

He perceived no iniquity in Yaakov. (23:21)

Rashi explains (based upon a *Midrash*) that, even when *Klal Yisrael* sins, Hashem chooses not to scrutinize their sin to the full extent of their shortcomings. This does not mean that we are perfect. People sin -- and some sin egregiously -- but Hashem knows that, despite their nefarious behavior, their *neshamah*, soul, which is a part of the Divine, remains untarnished, and, as such, it can/will return. While the soul will remain pure, we are still accountable for our actions, and we must strive to live an ethical and moral life. The belief in the intrinsic purity of the soul serves as a source of comfort, hope and motivation for leading a righteous life committed to spiritual elevation. Furthermore, it empowers us to maintain hope that, regardless of how far one has strayed, he can still return and be welcomed and embraced.

In the city of Koznitz, Poland, during the Nazi occupation, the mayor was a Jewish apostate by the name of Dr. Gunsher. He had been born into a traditional Jewish home, but, after attending secular school, he had become influenced by his peers and the entire pervasive culture, which ultimately led him to the baptismal font. Slowly, he distanced himself from any vestige of Judaism, and eventually he acted virulently against those who had "once been" his co-religionists. When the Nazis invaded the city, they arrested him, demanding to know whether he was Jewish or not. He did not respond to their threats and beatings. He was mute, refusing to openly renege the religion into which he had been born.

The German S.S. Commander lost patience, and he instructed his aide to go to the *shul*, remove a *Sefer Torah*, and bring it to him. The commander then ordered Dr. Gunsher to throw the Torah into the fire (which he had prepared especially for this event). "Absolutely not," screamed the doctor. "I am a Jew. You can do whatever you want with me, but I will not show such disrespect to my G-d." The Nazi stripped him of his clothes and threw him into the fire, where he was immolated.

The Nazis gave his clothes to his family, who, after searching through his pockets, discovered a hand-written, tear-stained note. "I apostatized myself and accepted another faith because I thought it would benefit me economically. Despite the esteem and wealth from which I benefited however, I cursed the moment that I made the decision to renege my religion. Due to my utter foolishness, I deprived myself of living as a Jew. I pray to Hashem that, in the merit of being born a Jew, I will be worthy of dying as a Jew."

Horav Yisrael Meir Lau, Shlita, relates the story of the daughter of the *rav* of a small town in Poland. After World War II (she survived the Holocaust), she completely severed her relationship with Judaism. She had a child with a non-Jewish man, and she gave the infant up to a Catholic monastery. A young *Rav*, who before the war had studied with her father and who knew her from childhood, attempted to reach out to her -- to no avail. She was interested neither in returning to Judaism, nor explaining why. He was a persistent fellow who refused to give up. After all, her father had been his *rebbe*. He visited her. He knocked on the door of her apartment -- only to be told that she was not interested in speaking to him. She knew why he had come. Finally, after a number of

attempts, she opened the door and allowed the young man to enter. She cried out, "I want nothing to do with you people. I have begun a new chapter in my life. Leave me alone!" He asked her if he could have a glass of water. She acquiesced and invited him into her home. He said, "I came here to find out what happened to your father. He was my *rebbe*, and I loved him. I felt like a son to him; thus, I have a responsibility to perpetuate his name." Finally, she relented and opened up to relate the tragic story of her father's murder and her subsequent abandonment of Judaism.

"It happened one morning after the *Shacharis* services. My father was sitting by the table still wearing his *Tallis* and *Tefillin*, reading from an open *Gemorah*. Suddenly, we heard banging on the door. I opened it, and three Gestapo burst through. They threw me to the ground and pounced on my father. He looked up from his *Gemorah* as if to ask, "What do you want from me?" He did not hear the answer, as one of the murderers slung the rifle from his shoulder, and, with all his force, pounded the butt into her father's head. The *Tefillin* on his head burst open from the force and his head split. Jets of blood burst from his brain and reddened his white beard. He died with his head on the *Gemorah*.

"Do you now understand why I want nothing to do with religion? Do you understand my anger? My father was a saint who prayed and studied all day. Did he deserve to die in such a cruel manner?"

The *rav* sat there and began to weep – both for his *rebbe* and for his *rebbe's* daughter. She, too, began to weep. Finally, he said to her, "I understand and commiserate with your feelings. I, too, have questions – but no human being can answer them. Only Hashem has the answers.

"You must remember that your father's grandchild has only one grandfather. He is the future legacy of your father, without whom your father's memory will not be honored. By handing your child to a Catholic monastery, you are granting your father's murderers a victory. This was their goal – to destroy Judaism, to extinguish its flame, to make certain that it will never again burn brightly. If your child follows in his grandfather's path – your father will have triumphed over his murderers. They took his life, but his soul lives on. By leaving your child in the monastery, you are finishing off what your father's murderers commenced! If you do not leave him there, when your son grows up, he will pick up on the same page of *Gemorah* on which your father left off."

The *rav* said goodbye and left the house. Shocked by his words, the daughter ran after him, got into his car, and said, "I want to remove him from the monastery immediately." She then added, "On the condition that you raise him; I have no one else." He agreed, after stipulating his own condition, "You draw him near to you, and, through you, I will draw near to him." Today, this child is a *Rosh Yeshiva* in Yerushalayim – continuing on where his saintly grandfather left off.

The indomitable Jewish soul cannot be stilled.