

He reached the place and spent the night there because the sun had set. (28:11)

Darkness can be overwhelming. The symbolism inherent in darkness can be debilitating, since it evokes hopelessness; when there is no hope, there is no life. Hope is the candle that lights up the darkness, regardless of the size of the candle. Sadly, consistent with the well-known proverb, too many of us are too busy cursing the darkness to seek out a candle to counteract the darkness. We are too intensely involved in complaining about the miserable hand that has been dealt to us to focus on the positive, in order to engender hope into our lives.

Yaakov *Avinu* had two seminal experiences which took place at night: the famous dream; and wrestling with the “man,” who was Eisav’s patron angel. He entered into each situation filled with fear and trepidation, and he emerged a stronger, more resolute person. His *emunah*, faith, in Hashem upheld him throughout the darkness of night, throughout the ordeal, lighting up his path. Yaakov symbolizes triumph over adversity. He was the Patriarch who initiated *Tefillas Maariv*, the Evening service. He taught his descendants that, even in darkness, Hashem is with us, and we must entreat His favor. Yaakov taught us that, with *emunah*, we can light a candle and overcome the darkness.

One who has faith in his heart and a candle in his hand does not experience the darkness. The amount of darkness one experiences is commensurate with the amount of faith he maintains. Our people are aptly called *Bnei Yisrael*, after the Patriarch who taught us to light up the darkness with our *emunah* in Hashem. With *emunah* in Hashem, our vision becomes clear, allowing us to see through life’s ambiguities and adversities. This indomitable faith has carried us through the worst epochs of our tumultuous history.

I cite three vignettes, two of which are well-known. Nonetheless, they have a common lesson which should be reiterated: A Jew who has *emunah* does not experience darkness. He has a built in generator that lights up the way for him. **Horav Ezriel Tauber, Shlita**, writes that the sadistic Nazis were not satisfied with destroying Jewish lives; they resented the Jewish spirit. Thus, they did everything within their power to ravage and utterly abase the Jewish spirit. A Jew who died with pride was a greater anathema to them than a Jew who lived. In order to carry out their diabolical goal, they hung a *Paroches*, curtain-- stolen from the Ark where the Torah scrolls of a destroyed synagogue had originally been placed -- over the entrance way to the gas chamber. Embroidered on the velvet were the words: *Zeh HaShaar l'Hashem, tzaddikim yavou va*, “This is the gate of Hashem, the righteous shall enter therein.”

Their hope was that the sight of the holy *Paroches* on the door of the gas chamber would provoke such hopelessness and despair in the condemned that they would abandon their faith as they made their final mortal walk. At the last moment of their lives, they would revile their Creator.

The Nazis did not know the Jewish spirit. Such human refuse is so distant from the spiritual dimension that they did not realize that, when the Jew came to this outrageous spot, he was filled with an indescribable spiritual revelation. These words situated in that spot brought light to the Jew's darkness. He now saw clearly the beauty and inspiration of his faith.

Suddenly, their souls awoke within them, as a new strength coursed through their ravaged bodies. Their spirits soared as they went to their final destination with song and dance. They were leaving a world where such filth dictates life and death and has the power to create such misery for humanity. They looked at the words, and they knew – clearly and without a doubt – that this gate, the gate to the gas chamber, was truly the gate that led to Hashem.

The gentile world that surrounds us does not realize the inextricable bond that exists between Hashem and His children – the Jewish People. Even those who have regrettably distanced themselves from Him still maintain a sort of relationship which even they themselves have difficulty explaining. Yet, it is there – often arousing them when they least expect it.

It occurred in Poland at the end of World War II. European Jewry had been decimated. Somehow, small groups of children had been housed by gentiles, many in monasteries, where the Abbots thought they were reclaiming a prize for their lord. True, they had saved the physical lives of these children, but, if they could get away with it, they were not going to release these children to become Jewish – again! They had them, and they would baptize them. Unless incontrovertible proof was presented that these children were Jewish, they were remaining in the monasteries.

Horav Eliezer Silver, zl, the legendary head of *Vaad Hatzalah*, the relief and rescue organization that addressed the physical and spiritual needs of the survivors of the Holocaust, appeared together with *Horav Gorfinkel* of England at a monastery and demanded that the Abbot release the Jewish children that were housed in his facility. The Abbot's response was simple: "Prove that they are Jewish." "We will return at the children's bedtime, and we will then prove to you that these children are, in fact, Jewish." The Abbot thought they had lost their collective minds. How could two or three minutes before these children retire for the night prove that they were Jewish?

Dozens of Jewish boys and girls were held "captive" in the monastery. I say captive, though they had not really been kidnapped, but the gentiles were never giving up a Jew whom they felt they could convert to their religion. This was part of their dogma. As long as Jews believed in Hashem, it impugned the integrity of their faith. The Abbot knew quite well which children were Jewish and which were not. After all, he had been present when their parents, out of desperation, gave them these children, as they themselves were being deported to their deaths. There was no way the Abbot would return these children to their true faith. All proof of their religious identity had perished in the fires of the Holocaust.

The two *rabbanim* did not agree. They knew that Jewish parents imbued their children from the moment of birth with an indomitable faith, with a light against the world's darkness. They would

prove to the Priest that a Jewish child does not lose sight of his faith, regardless of how dark it is, or how dark one makes it for him. When the two *rabbanim* arrived at the prescribed time, the Abbot was waiting-with a mocking smile across his face. He was confident that no children would be leaving today. Nothing that could prove the children's origins had survived the flames.

The young eyes peered silently – almost longingly – from every side, watching as two bearded figures made their way to the room where they were gathered. A small group of children in their bedclothes – boys with no *yarmulkes*, their *payos* shorn, a group of young boys and girls who, for all intent and purposes, looked and thought like *goyim*.

Suddenly, one of the bearded figures walked to the middle of the room, climbed atop a chair and just stood there – smiling at the children. Then, in the din of the silence, his voice rang out, uttering just six words: “*Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad!*”

As if by some mysterious cue, the silence was broken as the thin voices cried out: “Mama! Mama!” Tiny forms jumped from their beds, “Mama! Mama! Where are you?” They had never forgotten the good night kiss their mothers had given them when they recited *Shema Yisrael* before retiring to bed. These were the last words that had been instilled years ago. These were the words for which they had been longing.

The Abbot hung his head in shame. He knew that he had been defeated. The light that had permeated their Jewish hearts had risen to guide these children back home.

Our last vignette is about **Rav Meir Feist, zl**, an individual whose life personified light, despite being plagued with what many would consider extreme darkness. Confined to a wheelchair since the age of four, when both of his legs had become paralyzed, he suffered from a number of other chronic diseases as well. For more than half of his life, he had lived alone in the world, without the support and comfort of family and friends. Yet, he continued to amaze the medical world, who had written him off at age forty. At age sixty-eight he was *niftar*, passed away, from an illness unrelated to his chronic health problems.

This was a man who always manifested a joyful countenance: he never deferred to depression; he displayed incredible patience; and he actually felt that he was the beneficiary of eminent good fortune. It could actually be said that happiness was an integral component of his being. How did he do it? He understood that living a Torah life, ensconced in a Torah environment, was the most rewarding life one could lead. There is no greater source of pleasure than that which emanates from connecting with the Torah. This was the secret of his “happy” life. He understood that every day that he lived serving Hashem and learning His Torah was infinitely invaluable. Thus, despite his severe handicaps, his life was filled with joy. He saw no darkness – only light.