

CHAPTER 1 - PART 2

by Rabbi David Sykes

Still, the answer is not complete; there is still room to ask: Which part of the Torah is the direct cause of the strength of our nation to survive, of the strength of its steadfast cleaving to our faith? To our great sadness, in the difficult circumstances of the exile, the forgetting of Torah became greater and greater. Did not the Rabbis themselves say, "If the people of earlier generations were like angels, we are like mere human beings ..."? Have we not seen entire communities of Jews who, because of various distressing situations, such as difficulties in making a living and the persecutions and decrees, have been distanced from the page of the Gemara? Have we not seen groups and individuals who did not merit diligent perseverance at the "doors of the Torah" - who never knew the sublime pleasure experienced by a person who plumbs the depths of the sea of the Talmud and merits to involve himself in the study of the Torah of God - and, nonetheless, very astoundingly, these people continued to live holy and pure lives of faith?

These people, more than once, for the sake of their faith, their Torah, and their brothers, were the first ones to sacrifice their lives for the sanctification of God's Name. Men and women, who were far from the mysteries of Torah and did not know the depths of its secrets, stretched out their necks to the knife. These things are well-known, and were described well by the great men of Israel who lived in the difficult days of the decrees of and exile from Spain. People from among the simple ones of the nation were the symbols and exemplars of steadfastness, without second-guessing and without numerous calculations through which they could have sought to exempt themselves.

For the purpose of presenting and clarifying the question, I will make use of a Chassidic story, which, like all Chassidic stories, has, beyond the story that captivates the heart, a deep symbolic meaning hidden within.

A group of Chassidim once went on a long journey to their Rebbe, who lived far away. It was in the middle of the winter, when the snow covered the entire earth, and the cold winds froze even the air. The Chassidim sat in an open wagon, which they had succeeded in hiring with what remained of their money. The wagon moved slowly, and its wheels moved with great difficulty. The cold air powerfully penetrated their worn out garments, and pierced their flesh like knives. Quiet prevailed in the wagon, and the snow continued to pile up in the dark of night.

Suddenly, a heavy sigh was heard from the mouth of one of the Chassidim who had almost frozen - a heavy sigh - and afterwards, he said, "Oy, from where can we now obtain a little bit of brandy, to warm our bones a little? We are otherwise liable to die in this terrible cold, in the thick of the

desolate forest."

Another Chassid, who sat next to him and was also frozen, heard his sigh and sought to console his friend and to encourage his spirit. He turned to him with a calming voice and said, "Don't worry, my dear friend, don't let your spirit fall. Not far from here, just a little farther ahead, we will approach a large crossroads, next to which there stands an inn, in which you will be able to obtain plenty of brandy. There, we will also be able to rest a little bit and warm up our frozen bones. Wait a little bit more, and, in a few more miles, our salvation will come.

But there was again heard a sigh from the first Chassid, who refused to be encouraged: "You are right, my brother, we are indeed getting closer to an inn, where we will receive plenty of brandy, where will be able to give rest to the frozen and exhausted bundle of our bones, where will also be able to warm up. It is all true. However, what can we do until we reach that yearned-for inn? Is it not so that, until we reach the inn, we urgently need a little brandy, so that we will not die in the meantime and we will indeed be able to reach the inn?"

The symbolic meaning of this story is also clear. When we went out into the long exile - onto the dark and frozen road in the prolonged darkness of thousands of years - we went out equipped with our holy Torah, which gave us the strength to believe in the future redemption, the coming of the Messiah, and the coming to an end of all our travails. The inns on the road were the Torah centers, Torah scholars, and the holy great men of Israel, who warmed the Jewish heart and caused to flow into it the fire of faith and hope, which revitalized the dry bones; but until the inn
