

Hashem said to Moshe, “Behold, you will lie with your forefathers, but this people will arise and stay after the gods of the nations of the land... and they will forsake Me and annul the covenant that I formed with them... I will distance them and make Myself oblivious to them. So now, write this song for yourselves and teach it to Bnei Yisrael. (31:16,18)

The above *pasukim* paint a stark picture of the spiritual deterioration that will occur in the period following Moshe *Rabbeinu's* *petirah*, passing. While it did not happen immediately, the dynamics that led to the nation's freefall from their *igra ramah*, spiritually-elevated perch, to a *bira amikta*, nadir of depravity, were apparent. During certain moments in history – even in the last two hundred years, leading up to the present – we have observed an acute distancing from positive spiritual activity. For many, assimilation has almost been a way of life. Within the observant camp, a spiritual tug of war has ensued between those who are committed to strengthening Torah study and *mitzvah* observance and those who seek to “open up” Orthodoxy and water it down to the letter of the Law. (The latter have rejected the spirit of the Law and the accompanying traditions and customs, which are not only considered law, but have maintained our spiritual integrity throughout the generations.)

While this situation is certainly depressing, we have hope. I quote a vignette, a conversation that took place between *Horav Shlomo Lorincz, zl*, and the *Brisker Rav, zl*. *Rav* Lorincz lamented the reality (60 years ago) of the nation's spiritual degradation; the *Brisker Rav* assuaged him with hope. *Rav* Lorincz was a distinguished Torah activist, who represented Agudah Israel in the Knesset. He came to the *Brisker Rav* depressed and dejected, following the defeat of a bill that he had worked on for a while that was almost certain to pass. It did not. Despite all assurances to the contrary, his bill prohibiting the raising of *davar acheir*, pigs, failed. He poured out his heart over the low spiritual state of the country, and his fears that they had not yet reached rock-bottom. It would get worse.

The *Brisker Rav* said, “Let me teach you a lesson in *Chumash* in the manner that I used to teach my sons. He opened a *Chumash* and read from *Devarim* (31:16), ‘And Hashem said to Moshe, “*You will (now) lie with your forefathers, but this people will arise and stray after the gods of the nations of the land.*” Speaking in *Yiddish*, the *Rav* explained, “To stray after the gods of the nations of the land does not mean that they would not *daven Shacharis*. It means that they literally worshipped idols. If that were not (bad) enough, the *pasuk* continues, *And they will forsake Me*. This does not mean that they would not *daven Minchah*; it means that they will not even serve Me (Hashem)... And if this were not enough, the *pasuk* continues, *and annul the covenant that I formed with them*. This does not mean that they would not *daven Maariv*, it means that they did not perform circumcision. And it concludes with the words, *I will distance them and make Myself oblivious to them*.”

“Nu,” the *Brisker Rav* said, raising his eyes, “I am certain that you will agree that the situation described here is much worse than the one you just described, but let us continue learning: ‘So now, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to *Bnei Yisrael*...’ Torah study is the antidote for all spiritual deterioration, even idol worship and the abandonment of *Bris Milah*. It will return Hashem’s People to Him. All that we are relegated to do is take care of teaching it to *Bnei Yisrael*. In that case, you have no reason to despair.”

What is it about studying Torah that literally transforms a person? I write this *Isru Chag Shavuous*, the *Yom Tov* dedicated to Torah. Due to the various restrictions, the majority of *minyanim* were held outdoors. After *davening vasikin* in a large tent, I was walking home and passed my gentile neighbor who was outside enjoying the early morning air. While he is well aware that his Jewish neighbors attend prayer services in the synagogue, he never realized what this meant until he observed us *davening* outdoors, across from his house. I explained to him what had taken place during the night, how fifty men and many young boys had studied Torah together. He, of course, did not understand the concept of studying a book as part of a religious service. He asked me, “Rabbi, what is so special about this book?” I told him that this Book was the word of G-d, and, through it, the Almighty speaks to us. “In other words,” I said, “we are not simply studying a book. We are listening to the Almighty speak to us.”

This is what Torah study does for a Jew. It affords him the opportunity to listen to Hashem. When a person listens to Hashem, the experience is transformative. Obviously, the degree of listening, and the depths of comprehension, will determine the change that will transpire. *Teshuvah* stories abound which demonstrate the amazing spiritual regeneration that ensues within the person who commits to *teshuvah*. We have varied understandings of the meaning of *teshuvah* and what one must endure in order to succeed. I, therefore, have selected the following vignette, which is both timely and illuminating.

Horav Naftali Ropstitzer, zl, was one of the first *Admorim*. He was learning in his room one day when Zevulun, a member of the Jewish community, came to him obviously very distraught. “*Rebbe*, I cannot live with myself any longer. I have committed numerous transgressions, a number of which are very serious. *Rebbe*, I must know what to do in order to repent to expunge these *aveiros*, sins.” What that, he presented a list of sins that were quite egregious. (We must underscore that many people in those times [mid-eighteenth century] did not have the luxury of a *yeshivah* education, and they suffered from economic hardship, as well as the influence of a society that was antagonistic to religious observance.)

The *Rebbe* reviewed the list and declared, “There is no question. For such sins, there is only one resolution. You must forfeit your life! There is just no other way.” With a tear-filled voice, Zevulun accepted his fate. “It is better that I die having received Hashem’s forgiveness than to live the life of a sinner. I want to leave this world with a clean *neshamah*, soul.”

“If so, then we can proceed with your *teshuvah* ritual. I will prepare the molten lead that will be

poured down your throat. This will serve as the process that expunges all of your sins.”

Zevulun nodded in agreement. He was prepared to die if that is what it would take to purify his soul. As soon as the lead had melted, *Rav Naftali* laid Zevulun down on the bed, tied him up and blindfolded his eyes. “Now, my dear friend, recite *Viduy*, Confession, in preparation for your death.”

Zevulun recited *Viduy* and declared, “*Rebbe*, I am ready. I feel good that I will leave this world as I entered it – pure.” “If so,” the *Rebbe* said, “Open your mouth.” Zevulun opened his mouth, prepared for the searing pain of burning lead melt his innards. Instead, he received the shock of his life. Instead of hot molten lead being poured down his throat, the *Rebbe* had poured sweet honey down his throat!

“Do you think that the Almighty really wanted me to take your life?” the *Rebbe* asked. “*Chas v’shalom*, Heaven forbid! When a person commits such grave sins that warrant his death, do you think that Hashem wants him to die? Absolutely not! Hashem wants him to live. All the Almighty asks of us is remorse, a broken heart. Forgiveness is not about death; it is about life with contrition. When I saw how deeply pained your heart was, how much you really regretted your sinful behavior, to the point that you were prepared to renege on your life, I realized how utterly broken you were. Therefore, I had nothing to do. You had already achieved forgiveness.”

Zevulun never forgot the day that he received a new lease on life. He changed his past life’s trajectory and became a serious penitent, wholly committed to *mitzvah* observance. All Hashem asks of us is spiritual integrity, not a manifestation of religious observance solely for the purpose of impressing others. The only One we have to impress is Hashem.