

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

A young student asked me a question that only someone actively involved in seeking new meaning in life could pose. "Rabbi, why is Tehillim so depressing?"

I looked into his searching face and realized that his question was coming from someone who was learning the words of King David with fresh yet untutored regard. He wanted to find help in these age-old words, but he could not get past their painful descriptions. I replied, "King David tells us the reality of life, but he does so from a position of hope and promise. Nowhere do we see the holy singer of Israel fall into total despair. His greatest message is that we can work beyond what we see and find the ultimate salvation that Hashem holds forth."

This conversation turned into a long and as of yet unfinished dialogue that I treasure greatly, for it has given me an opportunity to articulate what I myself must understand. Even at his most stressful, painful moments, David saw the light of hope. It is our job to find it in every chapter he authored.

In kapitel 14, David foresees the destruction of the First Temple at the hands of Nebuchadnetzar. He prophesizes that our enemies will defile our holiest places, and no one will lift a finger to stop them. Nothing could be darker than such devastation, no moment as painful.

David describes our enemies with the words, *The degenerate one said in his heart, "There is no God." They deal corruptly and abominably; there is no one who does good.* Rav Hirsch sees the word naval, the degenerate one, as related to the root word for withered and worn out. He explains that just as a withered leaf has no will of its own but gets caught up in the currents of any passing breeze, so it will appear in those dark times of disaster. All the moral strength in man will seem withered away, and people will act according to the winds of their passions. Without the willpower to withstand, they will fall into the vortex of mindlessness.

A Jew's position of uniqueness among the rest of Hashem's creations is based on his unique ability to choose right from wrong. This is how we resemble the image of Hashem. When this Divine spark turns cold, we hear our enemies declare, "There is no G-d."

David speaks of eternal happenings. Our own times relate to his words all too well. While today Hashem's enemies use different tools to deaden the hearts of mankind, their goals are the same. They want us to deny our image of Hashem, our holy spark. So they deluge the air we breathe with the rot of secular selfishness and create an atmosphere where no matter how much we have, we feel the need for more. No generation has wallowed in so much material good, yet no generation

has seen so much mental anguish and unhappiness. Unfortunately, so many have become withered and dry, and they get blown from one craving to the next, mindless of their potential for greatness.

One day, I went to the post office to send off some mail and found myself waiting on a long line of mostly young students. I noticed that almost all of them were wearing little wires sticking out of their ears and attached to small boxes fastened to their waists.

In and of itself, this phenomenon wasn't something unusual. Those wires were part of an old invention called a Walkman. The strange thing about the sight was that even when those kids were talking to the clerk at the postal counter, they still had their tapes blasting full force into their ears. It's a miracle they could even hear what they were being told.

This behavior is indicative of the world these young people inhabit. They don't hear what those nearest them are saying because they are too engrossed in the jarring stuff being shouted into their heads. It's no wonder the world we live in seems deaf to the cries of the soul.

David described this sorry situation with the words, *They have all gone astray, together they became corrupt. There is no doer of good, not even one.* Yes, things are pretty bad indeed. The streets are not fit to walk on. Everywhere we turn, posters and advertisements bombard us with decadence. Homes are infiltrated with all types of junk, and even the schools no longer teach moral rights and wrongs. This is truly devastation on the level King David foretold.

At the same time, however, he speaks of hope and promise. It's astounding to witness how the truth of his prophecy can also be seen in our times.

I am reminded of a powerful insight that my dear friend and colleague, Rabbi Y. Y. Rubinstein, once wrote: "If you see a sign that says NO ENTRY,' it means there is a door." He used these words to explain the passage where Hashem told Moshe to stop praying for the salvation of the sinning Israelites: "And now, do not try to prevent Me from acting. Let My anger flare up against them, and I will consume them and make you a great nation" (Shemos 32:10). With these words, Hashem hinted to Moshe a fabulous truth a closed door is still a door. And with this understanding, Moshe prayed even more.

In our generation, too, perhaps more than ever, Hashem wants to hear our beseeching voice and bring us salvation through its cries. Thus, after describing a world at its lowest, David says in the next breath, *They will be stricken with terror, for Hashem is with the righteous generation.* At the specific point where the corruption started, our enemies will be stricken with terror. The greatest terror of all will be the realization of how shallow and meaningless their lifestyle has become. Their sophisticated talk will be seen as foolishness because their lives will be revealed as empty and devoid of any real joy. Those who *disparage the plans of the poor*, those arrogant leaders who made fun and shamed the Torah adherent as being of no relevance in the modern world, will have to turn to Hashem amid the ashes of their own destructive doings *because Hashem is their refuge.*

And then, in full voice, the kapitel sings out, *O that out of Zion would come Israel's deliverance! When Hashem returns the captivity of His people, Yaakov will exult, Israel will rejoice.* This is David's positive answer to the devastating reality presented earlier. There is no room for despair. We need only turn to Hashem.

Recent events depict the words of this psalm all too well. Those who wanted to build a Jewish world based on ideals foreign to the Jewish soul have witnessed their great experiment turn to ashes. No one supports them, the so-called leaders of the other nations have turned their backs, and even their young have no real connection with their heritage. Their aspirations have withered away and left them terrified. The only vibrant segment left in the Jewish world today is the Torah-true community they despised and discarded. This community thrives with growth and vigor, and we wait the day when even those terror-filled unfortunates will find themselves seeking Hashem as a refuge.

Perhaps we can take a cue from David and open up our hearts to those out in the cold, frozen by the frigid winds of an indifferent and valueless world. Maybe we can help them thaw and give them the warmth they need to come back to meaningful Jewish life. Maybe we can offer them Tehillim's keys to open their hearts and find the way to the heavenly gates in fulfillment of David's hopes.

Our Torah sages kept their Tehillim open. They prayed from the darkest places and saw a vision of truth and light. This has always been our strength. What seemed to outsiders a closed door is an invitation to us to open it. Tehillim speaks of true hope. David never ceased to find the key to Hashem's gates, and his great gift to us is that promise for all times.

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