

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

It had been a difficult time. Those last days remain seared in my mind, the memory and its poignancy never to be forgotten. Larry was dying, and there was nothing we could do but give comfort and say Tehillim. Here was a man who had been so alive and full of grace. Yet in the space of a few months, he had become completely helpless. The pain was agonizing, both for his family and for everyone who knew and respected him.

Larry was the president of our congregation. Unlike some in such positions, he was respected by all. In addition, he was an outstanding doctor with an international reputation. He had received honors from many famous personages, including the Queen of England. He was not old, and he had great plans for the future. Then one day he went shopping, collapsed and awoke to be told that he was ill with an ailment that had no known cure. From one who walked tall and spoke with unrivaled eloquence, he slowly shrank into a pain-ridden shadow who could not even eat on his own. His loyal wife and their grown children carried the burden of his care with fortitude. The blow was doubled with the realization that their beloved husband and father had once been the tower of strength in their lives. This strength had extended to our entire community. His involvement as president of the shul had given direction to us all. He was a very caring and spiritual person, who became emotional whenever people with problems turned to him.

I remember how once, on his return from a trip to Eretz Yisrael, he described his feelings of elation at taking part in a kabbalas Shabbos service at the Kosel. I asked him what it was that had so moved him. He replied that to watch and share in such a joyful moment with hundreds of other Yidden had given him great chizuk. He went on to explain that he fully realized that among those hundreds of strangers there were no doubt many who were of broken spirit and enormous pain. Yet they all sang together and somehow rose above the tedium and difficulties of their daily lives to enter a place of calm serenity.

Another time, he asked me if we could introduce the singing of Yedid Nefesh before kabbalas Shabbos. This was not the custom of the nusach we generally followed, and I was intrigued.

"Where did you hear that sung?" I asked him.

"In Eretz Yisrael. It's so lovely, and the words are so powerful."

Obviously I was glad to do his bidding. As a chassid, I had long missed this beautiful way of introducing the Shabbos tefilla. As time went on, this song of Yedid Nefesh became synonymous

with Larry and his yearning for all that is good and positive in our lives.

It was this beloved, thoughtful man who now was slipping away from us, and we were all aware of how sad the situation was. On the last day, during what turned out to be his last hours, I was sitting with the family around his bed. We had run out of words. Each of us was wrapped up in his own thoughts, saying Tehillim, helplessly watching Larry's desperate pain. He was more or less unconscious, and when he was awake, his eyes were pools of sadness. Some of those sitting there could not take the grief, and every so often someone would slip outside the room to cry.

I searched my aching mind for something that would ease his heart. I couldn't grasp what it was I sought, but I felt I was missing something. I too slipped out of the room, and as I breathed some fresh air outside his home, my rebbetzin arrived. She had come to be with the family, and she anxiously asked me what was going on.

I relayed the situation to her, and she said only one thing: "Sing Yedid Nefesh."

How obvious! I had been too lost in the trauma to see it. His prayer, his song, would give him the strength and comfort he sought.

I went back into the room. Larry looked up at me with mute beseeching. I started to quietly sing those cherished words. "Yedid nefesh Av harachaman, the Beloved of my soul, a merciful Father," and Larry stopped his agitated searching and calmed down. A smile appeared on his face, and most wondrous of all, he sang in a still, small voice the words of his prayer.

These were his last moments. He lay back on his pillow with a face no longer wracked with pain. Soon afterward, with the words Shema Yisrael on his lips, he returned his soul to Hashem.

Each of us has a prayer that is our own, a shtikele tefilla that sends messages to our inner being with laser-beam accuracy. Obviously, every prayer in the siddur is holy, but for each person there is, or should be, a tefilla that talks to his individual core. Its words seem just that more personal, and its theme talks about needs that are yours. For Larry, this was Yedid Nefesh, and with its words he was able to find that which he desperately sought.

King David also had his special shtikele tefilla, and Chapter 18 of Tehillim is it. This kapitel is the only one recorded twice, both here and in sefer Shmuel. The Abarbanel is of the understanding that David originally created this tefilla as a youth, while surrounded by his many problems and misfortunes. This song was meant to be his all-inclusive one that would give him strength throughout his eventful life. Throughout his life, David kept this psalm at hand, reciting it on every occasion of personal salvation.

Just stop for a moment and listen to some of his words:

"I will love You, Hashem. You are my strength." Hashem is loved by His servant thoroughly, and this in itself gives strength. It is a wondrous facet of Hashem's goodness. The more we divest ourselves of

our materialistic egos and turn to Hashem, the more we feel the strength to do so.

"Hashem is my boulder, my fortress and my rescuer my God, my rock in Whom I take refuge, my protective shield and source of my salvation, my stronghold." Hashem becomes the shield from harm, for with strong faith in Him, we can counter all the slings and arrows of those who seek to dissuade us from our true course. In this way, Hashem is not only our fortress that stands on high ground, solid and firm, but He is also the force that will rescue us when we slip away from His rock and stronghold.

"Lauded One!" I call out to Hashem, and I am delivered from my enemies. David faced many enemies, some external and some from within himself. By calling out to Hashem and remaining focused on this one truth, he was delivered from all.

The psalm goes on to illustrate in vivid imagery the wondrous ways that Hashem saves us.

He saved me from my powerful enemy and from those who hate me, for they were too strong for me. David makes a heartening admission. Yes, there were times when his enemies were way beyond his abilities. However, by focusing on Hashem's love, he eventually saw those enemies trampled in the dust.

We all have moments when our tormentors seem so strong that we can't imagine how we will persevere. Cares and troubles seem to overwhelm us, and we thrash about in agony. David gives us light. Yes, there are times when things seem beyond hope, but Hashem is always there to rescue us. As a communal Rav, time and again people come to me with situations that seem impossible to cope with. I try to explain that this is nothing unique life is sometimes like that, and we can find strength if only we truly turn to Hashem.

I realize this sounds easier said than done, and I may even be considered guilty of sounding trite in the face of others' pain. That is far from the truth. We all feel such times of constricted emotions. Much of it is self-inflicted because we have not fully developed our own spiritual quota, and a sort of panic sets in, but the truth is there.

David sang his song throughout an entire lifetime, during the most difficult hardships imaginable. Each moment of doubt, confusion and pain can be overcome if we sing our own tefilla, the one that touches our innermost selves.

On his deathbed, Larry taught me more than I could ever give him. We too can learn from David's lesson. Each of us must find his song and sing it well.

Text Copyright © 2007 by **Torah.org**.