

Rather, the matter is very near to you. (30:14)

Veritably, the term “near” (to you) is relative. One could be standing on top of something, but, if he is unaware of it, the item remains elusive. It could be under him, but, in his mind, it is across the ocean. If one does not know where to look, distance plays no role. I remember during the sixties when many spiritually lost people went searching for religious meaning and spirituality in the mountains of Tibet. They, of course, returned empty-handed, because they did not know what to look for. Had they had an understanding of the meaning of Judaism, they would have realized that they had to go no further than within themselves to discover Hashem. Sadly, their education vis-à-vis *Yiddishkeit* was sponsored by their unknowing parents who believed the words of their “spiritual” leadership, who often deliberately misled them.

The *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, is wily. He deceives the individual by allowing him to go through the motions of spiritual searching, but he cleverly points him in the wrong direction. When Moshe *Rabbeinu* informed Pharaoh that Hashem had said, “Send forth My People (*Shemos* 5:2),” Pharaoh’s response was, “I do not know Hashem.” The *Midrash* (*Shemos Rabbah* 5:14) expands on this dialogue. Pharaoh told Moshe, “I will research my book of gods which records the name of each nation’s deity, and get back to you.” Pharaoh returned and told Moshe “Hashem is not in my book. He cannot be a bona fide deity.” The *Midrash* compares their dialogue to a *Kohen* who traveled outside of his environs. His servant (who was not very astute) went searching for his master. The first place he stopped was at the local cemetery. He called out to the people who were there, “Have you seen my master?” They replied, “Fool, what would your master be doing in a cemetery?” (A *Kohen* is not permitted to defile himself and thus may not be within four cubits of a grave.)

The lesson is obvious. Pharaoh searched for Hashem in his book of pagan deities, dead gods, who were made of stone and mortar. Pharaoh symbolizes those who encourage their followers to study Judaism in the museums and history books. It is a dead religion. They would never concede to the verity that our religion is vibrant and our belief is alive, that Hashem is very real and very much a part of our lives.

Every *Yid* has within him the spark of *Yiddishkeit* which never becomes extinguished. For various reasons, it might become covered with dross, but this is merely a temporary overlay which does not affect the purity of the spark. The *Chiddushei HaRim*, *zl*, explains that this is the meaning of Hashem’s promise to Avraham *Avinu*, *Anochi magen lach*, “I will be a shield for you” (*Bereishis* 15:1). Regardless of the circumstances, Hashem promises to protect the spark within each individual Jew. Thus, when we recite the blessing *Magen Avraham* (in *Shemoneh Esrai*), we refer to this promise: the Shield of Avraham. Every Jew is protected by this spiritual warranty.

At the end of the Second World War, *Horav Eliezer Silver, zl*, received a commission from General Eisenhower to become an officer in the U.S. Army. Thus, he would be able to continue his *Vaad Hatzalah*, relief and rescue work in the Displaced Persons Camps that housed thousands of

Jewish survivors of Hitler's death camps. *Rav Silver* was a *gaon*, brilliant Torah scholar, without peer. He was the president of the *Agudas HaRabbanim*, Conference of Orthodox Rabbis of North America, but saving and sustaining Jewish lives took precedence for him. Among his many activities was the procurement of clothing, shelter, medicine, kosher food and religious paraphernalia for the survivors. He also compiled lists of the Jews who had survived.

Rav Silver could go anywhere, and he did, with the government - issued jeep at his disposal and GI's protecting him wherever he went. During the time that he spent in Poland searching for survivors, he would attend church every Sunday morning. He entered the Catholic church during mass, when everyone was in attendance, walked up to the altar accompanied by his bodyguards, faced the congregation and loudly proclaimed, "*Shema Yisrael! Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad!*"

The worshippers halted their mass in astonishment. What was this Jewish rabbi screaming out? During those few precious moments, *Rav Silver* scanned the crowd to see which ones – especially the young children – responded to those words. He was acutely aware that many Jewish parents, seeing the end closing in on them, had attempted to save their children by giving them to their Catholic neighbors. These *neshamos*, Jewish souls, were now being raised as devout Catholics. With his integrity and daring, *Rav Silver* saved hundreds of souls. These were pure *neshamos* that had been covered with dross. Once they heard the holy words of the *Shema*, the words pierced through the defilement and connected with their souls. *Magen Avraham*, the Shield of Avraham: Hashem will always protect us.

One might conjecture that this applies to young children, but what about those who are the products of one or two generations of assimilation, of parents and even grandparents whose animus towards Orthodoxy and its adherents is founded in decades long self-loathing and lack of Jewish (or any) identity? Do they still have a pure *neshamah*, a Jewish spark buried deeply beneath their overt contempt?

Horav Noach Weinberg, zl, relates the following incident. A *rebbe* who was teaching in a *yeshivah* high school in *Eretz Yisrael* was informed by one of the students (15 years old) that his mother was undergoing a surgical procedure – not life-threatening, but surgery nonetheless. What does a Jewish boy do as he waits in the waiting room? He recites *Tehillim*. As the boy was moving back and forth saying *Tehillim*, in walked an old *kibbutznik* (often non-observant and antagonistic) "What are you doing here?" the man demanded of the boy. "My mother is having surgery," was the boy's reply. "I mean what are you doing?" the man asked, sort of agitated. "I am reciting *Tehillim* for her recovery" was the boy's answer.

"You are saying *Tehillim*? Is that why we fought for this country? (reference to the War of Independence 1948 – and probably the subsequent wars). So that a young fellow like you should continue with these archaic, medieval practices? Become a real man; give up your superstitions. Stop with your *meshigas*. There is a real vibrant world out there that wants nothing to

do with your kind. Throw your *Tehillim* out the window!”

The boy held his ground, looked at the man, and asked, “What brings you here?” “Oy, I came to pick up my son’s body.” “What do you mean?” the boy asked. “The doctors say that my son is so sick that they are unable to detect any vital signs. As a last ditch attempt, they are performing surgery, but they are convinced it is useless.” The man sighed, “My son will die. I just came to pick up the body and see to it that he receives a proper burial.”

The boy looked at the man and said, “Are you out of your mind? Why are you giving up? Take my *Tehillim* and pray to Hashem. Pray as if your son’s life depends on it – because it does!”

The man was immovable. “You think I would resort to superstition? Never!” The boy moved over to the other side of the waiting room and continued his *Tehillim* recitation. An hour later, the surgeon who was performing the man’s son’s surgery came out and said, “The surgery was a success. Your son will live.”

Suddenly the old *kibbutz*nik jumped up, raised his arms, and called out, “*Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad!*”

What happened? The *Rosh Yeshivah* explains that when the man came to retrieve his son’s body he was in a turmoil. He knew that the correct thing to do was to pray to Hashem, but he would not be a hypocrite. All his life he had reneged religion; now was not the time to show that he really cared. He had not *davened* since he left the *cheder* in Europe. He had to vent his frustrations on someone – who better than a *yeshivah* boy who personified everything that he was not? Nonetheless, as evinced by his loud declaration of *Shema Yisrael*, his *neshamah* was in gear and working well. *Magen Avraham*: The assimilated, secular, bitter, lack- of-identity Jew might vent on us, but it is all frustration with what he/she could have been, and now (they think) it is too late. It is never too late. That is Hashem’s promise