

And Hashem said to Noach, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have confirmed between Me and all flesh that is upon the earth.” (9:17)

Sforno comments that the bow is a sign for the righteous Jews to commence praying for the generation. The mere fact that the bow appears is a Heavenly message that something is amiss. The people have subverted their spiritual dimension, with punishment being the Heavenly response – unless the righteous pray for Heavenly compassion. The rainbow is the sign of the covenant which Hashem made with mankind: “It is incumbent upon you (Noach), and those like you, to bestir yourselves when you see it, to rouse the people to repent and understand that they must better themselves.” (*Sforno*)

The rainbow is a Divine message, a wake-up call to get our spiritual demeanor in shape. The *Talmud (Kesubos 77b)* relates an exchange between Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi. Rabbi Shimon asked Rabbi Yehoshua whether the rainbow had appeared in his generation. When he replied affirmatively, Rabbi Shimon questioned his righteousness, for a truly great *tzaddik* protects his generation, so that the message of the rainbow would not be necessary.

Hashem sends messages all the time but, unless people are listening, the messages fall on deaf ears. It is up to those who are not spiritually hearing-impaired to heed Hashem’s wake-up calls and pray for themselves and for those who are unable to hear.

The *Alter, zl, m’Kelm*, writes concerning *Horav Moshe Chaim Lutzatov, zl*, the *Ramchal*, author of the seminal *mussar sefer, Mesillas Yesharim*, that he listened to the words of the *Navi, Simu levavchem al darkeichem*, “Consider how you are faring” (*Chaggai* 1:5). The *Navi* was exhorting the nation to wake up and return to Hashem. The *Ramchal* “listened” and did something about it. Does anyone have an idea how many lives have been impacted by the *Ramchal*? How often are we roused to perform a *mitzvah*, to undertake an important endeavor on behalf of the greater community – only to ignore the “voice”?

Horav Shimon Schwab, zl, was wont to relate a conversation he merited to have with the saintly *Chafetz Chaim, zl*. It was 1930, and he stopped in Radin on his way home from *yeshivah*. The *Chafetz Chaim* asked him, “Are you a *Kohen*?” The *Rav* replied, “No.” “Perhaps you are a *Levi*?” “Also no.”

“What a pity,” the *Chafetz Chaim* said. “*Moshiach Tziddkeinu* is coming, and we will rebuild the *Bais Hamikdash*. We will experience a tremendous yearning to enter the *Bais Hamikdash* [the sanctity of the edifice that was the center of *kedushah* for the Jewish people, will finally have been returned to us]. It will be an irresistible attraction, but only a select few will be permitted to enter. Only *Kohanim* and *Leviim* will gain entry.”

The *Chafetz Chaim* continued, “Do you know that I am a *Kohen*? Tell me why are you not a *Kohen*.”

The response was obvious, “My father was not a *Kohen*.”

“Why is your father not a *Kohen*?” *Rav Schwab* decided not to answer. (He understood the venerable sage had a unique message he sought to convey to him.)

“I will tell you why I am a *Kohen*, and you are not. Three thousand years ago, during the Golden Calf incident, *Moshe Rabbeinu* called out, *Mi l'Hashem eilai*, ‘Whoever is with Hashem come to me!’ My father and all the other *Kohanim* before him (Members of *Shevet Levi*) came running, joining with *Moshe*. Your ancestors, sadly, did not come forward. Thus, we are the *Kohanim* and *Leviim* (who will serve in the future *Bais Hamikdash*), and you are not.”

The clarion call went out then as it does today. Hashem chooses various media to issue His call. Some listen. Some just do not hear. Some hear, but are unable to process its meaning. Others hear, but process the wrong message. The following vignette is a classic example of two responses to a message.

The story is well-known. The reaction is not. During the days of darkness, when the Nazi murderers were systematically decimating European Jewry, ten martyrs, *yeshivah* students, whose only offense was being Jewish, were randomly selected to be hung. This public display of cruelty was by design, in order to disgrace and demoralize the hapless Jews in the ghetto. To add to the pain, the murderers chose the holy day of *Shavuos*, the day of *Kabbolas haTorah*, as the execution date.

Among the ten *bachurim* was a *Gerrer Chassid*, a young man by the name of *Shlomo Zelichovsky*, whose adherence to *kedushah*, sanctity, was extraordinary. His *tefillos* were offered up amid passion, fervor and with utter devotion and self-sacrifice. He told his comrades that they would not permit the evil Nazis to destroy that moment of *mesiras nefesh*. They would transform *Shavuos* into *Yom Kippur*, so that they would ascend to the Heavenly spheres in a state of total purity. That night, *Reb Shlomo* led his group in *Kol Nidrei*, the prayer reserved for *Yom Kippur*. Their voices rang out for the members of the ghetto to hear. They joined in reciting *Tehillim* and *tefillos* pertaining to atonement.

The next morning *Shlomo* led the group in *Tefillas Shacharis*, *Mussaf* and, as the day waned, they prepared for *Tefillas Neilah*, the closing prayer of the Day of Atonement. By now, all members of the ghetto had been rounded up, so that they could watch the public execution. Terror gripped everyone – everyone, but the ten martyrs, who were ensconced in an otherworldly holiness and purity. The murderers could take their bodies, but not their souls. The Nazis were shocked to see the ten would-be victims come forward, heads held high, as if unafraid of their fate.

Shlomo recited *Tehillim* publicly and loudly. The words, *Ezkerah Elokim v'ehemayah*, from the

Neilah Selichos, in which we declare our unequivocal devotion to Hashem despite whatever troubles we experience, rang loud and clear. The enemy stood there dumbfounded. They did not understand. How could they? They were sub-humans cloaked in human garb. They were at a loss to make jest of the Jews' death, when they were displaying such a display of courage and bravery.

The nooses were placed around their necks as the words, *Hashem Hu Elokim*; "Hashem is G-d!" were cried out. At the very last moment, Shlomo looked at the assemblage, brothers and sisters, who themselves were uncertain when their turn would come, and cried, "*Yidden!* Avenge our blood!"

Standing in the crowd was a young man who until that day was on the verge of turning his back on Jewish observance. He had stopped putting on *Tefillin*, and *Shabbos* had become a memory. A tormented soul, he could not bring himself to continue his religious commitment. Too much tragedy had occurred. He was overwhelmed with grief. Today, standing there, hearing the words, "*Yidden!* Avenge our blood," he realized that the only way to avenge their blood was to continue what they believed. For the first time in weeks, he put on *Tefillin* and *davened* fervently to Hashem. He had returned.

Some erect memorials, while some dedicate their lives to serving as living memorials.