch, Shlita, posits that anti-Semitism has kept *Am Yisrael*, the Jewish People, alive throughout the millennia. The murder, the libels – products of virulent hate, which led to devastating pogroms – were actually the force that stood behind us. It stood firm as an impenetrable barrier against assimilation. It kept us away from them. In a world of relative freedom for a Jew – and an eagerness to socialize and be accepted – intermarriage and spiritual extinction are not far off. Sadly, we are not winning the battle. When the Jewish nation realizes its greatness, its unique pedigree and special favor in the eyes of Hashem, we will develop the sense of pride essential for overcoming the depression that is fundamental to *galus*.

I taught a class today to a group of unaffiliated Jews. Some remembered their Orthodox *zaides*, others even spoke of their Torah-observant parents. After all is said and done, however, they had chosen a different path of life. Their children, regrettably, had no choice. I will not even talk about their grandchildren. I must emphasize that these are wonderful people who somehow, somewhere, veered from their heritage – and now it is too late. Perhaps not for them, but for their descendants. Let me take that back. It is never too late. It just becomes more difficult. As long as the spark is there, as long as there is an affiliation, a sense of pride – there is hope.

Perhaps it was *bashert*, or it was the emotion that still lingered when I came home, but when I turned to my bookcase to search for a *sefer*, my eyes fell on Rabbi Yisroel Besser's tribute to **Horav Shlomo Freifeld, zl**. He was a towering individual whose love for each and every Jew was only superseded by his love for *Yiddishkeit*. It is no wonder that he was one of the founders of the *baal teshuvah*, penitent, movement. He reached out to Jews of all stripes, backgrounds and persuasions. He did not care from where one came. His concern was for where he was going. Let me share a few vignettes about the man who is referred to as *Rebbi* by his many students.

When a person is called up to the Torah, he recites the blessing, *Asher bachar banu mikol ha'amim*, “Who has chosen us from among all the nations,” and concludes, *v'nasan lanu es Toraso*, “and He gave us His Torah.” The first part of the blessing concerns our being Jews: we acknowledge and thank Hashem for choosing us. The second part of the blessing expresses our gratitude to the Almighty for giving us His Torah.

In his *drasha*, lecture, *Rav Freifeld* observed that in the early part of the twentieth century, the *nisayon*, challenge, was concerning the second part of the blessing. In those days, every Jew – man, woman and child – was acutely aware of his pedigree, his Jewishness. He was infused with a sense of pride concerning his Jewish identity. His battle, instead, was pertaining to his ability to perform *mitzvos*. It was simply just too difficult. *Shabbos* was a tremendous hardship. Kosher was extremely difficult. Once these two primary *mitzvos* were not observed, the rest soon followed suit.

“Today,” the *Rosh Yeshivah* continued, “there is no longer a struggle to keep *mitzvos*. Kosher is

readily available at an acceptable price, and *Shabbos* is no longer something about which the non-Jewish world is ignorant. Our battle has shifted to the first part – the challenge to be a Jew.” We lack the pride of being part of the Chosen People. Indeed, some of our co-religionists even feel the need to apologize for being Jewish.

Judaism must permeate one’s entire being to the point that it is reflected externally in his every nuance. *Rav Freifeld* would often relate the story of a journalist named Dorothy Thompson, who had been sent by her newspaper to cover the first Zionist convention held in Basel, Switzerland. She had spent a few days at the conference, moving among the delegates and getting a feel for their positions and world perspectives. She then decided that she wanted to attend the historic *Kenessia Gedolah* in Katowitz, Poland. She dressed up as a man and snuck into the great hall. She later wrote of the disparity between the two gatherings: “In Basel, I saw the Jewish intellect. In Katowitz, I saw the Jewish G-d.”

I conclude with the *Rosh Yeshivah*’s practical appreciation of a well-known *Midrash*. *Chazal* point out that an ant manifests two noteworthy characteristics: It is very industrious, constantly working, preparing and storing food for “later.” It works so incessantly that it stores much food for a long period of time. This is really unnecessary, since the lifespan of an ant is only six months. The other admirable trait is that the ant will not take anything that does not belong to it. *Rav Shlomo* explained that these dual characteristics are actually one and the same: “Only someone who does not look elsewhere truly realizes that all the *chiyus*, sustenance, that he will ever need is right here.” He then continued, “*Rabbosai*, everything that we need is already within us. We need not look elsewhere.”

How true is that statement. The Jew who is insecure feels that “others” have more to offer than his own *Yiddishkeit*. For some, it takes going out there, seeking and exploring, only to discover that it is all a sham. We have it; they do not. These individuals will, hopefully, return. Regrettably, there are those who are so stubborn that they would rather continue living a fool’s life filled with hypocrisy and self-deceit than be *modeh al ha’emes*, concede the truth, that they have erred, they were wrong. We can only hope that they, too, will one day develop the courage to return and stand proud in support of Hashem and His Torah.