

For from its origins, I see it rock-like, and from hills, I do see it. Behold! It is a nation that will dwell in solitude. (23:9)

Tzurim is a reference to our *Avos*, Patriarchs. *Gevaos* refer, to our *Imahos*, Matriarchs. *Meirosh tzurim er'eenu*; I see the roots of this nation. They are firmly anchored in the *tzurim* and *geva'os*, Patriarchs and Matriarchs. It is part of their DNA. *Hen am levadad yishkon*. They are different in the sense that they live away from the pagans. They dress differently, eat differently, maintain a different set of morals. Bilaam was amazed by *Klal Yisrael's* ability to retain their exclusivity. They stood out in a world that was so different from theirs. They dressed with *tznius*, retaining a sense of moral modesty in their selection of clothing. The food that entered their mouths was kosher, thus not affected by the evil character traits of non-kosher animals and fowl. Their moral dignity was reflected in their adherence to the strict tenets of Judaism that banned unions that were perverse and irregular. They demonstrated respect for one another by making sure that their windows did not coincide with the windows of their neighbors.

Rambam (Hilchos Dei'os) writes: "By nature, a person is influenced by the thoughts and practices of his friends and neighbors, who act like the rest of the society in which he lives." Bilaam wondered how the Jews were able to resist the repugnant influence of the morally bankrupt society which surrounded them. He came to the realization that the Patriarchal and Matriarchal roots have played a prominent role in the Jewish DNA.

Indeed, we are captive to a society that is morally degenerate: where substance abuse is rampant, where ethics are considered to be antiquated and integrity is perverted. Yet, the Jewish people stand alone, an island of moral sanity in a sea of confusion. Why is this? Our roots. The *Avos* and *Imahos* imbued us with the ability to stand firm and resolute, as did our Patriarch, Avraham *Halvri*. He stood all alone on one side (so to speak), while the rest of the world looked at him with derision. He survived; they did not. Nothing is left of his antagonists. We, however, carry on his mission.

A Jew remains a Jew. The Patriarchal DNA might be covered with spiritual dross, but, when the proper time arrives, it is revealed in all its beauty and purity. Yirmiyahu Kaminsky stood at the side of his father's tombstone on *Har HaZeisim*. It was his father's *yahrzeit*. His father had been a mathematics professor in an institute of higher learning in Chullon. His father had related to him the story of his life and how he had ended up in the Holy Land. It was a fascinating journey, a journey that ultimately brought his son, Yirmiyahu, to his grave on his father's *yahrzeit*.

His father was born in Kharkov, Ukraine, in 1919. His father's mother's name was Selma Glickstein. When she saw the winds of anti-Semitism churning up against the Jews, she decided that being Jewish was a disadvantage which would severely handicap the future of her infant son. She was a single parent who had become widowed shortly prior to her son's birth. She made the decision to enter his religion in the community registry as Christian. To concretize the change, she altered the family name from Glickstein to Kaminsky. Branislav Kaminsky would grow up as a *goy* –

without a *bris*, circumcision, and with a non-Jewish name. He attended the finest government schools, unaware that he was a *Yid*.

One day, he was going home in the company of a group of friends, when they chanced upon a young, Jewish boy. His friends proceeded to hurl curses and maledictions at the innocent boy whose only offense was being Jewish. They completed the outrage by pummeling him until he was bleeding. One last kick in the chest, and they continued along their merry way, satisfied that they had hurt a helpless Jew.

Branislav was shocked beyond belief. How could they be so abominable? Their actions repulsed him, so that when he came home in an appalled state of shock, he asked his mother, "Why did they pick on that defenseless boy just because he is Jewish? Where does such implacable hatred originate?" His aunt, who happened to be visiting his mother at the time, banged on the table and declared, "I cannot tolerate the boy's pain any longer. Tell him the truth!"

"What are you saying?" Branislav asked his aunt, who turned to his mother with a pointed finger and said, "Tell him!" Selma was suddenly tongue-tied, so the aunt finished off what she had started. "You are a Jew! We are all Jewish! We have concealed our true faith for fear of violent repercussions."

Branislav was terribly shaken up by the news. He had been living a lie. The lie would stop now. He went to the government office and had his religious identity changed to Jewish. The next step was to go to the *Rav* of Kharkov and announce that he had not been circumcised. He was returning to the Jewish faith. He had his name changed to Avraham Baruch.

Yirmiyahu continued telling his father's story: "When the war broke out, my father was drafted to serve with the partisans. Shortly thereafter, he was caught, arraigned, judged and sentenced to death. They wasted little time when they caught an insurgent – especially if he was Jewish. By some miracle, the SS commandant remembered him from school. Instead of execution, he was sent to the Mauthausen concentration camp, where he survived the war. Following the liberation, he moved to France where he married and raised a family. He passed away in France, and his body was interred there. However, we recently brought his body to rest in the Holy Land."

One can change his name – but the Jewish *neshamah*, soul, remains unaltered.

Certain instances in a person's life engage his *neshamah*, and his Patriarchal DNA awakens within him. The head of the Jewish community in Koznitz, Poland, was a Jewish apostate. Dr. Grunshan had assimilated early on, when he was a student, and, as time progressed, his distance from Judaism increased – to the point that he was known for his self-loathing nature, which manifested itself as anti-Semitism.

When the war broke out, the Nazis did not distinguish between observant Jew and apostate. If one

had Jewish blood, his level of observance- or lack thereof – did not matter. Dr. Grunshan was taken prisoner and mercilessly beaten and tortured. During the entire time, he remained stoically silent, exhibiting pride that would not permit him to beg before these beastly fiends. Finally, the Nazi in charge had a *Sefer Torah* brought to the room, as he lit a bonfire outside. “Take the scroll and throw it into the fire!” the accursed Nazi commanded. “No!” Dr. Grunshan cried. “I will not burn a *Sefer Torah*. I am a Jew! You can do whatever you want to me, but I will never desecrate a Torah scroll!” The Nazis removed his clothing from him and flung him into the flames, where his body was quickly consumed. Later on, while going through his pants pockets, one of the Jewish prisoners found a note penned by the martyr. One could tell that the words had been written as tears were rolling down the face of their author.

“I apostatized myself and became a Christian purely for financial advantage. I continued along this route because of convenience. Nonetheless, all of this time, I have cursed the moment that I made that terrible decision. Due to my foolishness and greed, I missed out on the opportunity to live proudly as a Jew. *Yehi ratzon* – May it be the will of the Creator that my birth as a Jew should serve in my stead as a merit that I die as a Jew!”

Many stories attest to this verity. A Jew remains a Jew, despite the various layers of spiritual deficiencies that externally cloak his soul. It is what is inside that matters. That aspect of his Jewishness remains pure and unsullied.