

I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you, I will curse. (12:2)

Avraham *Halvri* is the name given to our first Patriarch, the individual who, with his own cognitive ability, was able to understand what had eluded an entire world: there is a Creator; He is One; He is the G-d of Creation and of history. With simple – but penetrating – logic, Avraham reached out to a pagan society and imbued them with faith and conviction in the Almighty. Yet, he was all alone, literally *b'eiver echad*, on one side – the opposing side of everybody else. Hence, the name Avraham *Halvri*. We, his descendants, are heirs to this proud appellation, *Ivrim*, all of us on the opposite side of world society.

The life of our Patriarch has been an inspiration to all throughout the generations. He stood up against an entire world, without fear and without shame, and declared his belief in Hashem. As unpopular as he must have been, he was still respected. Hashem conferred a remarkable blessing upon him, from which we, his descendants, should take a lesson: *Va'avarechecha va'agadlah shemecha veheyey brachah*, "I will bless you, and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing." *Va'avarcha mevarchecha u'mekaleelcha a'or*, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse."

What an inspiring blessing. The **Gaon, zl, m'Vilna**, points out a twofold difficulty. First, the syntax of the *pasuk* does not follow the Biblical pattern. One would expect *akaleil*, "I will curse," to follow its matching vernacular, *umekalelcha*. Why is the word *a'or* used? Second, if those who cursed Avraham would, in turn, be cursed, how could all of the families of the earth be blessed?

The *Gaon* explains that *a'or* means to shed light! The brilliance of Avraham's life would illuminate the world with light. All will be beneficiaries of his self-generated sunshine – even those who curse him! Thus, in the end, all of the families of the world will be blessed by him. As his descendants, we must follow his prescription for living, so that we will bring luster to a world overshadowed with the darkness of immorality, hedonism, lack of integrity and modern-day paganism. The curses that plague society can be subverted with our blessings. How appropriate is the maxim: "Instead of cursing the darkness, we should light a candle."

When one thinks about it, Avraham was up against a pervasive, opposing world view, but, for many people the primary issue was ignorance. They had been raised as pagans; thus, their minds could not comprehend monotheism. Once Avraham broke through the barrier, he was able to encourage conversation. True, some were diehards, such as Nimrod, the self-proclaimed god/king, but we must face it: he had a good reason for seeking to quell Avraham's "nonsense"; it was hurting his business.

Many spiritual leaders throughout the generations have been compelled to deal with a much

greater and more virulent foe: their own coreligionists who have fallen under the influence of the American dream. Let us go back to America, circa early twentieth century, when the *Agudas Kehillos*, United Communities, which were really not so united, brought in a *Rav Hakolel*, Chief Rabbi for New York. **Horav Yaakov Yosef, zl**, was a Lithuanian Torah scholar from Vilna, who attempted to serve as *Rav* over the splintered and fractitious European immigrant communities who called New York their home. These people came here, some searching for riches, others hoping to find sustenance. For the most part, however, they were simple, hard-working Jews, who were too *farhorevet*, literally knocked-out from over-working, to care very much about their religious dimension. They were embittered and distrustful of anyone who would stand in the way of their achieving their dream.

Horav Tzvi Hirsch Rabinowitz, zl, son of the *Kovner Rav*, was the first one to be offered the position of chief rabbi. He demurred, saying, “A *Rav* can only be appointed over a *Kehillah*, congregation of Jews. For a *Rav* to create Jews, however, is impossible. Only Moshe *Rabbeinu* could have accomplished such a miracle. In America, we have to create *Yidden*, and that is something I cannot do.”

In addition, no *yeshivos* existed to educate the masses, thus allowing for the scourge of assimilation to fester and grow. There were sham rabbis, who, for a few dollars would perform any religious ceremony that one required for convenience sake. The *Satmar Rebbe, zl*, was wont to say that the reason that so many Jews of that early generation assimilated was their neglect of the “small things.” It did not start with blatant *chillul Shabbos*, desecration of *Shabbos*; it began with a quick trip to the barber to remove their beard and *payos*, vestiges of the European *shtetl* “mentality.” Shortly thereafter, their entire *Yiddishkeit* followed. America was – and continues to be – a free-country. One can dress however he chooses. We have had every type of style grace the public arenas of every major metropolis: hippies, gypsies, artists and carefree folk who have no sense of style other than what enters their mind at any given moment. Hairstyles of every persuasion, from conformist to mohawk to satanist and every eccentricity and derangement in between. No one seems to care – except the Jew, who feels that going in public sporting a beard and *payos*, black suit and hat, or even a *yarmulke* – regardless of color, size and material – is offensive.

Indeed, many of these same Americanized Jews, who have no problem with the Amish in their antiquated mode of dress and so many others that have maintained their tribal, cultural, religious garb, cannot tolerate a Jewish brother who looks “different.”

A young *chassidic* man was in a shop in Williamsburg, when an elderly couple entered the store, together with a young, strapping lad of about sixteen. The teenager was bareheaded. The father turned to the *chassidic* teenager and asked, “*Boychik*, how much money do you want for your *payos*?”

The woman was furious with her husband’s mockery, “You American, what do you know

about *Yiddishkeit* in the *alter heim*, old home, Europe?" She suddenly burst into tears, "The *Rebbe's einiklach*, grandchildren, wore such *payos*." She then started naming the names of the *Komarner Rebbe's* children.

"I come from Komarna," the woman began. "As a young girl, I was in the home of the *Komarna Rebbe, Horav Yaakov Moshe Safran, zl*. His daughter, the *Munkatcher Rebbetzin*, was my friend. His son Boruch'l, the last *Rebbe* of Komarna, was killed by the Nazis. Before I left Europe, I received a *brachah* from the *Rebbe*." Sadly, now her only son did not look like a Jew.

Avraham *Avinu* had it hard, but he was not going up against disenchanted brothers. The purpose of the above is not to lay blame, but rather, to encourage and empower. The Jewish People, heralding back to our forefather Avraham, have a history of being on one side against the masses. It goes with the territory of being a Jew. Today's society should not present a greater challenge than the ones over which our parents and grandparents triumphed. Had they not been able to do so, we would not be here.