

## **And Bnei Yisrael groaned from the labor, and they cried out, and their outcry rose up to G-d... and G-d heard... and G-d remembered His covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. (2:23,24)**

The Jews had been suffering for years from the back-breaking labor forced upon them by the Egyptians. They must have cried, groaned and moaned before. Now, the covenant with the Patriarchs came into play. This was not a new covenant. It had been around for quite some time. Why now? What change transpired that now, after all this time, Hashem listened, remembered and responded to these pleas? *Horav Yisrael Belsky, zl*, recounts from a *Shabbos Shuvah drashah*, lecture, rendered by *Horav Yonasan Shteif, zl*, that responds to this question.

*Golus* comes in two forms: physical and spiritual. Physical bondage is physically painful, causes deep anxiety and depresses a person, as he sees life and hope diminishing every day. Spiritual exile requires a deeper sense of self and one's spiritual needs in order to feel the spiritual angst that overwhelms a person as he feels his relationship with Hashem waning with each passing day. To put this into perspective, I suggest that we each ask ourselves how we felt locked in our homes as the Covid virus raged. No *shuls*, no *bais hamedrash*, with *shiurim* on the phone. The first time that we were allowed back into *shul* to *daven* with a *minyán* was exhilarating. Imagine, living like this in an oppressive country, where Jewish religious observance is punishable by death or life in Siberia – which is the same. This is spiritual bondage. In order for it to be considered exile, however, one must feel that he is missing something, that he is being deprived of life itself. If he feels no loss, then it is not much of an exile.

It is natural to complain when one is in pain. When one is suffering, anxiety and depression are to be expected. Thus, when *Klal Yisrael* first began to cry out, it was tears inspired by pain – the pain of physical deprivation. The labor was overwhelming, backbreaking work that produced absolutely nothing. Physical pain, anxiety and demoralizing labor will destroy a person. So they reacted with tears. Hashem heard them, but waited patiently, because the *golus*, exile, would eventually come to an end. The Jewish People would outlast and outlive the Egyptians. Their suffering would come to an end. Hashem had promised this to the *Avos*, Patriarchs. It was like engraved in stone. So what had changed?

During the many (210) years of miserable suffering, the cries had subtly changed. The people began to realize and finally acknowledge that physical pain was not the worst that one could experience, as long as he was not alone. When one comes to the horrible realization that, with time and increasing pain, his relationship with Hashem, his sanctity, was slowly diminishing, and, if things were to continue in this manner he would have nothing – neither body nor soul; he had reached the end of the line. The inexorable toll that the hard labor was taking on their emotions and ability to think and connect with Hashem was destroying their Jewishness, without which they were

nothing. Now, they had serious reasons for crying. The physical pain was destroying them spiritually.

This is what they cried about – now. The last vestiges of their closeness to Hashem was quickly dissipating. If Hashem would not listen to them, they were finished. It was crunch time. This is why Hashem remembered His covenant with the Avos, which is the root of our eternal connection with Hashem. The Almighty saw that we were in danger of losing that connection; the twines of the “rope” that connected us to Him were tearing, one by one. Without the *kedushah*, sanctity, of being *Bnei Avraham, Yitzchak, v’Yaakov* – what makes us distinct? It is what exemplifies us and discerns us. In the merit of this heightened awareness which was (sadly) inspired by their suffering, Hashem hastened the redemption and liberated them from the Egyptian bondage.

Perhaps the greatest exile is when one does not know that he is in exile and begins treating his dismal circumstances as the “new” way of life. I was just learning with someone who had once been observant. “Life,” “situations,” “environment” all took their toll on his spiritual development. Soon after completing his *yeshivah* high school education, his religious trajectory changed directions, and today he is far from his original destination. Obviously, his children and grandchildren were never introduced to, or indoctrinated in, his “original” way of life and are today very distant from Torah and *mitzvos*. I asked my friend if he has, over the years, talked to his grandchildren about his parents, who were Holocaust survivors, and whether he has touched on the Holocaust and the spiritual heroism manifest by our brothers and sisters. His response troubled me: “I am not permitted to mention anything negative to my grandchildren. In fact, when they conduct a *Pesach ‘Seder,’* I have to gloss quickly over *Makas Bechoros*, killing of the firstborn Egyptians, because it implies negativity and sadness.” This is my understanding of spiritual exile, when one does not even understand what is happening, when Hashem speaks to us and no one is listening – because it might project negativity.

What keeps us going? Only our connection to Hashem allows us to maintain our fortitude in the face of the most horrific challenges. A well-known story concerning the saintly *Horav Meir, zl, m’Premishlan*, was often related by the holy *Kaliver Rebbe, zl. Rav Meir* used to immerse himself in a *mikvah* situated on top of a snow covered mountain. Despite his advanced age, *Rav Meir* clambered up the mountain without help. The man who accompanied the *Rebbe* was much younger than he, yet he slipped and fell with almost every step. He asked the *Rebbe*, “How is it that Your Honor walks up so steadily, while I am constantly stumbling?” The *Rebbe* replied, “He who is bound to the One Above will not fall below.”

We each have our own unique “cord” for connecting with Hashem. Our nation has survived throughout the millennia because we never let go. The holy *Berdichever Rebbe, zl, Horav Levi Yitzchak*, would declare in his *Erev Yom Kippur drashah*, “*Ribono Shel Olam!* To build a building, iron, stone and water are needed. If You need iron to build the Third *Bais Hamikdash*, we are iron, since we have continued our commitment throughout time, despite a sea of troubles. If You need stones, how many Jewish hearts have slowly turned to stone because of all their troubles and

suffering? If You need water, you have plenty of it in the endless tears of *Klal Yisrael*.”

We each have our own way of holding on.