

## **In this wilderness shall your carcasses drop. (14:29)**

Ever since that first *Tishah B'Av*, when the *meraglim*, spies, returned with their slanderous report of *Eretz Yisrael*, *Tishah B'Av* became a sad, fateful night for the male members of *Klal Yisrael*. The decree had been issued that they would not enter into the Promised Land. The wilderness would become their graveyard. Every *Tishah B'Av* every (eligible) Jew dug a grave for himself, lay down in it and prayed. Would he wake up in the morning, or would this be his last night on earth? Every year, fifteen thousand men did not wake up. Whoever did not arise in the morning, *yoshev b'seiser elyon* (the chapter recited at a funeral when the deceased is being taken on his final journey to his grave) was recited next to his grave and then he was covered. (I have always felt that a lesson may be derived from this sort of morbid self-burial. One who slanders – ultimately buries himself.)

This scenario continued on every *Tishah B'Av* until the final year, when the last group of fifteen thousand Jews laid themselves to rest. An astonishing thing took place on the next day: nothing happened. They were all alive! This must be some mistake, they thought. So, the next night, they repeated the procedure – and the next – and the next – until the fifteenth of *Av*, when they realized that Hashem must have rescinded the decree. Why? What was different during the last year that had allowed these Jews to live?

*Horav Chaim Tzarkovsky* (cited by *Horav Shlomo Levinstein*) explains that it was their *davening*, praying, that made the difference. It is not as if the previous groups did not pray to live. They certainly prayed, but theirs were not prayers that emanated from the deepest recesses of their hearts, because they all knew that their death was not a sure thing. Only fifteen thousand would die. Who said they were to be among the unlucky ones? When the last year arrived, the men knew this was it. There were no others. It was them – or nothing. Thus, their prayers were powerful. They knew that, unless Hashem listened to their prayers, they would die. The fear and trepidation that accompanied their prayers were unlike anything heretofore experienced by any members of the Jewish People. They all thought death was not inevitable. They had an option; they had hope. The last group had exhausted all options and all hope. Prayer was their only option.

Indeed, prayer is (always) our only option. If we would always *daven* the way we do when we are up against a wall with no options, our prayer would achieve greater efficacy. Anyone who has ever had his options taken away and is suddenly compelled to realize that there is only one way out – (and it is not pleasant) either gives up hope or, if he is a believer, prays like he has never prayed before. This is the definition of *avodas ha'tefillah*, praying as if no other options exist.