

The prison warden did not scrutinize anything that was in his charge inasmuch as Hashem was with him. (39:23)

Prison is not a happy place. It is usually reserved for the dregs of society. Many are there because they were unable to defend themselves against the prevailing circumstantial evidence. Others just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yosef was accused of a crime which he did not commit, but, in Egypt, as in most countries, this does not prevent the ruling class from disposing one into a system where he is lost – often forever. Yosef was admired and revered by the warden, as well as by the prisoners. They saw that something was special about him. Hashem was with him; thus, Yosef succeeded at whatever task he undertook. All of this was the result of the Egyptians' recognition that Yosef was not alone.

Horav Shlomo Wolbe, zl, makes an insightful observation from this statement. It is possible for Hashem to be with a person even when that person finds himself in an environment that is non-conducive to spiritual refinement and growth. Even if one finds himself in an environment that is secular in nature, antagonistic to religious belief or hedonistic in action, he must never forget that he is never alone. Yes – even within the confines of spiritual filth in which he finds himself, Hashem is present with him. Yosef was a slave in a forlorn dungeon, surrounded by Egypt's lowest of the low, pagans who had descended to the depths of immorality, who had fallen to the nadir of depravity; yet, the Torah informs us that Hashem was with him.

Thus, says the *Mashgiach*, one can seek excuses to justify slacking off in his commitment to Torah and *mitzvos*. He cannot say, "Well, I am alone; Hashem has forsaken me." This is not true; Hashem can be found anywhere.

"Where is G-d found?" asked *Horav Menachem Mendel, zl, m'Kotzk*. His reply is classic: "Wherever He is given entry!" The *Berditchever, zl*, was wont to say, "One can say he is for Hashem; one can say he is not for Hashem; but one can never say that he is without Hashem!" Hashem never forsakes us. He is right there, waiting to be invited in. How does Hashem enter? Through *emunah*, faith. When we believe in Hashem, we have already allowed Him into our lives.

Rav Wolbe states (*Ali Shur*), "*Emunah* is a reality; it is not a concept." When we were kids we all sang the popular song, "Hashem is here, Hashem is there; Hashem is truly everywhere." We must take the juvenile entrancement of Hashem is here and transform it into the mature reality of *emunah*, of believing that Hashem is here. Sadly, many sang this wonderful melody as children, but – with regard to the reality of the words – remained mere children!

Emunah is not blind faith. It is reality. It is clarity. It is feeling. A living connection exists between us and Hashem. The *maamin*, believer, firmly believes unequivocally that Hashem is here, there and everywhere. To him, *emunah* is palpable, but, as the *Kotzker* said, we must allow Him in. If we do not "see" Him, we can hardly invite Him into our lives. The individual who is afflicted with spiritual

blindness, or even weakened by spiritual myopia, does not see Hashem. If he does not see Him in every place, he will sadly not see him in any place.

Rav Wolbe once attended a seminar in Sweden. During the lecture, the speaker mentioned that “the very atmosphere of Sweden is *treif* (*unkosher*, unholy).” Rav Wolbe took umbrage with this statement and wanted to vehemently protest, because it implied that Hashem was not in Sweden! How can one make such a pejorative statement? *Melo kol haaretz Kevodo*, “His glory fills the entire world” (*Yeshayah* 6:3). Hashem can be found in the most far-flung, desolate places. Our problem is that we do not look for Him. If we make the effort, we will see Him beyond a shadow of a doubt – everywhere.

The surroundings in which we find ourselves do not always support our service to Hashem. In the course of our daily endeavor, either in the pursuit of our daily bread or in the spiritual work that we do, we might find ourselves in areas that are quite distant from the spiritual utopia in which many of us had the good fortune to grow up. Does that mean that we are alone, that Hashem is not with us at every step? No! We are never alone. We just have to open our eyes and see how everything around us “seems” to be working with us. If we believe, we will see. Without *emunah*, we have no eyesight.

We must remember that life will not always be a rose garden. As we encounter life’s ups and downs, we will confront challenges and difficulties – some that have the ability to leave us shattered, but, through the spectrum of *emunah* vision, we are enabled a path through the obstacles, a path called hope. Even then, when our vision lights up the path of hope, we might stumble, so we stretch out our hand and place it in the hands of the Almighty, Who will either walk us through, or, in some cases, even carry us.

The following vignette is a story related by Rabbi Fishel Shachter. I use it because it represents everyone’s story. I, too, was born to Holocaust survivors who saw it all – yet survived, their *emunah* intact. I write this today on the 75th *yahrzeit* of my three sisters who perished in the Warsaw Ghetto on *Tishrei* 13, 1942. *Hashem yinkom damam*.

A female Holocaust survivor had been married for twelve years without being blessed with children. One day, she sat in the Madison Avenue (Manhattan) office of a distinguished gynecologist and heard the following: “Madame, I implore you to listen to me, since what I am saying is for your own benefit. Medically speaking, there is nothing that we can do for you. Hair will sooner grow on my palm than you will conceive.” The woman listened to the devastating news, bid the doctor good-by and left. She boarded the Madison Avenue bus. She sat there lost in thought, feeling sorry for herself, her life flashing before her.

She had experienced the terrible horrors of the Holocaust. Her family had a trap door beneath their dining room table, which they would use to access their hiding place, climbing down to the basement to evade the accursed Nazis. Her job (for which she volunteered) was to smooth over

the small rug that covered the trap door. She would then hide beneath some furniture, hold her breath, and pray that her presence would not be detected. The family descended the steps to the basement. She closed the trap door, smoothed over the carpet, then curled up as much as possible, and hid under some furniture. Time and again, the family was saved as a result of her courage. Finally, however, the Nazis noticed a soft spot beneath the carpeting, and they discovered the trap door. She remained hidden. Her family – everyone – did not fare as well. They were all dragged away and sent to Auschwitz. None survived the war.

She arrived in America with hope to rebuild her life, raise a family and somehow repair some of the loss of her family. Now, however, these hopes had all been shattered. She sat on the bus, not getting off at her usual stop because she felt she had nothing, no reason to get off: “I have nothing for which to live.” The driver felt bad, but it was the end of the line. He had put in a long, hard day. “Lady, I’m sorry that you are unhappy, but I have to go home and eat supper. Have a life – somewhere else” were his parting words.

She got off the bus and raised her eyes Heavenward: “*Ribbono shel olam!* You saved my life countless times. You must have had a reason for keeping me alive. I want so much to start over, to have a family and raise them *al taharas hakodesh*, amid purity and holiness. Please do not abandon me. I will not give up. I will always serve You. You have done so much for me, I only ask, please, perhaps give me a little more?”

One year later, she was the proud mother of an infant boy. Subsequently, she had a long life witnessing the births of children, grandchildren and greatgrandchildren. She never gave up hope. She believed with all of her heart in Hashem and in His ability to change everything *k’heref ayin*, with the blink of an eyelash. He did. She was Rabbi Fishel Shachter’s mother.

We all have such stories. Those of us whose parents survived the purgatory of the European Holocaust all can attest to our parents’ abiding faith. It was absolutely clear and unshakeable. They saw with a vision unlike that of anyone else – because they believed.