

He said to the people, “Behold! The people, Bnei Yisrael are more numerous and stronger than we. (1:9)

Wherein lies our strength? What are the characteristics of Judaism and its people that catalyzed fear in Pharaoh? We are: united with Hashem; united with family; united in ourselves; secure in our beliefs and in our distinctiveness. When Haman sought to eradicate the Jews of Persia, he told Achashveirosh, *V'daseihem shonos mikol am*; ‘Their laws are different from every other people’ (*Megillas Esther* 3:8). *Horav Bunim, zl, m’Peshicha* interprets this to mean: “Their ‘law’ is to be different/to be distinct from all peoples.” Our distinctiveness is what has preserved us as Jews throughout the millennia. Those who assimilated did not fare well – neither spiritually nor physically.

In *Sefer Devarim* 26:5, the Torah describes the Jewish people in Egypt as “a nation – great, strong and numerous.” The *Pesikta (Devarim 46a)* adds *Melamed*, this teaches, “*She’hayu Yisrael metzuyanim sham*; the Jews were distinct there.” How did they stand out? The Jews were distinct from the Egyptians in their clothing, food and language. Other commentators add that they also maintained their Jewish names. The only way to survive in an (spiritually) alien culture is to remain alien! The secret of the spiritual survival of our ancestors was their distinctiveness. They maintained their qualitative greatness by preserving the quality of their spiritual attachment to their tradition. They distinguished themselves from the Egyptians in the areas most often given to assimilation: language; name; clothing and food. We could not “go out” with them. We looked different and spoke differently and had different names. All total – we were different. Thus, they wanted nothing to do with us. As long as we retain our “foreign” status, we preserve our spiritual and moral superiority.

Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, relates the story of his 95-year-old Jewish neighbor, who, whenever he found the *Rav* at home, would approach him and say, “You should know that during the Holocaust, there were many Jews like you with beards, *payos*, and dressed in Jewish garb. The Nazis forced them to wear a Jewish star on their clothing – and then they slaughtered them!” The man was filled with questions, primarily: Why specifically were the Jews forced to wear the yellow star which brought about a clear demarcation between Jew and gentile? After a while, the *Rav* shared the following story with the unfortunate Jew:

In the *Sefer Meshivas Nefesh, Horav Yochanan Luria, zl* (who was one of the *Chachmei Ashkenaz*, circa 17th century), relates that at that time, the government also decreed that the Jewish population wear a yellow star, in order to call attention to them. The purpose was to deride and humiliate the Jew, making him the laughing-stock of the country. He wrote, “When I was commanded by the local officer in Strasbourg to wear the yellow star, the local priest (who had respect for the *Rav*) asked me what this symbol on my garment represents. I was afraid to tell the truth: that the local officer who sought to humiliate me was behind this. If the officer would discover that I had reported him, I would be punished. Worse, the entire Jewish community would become victim to his anger. I therefore replied, ‘I do not know why. It is the decree of the king.’”

“The priest, however, was no fool. The priest said, ‘You might not know, but I know the reason that there is such a decree against the Jews. Hashem chose you from among all of the other nations, because He wanted you to distinguish yourselves. He gave you specific *mitzvos* which would safeguard and underscore your distinctiveness. Such *mitzvos* as *Bris Milah*, *Tzitzis*, *Tefillin*, and *Mezuzah* serve as clear signs that you are different – that you are clearly a member of the Jewish religion.

“Hashem did this so that, when a gentile meets a Jew and sees him wearing *Tzitzis*, he will inquire. The Jew will respond that *Tzitzis* are to serve as a reminder of Hashem’s *mitzvos*. Since the Jew is so embarrassed to be different that he shuns these *mitzvos*, Your G-d declared that you wear a Jewish star – for no rhyme or reason. It is a sign that fools and simpletons wear on their clothing, so that everyone will know that they are fools!”

Rav Zilberstein now turned to the elderly Jew and said, “The answer to all of your questions can be found in the words of the priest, ‘Do not blame the Torah observant crowd for the yellow star.’ We are proud of our distinction. We wear *Tzitzis* with pride. Judaism is our greatest source of pride. Blame, instead, those who have distanced themselves from Hashem and His Torah. They have caused the gentiles to separate us from them.”

Being distinct is a badge of honor – not shame.