

## **If your dispersed will be at the ends of the Heavens, from there Hashem, your G-d, will gather you in, and from there He will take you. (30:4)**

Simply, the Torah is teaching us that, regardless of how entrenched the people are in their false beliefs and practices, if they repent, Hashem will welcome them home. Indeed, He will return them to the fold. Alternatively, the Torah is teaching us that, if a Jew's relationship with his religion is even so minimal that he is barely hanging on to the ends of Heaven, Hashem will take him back. He has not completely revoked his relationship with the religion of his forebears. Every Jew has that *pintele Yid*, spark of the Divine, the *Yiddishe neshamah* within him, that regardless of its size, can be stoked to rise up as an eternal flame. Furthermore, Hashem provides the impetus, the setting for the spark to be revitalized.

The *Ponovezher Rav*, *zl*, loved all Jews, regardless of background or religious affiliation. He was consumed with his love for Hashem and His children. He traveled the world fundraising for his fledgling *yeshivah*, Ponovezh. When he visited Los Angeles, he would always be hosted by a wonderful couple. After some time, the husband became ill and passed on to his rightful reward. His wife asked to continue hosting the *Rav*. During one of his visits, the *Rav*, accompanied by one of the *rabbanim* of the community, was having dinner at his host's home when a few of her grandchildren came to visit. It was obvious from their outward appearance that they had an extremely limited connection with religious observance. The *Rav* looked at them and, with his signature smile exuding warmth, asked, "Do any of you remember a Jewish song or tune that your grandfather would sing?" They replied that they remembered nothing. Not one to give up easily, he kept on asking, cajoling and finally begging, until one of them said he remembered a song. The *Rav* asked him to sing it. At first, the boy was bashful, but then, with the assistance of his siblings, he belted out a well-known Jewish song. The *Rav* thanked them profusely, and they left. Afterwards, the *rav* who had accompanied him asked why he had made such a big to-do about the song. The *Rav* replied, "You saw how those children looked. It was necessary to give them some connection to their late grandfather, and, by extension, to *Yiddishkeit*. They will sing the song and remember where it came from and who had sung it to them."

One of the most tragic eras of our tumultuous history occurred during the reign of Czar Nicholai I of Russia (a little over 200 years ago). The evil czar initiated the Cantonist decree, whereby young boys were kidnapped from their parents and forced to serve in the army for a minimum of twenty-five years. During this time, they were compelled to disclaim connection/ties to all relationships with *Yiddishkeit*, profane the *Shabbos* and eat only non-kosher food. Thousands of Jewish boys were victim to this tragedy. Understandably, when they were released from the army, they had become coarse, uncouth men, to whom religion of any kind had no value. These were men who were broken, both in body and spirit. One can only begin to imagine the toll these tragedies took on the hapless parents. The tragedy was exacerbated for one family, who had waited some time to finally be blessed with their *ben yachid*, only child. When he was seven, the child was wrenched from

their hands and taken captive. Needless to say, *Rav Yoel* and his wife never smiled again.

The only comfort that *Rav Yoel* had was in his Torah study. When he was engrossed in his *Gemorah*, he thought of nothing else. Years passed; *Rav Yoel* and his wife did not age well. After all, they had lost the light of their life. Who knew if he even knew that he was Jewish. One day, out of the blue, a group of the czar's evil soldiers broke down the door of *Rav Yoel's* simple home and dragged him out of bed. They had trumped up charges against him. This was sadly common fare in Russia, where parents were dragged away, never to be heard from again.

At least *Rav Yoel* had his *Gemorah* with him. He continued studying Torah every waking minute of the day. A few weeks into his captivity, the superintendent of the prison informed him that he had been found guilty of treason. The verdict was non-negotiable. He would be executed within a week's time. A few days passed, and a guard who seemed to be a caring person, came by and said that his sentence would be carried out the following day. "Is there anything I can get you?" the guard asked. "Yes, I have been studying the *Talmud*, and I came across a passage that is troubling. I remember that the *Rashba* (an early commentator) explains this. Is there any way you might go to a synagogue and ask to borrow a copy of the *Rashba*?" The guard agreed to perform this last favor for the doomed prisoner. Five hours later, he returned with *Rav Yoel's* last meal and coveted *Rashba*.

*Rav Yoel* did not bother looking at the dried bread and undercooked potatoes. He just wanted to pore over the holy commentary of the *Rashba*. An hour later, following intense study and deliberation, he looked up with an otherworldly smile. His eyes shone with glee. He understood the passage in the *Gemorah* – and he began to sing and dance! His eyes were closed as he sang and danced. His co-prisoners could not believe how a man, a few hours from his execution, could be singing and dancing. They conjectured that he had snapped, lost his mind, due to the anxiety surrounding his predicament. They were wrong, because they did not understand *Rav Yoel's* relationship with the Torah.

*Rav Yoel's* mind began to wander. Imagine, if things had been different and tonight would have been his son Mordchele's wedding. He surely would have been dancing up a storm. How he remembered that sweet child. How long they had yearned to hold their own child in their arms. He had been such a cute baby, with a red birthmark on his earlobe. *Rav Yoel* continued dancing – only now he imagined he was at his Mordchele's wedding. The guard walked over and interrupted his pleasant reverie. "It is time," he said. "I will attempt to make it swift and easy for you." *Rav Yoel* looked at his guard. He was tall, erect, muscular. He had a shaved head with a red birthmark on his earlobe! "Mordchele! Is it you? Are you my long-lost son?" *Rav Yoel* cried out at the top of his lungs.

"Come, let us go. Let me have this done with dignity," the guard said. *Rav Yoel* closed his eyes. He could not believe what he had just seen. Could it be possible? Could this man be his son? The firing squad lined up to perform their malevolent work. What was one more life to them? *Rav Yoel*

thought to himself, "This must be my Mordchele. Suddenly, he began to sing the tune with which he always studied *Gemorah*, *Amar Rava*, *ay, ay, ay*, *Amar Rav Huna*, *ay, ay, ay*.

When the guard heard the tune that his father had sung every day, all day, into late in the night, that hidden spark within him welled up, and the flame of *Yiddishkeit* began to burn brightly within him. "*Tatte, Tatte!*" he cried out, as he hugged his father. The bullets flew through the air to their mark. Mordchele held his father's bloodied body in his hands and wept bitterly. He had finally come home. From that moment on, his life changed. He continued his father's legacy, returned to *Yiddishkeit* and learned many commentaries of the *Rashba* and other commentators. He became well-known as the saintly *Rav Mordechai HaTzaddik* of Cracow. He had heard the song of Torah which had been his lullaby as a child. It was concealed beneath the dross accumulated over the years. When it finally emerged, it was as pristine as when he had heard it as a child. The spark of Judaism is never extinguished.