

And Moshe blessed them. (39:43)

Rashi teaches that Moshe *Rabbeinu's* blessing was: “*Yehi ratzon*, May it be His will that the *Shechinah* rest on the work of your hands; *Vih noam*, May the pleasantness of our G-d be upon us.” What greater blessing can there be than knowing that Hashem’s *Shechinah*, His Divine Presence, rests upon his work? One can have no greater prize than having the Divine Presence crown his finished product. How did the people warrant such an extraordinary blessing? They were sincere in their contributing. Their donations – whether it was their best material or themselves – was all *l’shem Shomayim*, for the sake of Heaven. There was no “self” involved. It was all for Hashem. When one’s intentions are pure, he is blessed.

Growing up in Antwerp, Belgium, prior to World War II, “Chaim” purchased a parcel of land in Bnei Brak. When the winds of war were beginning to blow, he, like many of his co-religionists, fled to France. It did not take long before the accursed Nazis moved their war machine through Western Europe reaching France. Those Jews who were fortunate to escape, found safe haven in other countries. This Jew from Antwerp was able to escape to Portugal where he rebuilt his life – unfortunately, not in accordance with Torah dictate. The Jewish community was small, comprised now primarily of refugees. They were in a country that, at best, tolerated their Jewish immigrants. The best way to earn a living and raise a family was to acculturate and eventually assimilate.

Once one begins to descend into the abyss, he freefalls quickly. Chaim soon forgot his religious upbringing. He eliminated *Shabbos* and *kashrus*, together with *davening* and *Tefillin*. To add insult to injury, he married out of the faith. His heirs were now *goyim*, as well. He invested in a small fish business, which, over time, grew into a large successful enterprise. Now, years later, he was a wealthy Portuguese citizen who happened to have a biological Jewish pedigree.

Let us now return to Bnei Brak where Chaim had purchased a parcel of land. Since he had not laid claim to it his real estate purchase, according to Israeli law, it was up to the first person who claimed it. Two Torah organizations debated over its ownership, with each claiming that his organization had been there first. Back and forth, they presented their litigation before the judge, who now had access to Chaim’s deed on the property. Apparently, this property belonged to a Belgium Jew who had purchased it in 1935.

We return to Portugal where Chaim became interested in a small abandoned *shul* situated in the suburb where he lived. This *shul* was built prior to the Inquisition, making it approximately 500 years old. He decided to do one good thing with his now defunct spiritual life: rebuild the *shul*. Having been made aware of the litigation that was going on in Bnei Brak, he decided that he would use the proceeds of that sale (the money paid by whichever institution was prepared to pay his asking price) to rebuild the *shul*. This came as a surprise to the members of the Jewish community who were well aware of his hefty financial portfolio. Why use the funds generated by his sale of land in Bnei Brak? He explained that he had once been a devout Jew, wholly committed to Torah study and *mitzvah* observance. It was during that period in his life when he felt that his relationship

with Hashem was satisfactory. He was acting in consonance with Hashem's commands. Once the war ravaged European Jewry, it took its toll on his spiritual demeanor, as well. He had, over the years, distanced himself from Hashem, and he had profited financially from his decision to renege his spiritual affiliation with Judaism. While he felt strongly about his Jewishness, he acknowledged that his conduct in the spiritual arena was less-than-acceptable. As such, he wanted to designate those funds earned from monies he spent while his commitment to religious observance was unambiguous to be used to rebuild the synagogue.

We should neither judge nor fault our Jewish brothers and sisters who do not practice as we do. Some never had access to a Jewish education; others grew up at a time or in a place where religious observance was a difficult, almost insurmountable, challenge. Some suffered more than the average human body or mind can endure. Whatever their reason, they still know and acknowledge their ancestry. They just have a different way of expressing it.