

The Egyptians mistreated us and afflicted us. (26:6)

HoRav Yechiel Yaakov Hopstien, z"l (Fifth Koznitzer Rebbe), adds a homiletic twist to the interpretation of the *passuk*, allowing for historical and contemporary reflection. He understands *vayarei'u* as being derived from *rei'a*, friend. Thus, the affliction brought on by the Egyptians resulted from their befriending us. When the gentile wants to be our friend, and we, sadly, become excited with our new-found acceptance, we go overboard and out of our way to endear ourselves to him. This leads to acculturation, which is the precursor of total assimilation.

Contemporary society is deeply focused on antisemitism- its resurgence, its many forms and responses that will be effective and appropriate. The key to understanding antisemitism is, first and foremost, to understand that it is *Hashem's* way of maintaining our separatism and exclusiveness. As *bnei Avraham*, *Yitzchak v'Yaakov*, as *mekablei haTorah*, we are inherently different, with a distinct and focused purpose in life. Having said this, we must only take a look at our history and discern the painful irony of events that have often preserved our *Jewish* identities. When we sought to gravitate close to "the other," to be accepted as one of them, we suffered an unexpected backlash. When we were persecuted, we often maintained our fidelity to *Hashem* and preserved our *Jewish* identities. When we were accepted, we often disappeared from the Jewish landscape.

Let us go back a couple of centuries to Berlin and Paris, where, following the French Revolution *Jews* were allowed out of their ghetto—a place where, despite the privation, the light of *Torah* burned brightly. The salons became the new home for the alienated, acceptance-starved *Jews*. It did not take very long for the light of *Torah* that had illuminated their lives to be dimmed by the glitz that came with gentile accreditation. Soon it was difficult to distinguish between the *Jew* and gentile: they dressed the same; they lived in the same manner. As a result, intermarriage was not only permissible, but it was encouraged. The *Jew's* persona and identity fell by the wayside of assimilation. The sad outcome of their turning their backs on *Hashem* and *Torah* was total alienation and an end to their *Jewish* legacy. Due to these actions, their children were not simply estranged; in many cases, they were not *Jewish*.

When antisemitism rears its ugly head, it delivers a message to these lost *Jews*. They did not have an exit strategy from *Judaism*. You are a *Jew* until the day you die. Ignoring your identity and marrying out of the faith do not change who you are. Once the dominant hatred was no longer covert, when the *goyim* showed their true colors, things began to change. Now those who ran away realized that they had nowhere to go but back home to the religion they had rejected.

Does antisemitism, in all its ensuing tragedy, preserve *Jewish* identity and help curb assimilation? This is a good question to which history has responded: it does. The *Torah* wants us to be distinct—in holiness; to stand out—in our moral and ethical behavior. *Torah* protects us. *HoRav S.R. Hirsch, z"l*, writes: "When the *Jew* ceases to be a *Jew* by conviction, he is forced to be one by hatred." When we willingly abandon *Torah*, *Hashem* reminds us that we must return, even if unwilling. Obviously, this is not the ideal way to maintain our separatism. If we are proud *Jews* due

to our conviction and love for *Hashem* and His *Torah*, then we do not need compulsion to remind us as to our heritage.

HoRav Elchanan Wasserman, z"l, writes that, when the *Jew* attempts to emulate the nations, *Hashem* grants the nations license to push the *Jews* away. This is not an act of "revenge," but Divine Mercy, a painful "guardrail," to prevent us from going over the cliff completely. Nonetheless, our *Jewish* destiny cannot depend on our enemies' hatred toward us, but rather upon our love for *Hashem* and preserved our *Jewish* identities. When we were accepted, we often disappeared from the Jewish landscape.

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