

## If I have favor in Your eyes, My Lord, let my Lord go among us – for it is a stuff-necked people. (34:9)

A superficial reading of the *pasuk* will cause the reader to pause and question Moshe *Rabbeinu's* comment concerning the stiff-necked nature of *Klal Yisrael*. On the surface, stiff-necked does not appear to be a positive attribute. It denotes one who is imperious, overly-assertive, and pretentious. These traits may have positive sides to them, but Moshe was seeking to ameliorate their side – not to present it as an act of *chutzpah* by a people who seem to have audacity as part of their DNA. When seeking forgiveness for the nation, it would seem best to downplay their brashness.

*Horav Moshe Shternbuch, Shlita*, quotes *Horav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, zl*, who defines *akshanus*, stiff-neckedness, as one's total fidelity to Torah and *mitzvos* under extreme situations. Vicissitude and travail do not cause the Jew to run away. On the contrary, when the pressure becomes stronger, the Jew girds himself to stand resolute and triumph over pressure. This is what Moshe intimated to Hashem: Yes – the Jewish people committed a grave sin, but, despite their infraction, they remain committed under all circumstances. Their faithfulness will not waver; they will not bend. No other nation maintains such an assertive nature as its defining characteristic.

The story is well-known, having been printed in the *hakdamah*, preface, to his *Mekadshei Hashem*. I merited to hear the story from the author, *Horav Tzvi Hirsch Meisels, zl*, who was my family's *Rebbe*. Every year prior to *tekias shofar*, the *Veitzener Rav* (*Rav Meisels*), who survived Auschwitz and now lived in Chicago, would ascend to the lectern, his tear-stained *Tallis* pulled over his head – and he would begin to speak. The words were hardly audible because they were uttered amid heavy, uncontrolled sobbing. He was not the only one who cried. Everyone in the *shul*, comprised primarily of Holocaust survivors, wept bitterly. I was a young boy, sitting next to my father, whose relationship with the *Veitzener Rav* hailed back to their days in Auschwitz. The memories I have from the pre-*shofar drashah* are indelibly seared in my mind.

The *Rav* spoke about the 1,400 boys who were doomed to die on *Rosh Hashanah*. The *Rav* had somehow been able to procure a *shofar* which he blew for the internees in twenty different venues. Each instance was fraught with extreme danger. Being caught meant certain death, but these men and *Rav Meisels* had already walked through the valley of the shadow of death. The Nazis could take their bodies, but they were powerless to vanquish their love for, and commitment to Hashem, which was the only thing that kept them going. What catalyzed in others depression and even insanity, in others was the fulcrum that urged them on to live.

When the 1,400 boys who had been selected and isolated in a separate block heard that the *Veitzner* had a *shofar*, they pleaded with him to blow the *shofar* for them. He was acutely aware of the penalty should he be caught. Nonetheless, how could he deprive these holy children of what would be their last *mitzvah*?

He walked into the block to be confronted by a sight that remained etched in his mind for the rest of his mortal days. He saw a bitter sea of tear-stung eyes, children weeping uncontrollably – not with fear, but with pride in their preparation to ascend to the highest levels of holiness in leaving this world *Al Kiddush Hashem*, accompanied the sound of the *shofar*. They swarmed around the *Rav*, kissing his hand, his clothing, anything- as long as they could touch him. He knew many of them, members of his congregation in Veitzen. He briefly spoke words of Torah in an attempt to hearten them for the inevitable. He blew the *shofar* as they all cried. This was followed by a passionate rendering of *Shema Yisrael*. The *Rav* bid them farewell, knowing that, in moments, they would all be ensconced in *Gan Eden*.

This is the definition of *am kshei oref*, a stiff-necked people. Yes, we are obstinate and uncompromising. We will neither yield to those who attempt to convince us to lower our religious standards, nor fall victim to persecution. We stand with Hashem, because that is what a Jew does.