

ODDS AND ENDS

by Rabbi Avi Shafran

Alighting from the Staten Island ferry at Manhattan's southern tip on my way to work February 5, I was greeted by a phalanx of stern-looking police, padded with Kevlar and armed with assault rifles. Then, suddenly, from behind me, came a loud, hoarse shout, echoed by the roar of hundreds of voices. Before me, a small army fell into formation, front guard carrying large flags, troops marching dutifully behind, determinedly heading north on Broadway. It was post-Super Bowl Tuesday, and Agudath Israel's national offices lie a few minutes' walk up the celebrated boulevard, along the parade route they call the Canyon of Heroes.

After making my way through the gathering crowd (the parade's start was still two hours away) and the peddlers of timely trinkets, past the rows of police scooters and motorcycles, the early inebriated and the cordons meant to keep celebrants from celebrated, I arrived at our offices. The front entrance to the building was blocked; I entered though the back, on another street.

After attending a long staff meeting, having just settled in at my desk, I was startled by a swell of loud, raucous cheering from the street. Thirteen stories below. Through closed windows and across a good-sized reception area. Here be heros.

A bit later in the day, after the confetti had settled, blanketing the ground, and the thousands of revelers had gone their ways, I heard a different sound in our offices. It came from the large room that serves as our synagogue for weekday afternoon services.

The previous Thursday, Orthodox rabbinic leaders in Israel and the United States had called on their followers to recite Psalms and, where possible, convene the special prayer service recited on Yom Kippur Koton, or "minor Yom Kippur," as the day before a new Jewish month begins is called. For the month of Adar I this year, that day fell out on February 5, 2008. The rabbis' request for special prayers came from what they perceive to be a confluence of crises in the Holy Land - dangers to Jews "from both within and without." The danger without is self-evident: the mounting threats to Israel emanating from Iran and the vipers' nest of Palestinian terror groups, along with a larger world (and a world body) largely indifferent to it all.

The danger within was an attempt to tamper with the Israeli haredi community's educational system, and political deliberations "that could place entire populations of Jews into grave danger, G-d forbid - including those in the Holy City of Jerusalem."

While the Yom Kippur Koton service in our office synagogue lacked the decibels of the earlier, larger gathering along Broadway, it had its own power, born of Jews' heartfelt pleas with their Creator to forgive their sins and protect His people from harm.

Even for a connoisseur of contrasts like me, Tuesday's provided a notable one.

In this corner, so to speak, were a teeming mass of wildly jubilant human beings, enraptured by how some young men managed to run and throw and catch an oddly-shaped ball somewhat better than another group. In the other were a few dozen (joined, to be sure, by many thousands around the world) humbly asking for G-d's mercy.

Something more, though, than the differential struck me. I couldn't help but wonder if something synchronistic, maybe even meaningful, lay in the fact that the day designated by the rabbis to pray for the welfare of Israel's Jews turned out to be the one on which New Yorkers celebrated the Giants' win - in the fact that what was Yom Kippur Koton for some happened to become a joyous celebration-day for others.

Maybe I was being overly imaginative, but what occurred was that the celebration on Broadway was really, at its core, over how a situation that seemed all but lost - with an adversary seen as unbeatable and the longest of odds being placed on triumph - was turned on its head at the last minute.

As it happens, that's quite an Adar thought. The joy that the Talmud says is appropriate for the just arrived Jewish month derives from the subtle miracle of the Purim story, where all seemed increasingly hopeless yet, after Jews' prayer and repentance, turned out just fine. The odds were long ones, but they didn't end up reflecting the ends.

For believing Jews, the ends of history are clear, as improbable as they might at times seem. So perhaps it's not too fanciful to hope that Tuesday's confluence of parade and prayer proves to be a good sign - for a positive response to the latter.

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