CHAPTER THIRTY

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

Ah, those youthful memories. They give so much insight if only we remember them in time. Just today my mind wandered back some forty odd years ago to another place, another world.

We lived in Kew Garden Hills, a section of New York City that is now very heimish, but in those long-forgotten days was a secular bulwark. The area was Jewish, but the folk weren't quite as frum as one would hope. In fact, it supported a large Conservative establishment, and hardly a kappel could be seen in the street. All the local shops were open on Shabbos, and kosher food was hard to find.

Into this sterile atmosphere came a handful of heimishe Yidden who lived there basically because the housing was spacious yet affordable. On one of the side streets, a chassidic rav opened up a shtiebel, and it was in this vibrant environment that I grew up.

The rav's name was Harav Yosef Gelernter, zt"l, and he was a true Torah pioneer. His was a living Yiddishkeit that left little to the imagination. As a Polish Yid and Gerrer chassid, Reb Yosef glowed in the darkness of what was otherwise a community seeking to separate itself from its Torah roots. He bravely built a mikve, wore a shtreimel and created an oasis of strong, Torah-true Yiddishkeit despite the hostility of his neighbors.

My memories centered around how the shtiebel looked on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Of course, most Jews, no matter how far their road has led them away from Torah, want to go to shul on the High Holy days. The problem is deciding where to go. Surprisingly, to many in that long-forgotten community, the Rav's shtiebel was the place to be.

They were far from being considered frum Yidden, but they came anyway. Some came because they harbored memories of long-forgotten shtiebelach in der alter heim or the Lower East Side. These lost souls still found the thought of davening with the older folk a warm, sweet reminiscence. Others came because it was cheaper. The seats in the big temple went for hundreds, while you could get in the rav's shul for almost nothing. So, while during the year the shtiebel hosted about fifty devoted souls, on Yom Tov the numbers would swell to well over a hundred and fifty.

The logistics of this mixture were interesting to behold. Generally, the regulars would sit in the first few rows around tables, while the guests would be lined up in rows of rented chairs reaching all the way to the back. Rav Yosef was our baal tefilla, and his davening would transport us to a realm of spirituality that had no connection with the post-war America he found himself in. His tears were of ancient vintage, deeply ingrained with the tinge of deveikus, clinging and yearning for Hashem.

Rav Yosef was a survivor of several camps. He had seen what no human should ever have to see. Yet he stood strong and proud, tallis on his head, voice clear and sturdy, davening with the fervor he had learned in the mesivta of Warsaw.

What did our guests make of all this? True, they would begin the morning shmoozing while the frumies got on with the day's business. However, every once in a while they would stop and listen, and then their listening would become participation, and slowly but surely they would find themselves being swept up into the spiritual energy around them. I personally saw these supposedly cold-hearted, unconnected fellows open up their hearts for just a moment and stand there astounded by their own feelings.

Ah...it was such an innocent time. Souls were so thirsty, and huge fires were ignited with a bit of warmth.

We take all too little notice of the dynamic power a shul can create, not only for such guests as the aforementioned, but for our own souls as well. There are moments when each of us needs the support that only communal tefilla can offer. At such times, we seek out Hashem together with others and allow ourselves to become spliced with what we so desperately need. It can't happen on our own. We need the sighs, the cries and the strength of others to energize our own deficient souls.

In kapitel 30, we celebrate the constant renewal of our shuls. The chapter begins, *A mizmor song for the dedication of the Temple, by David.* We know that the Beis Hamikdash was built by King Solomon. How is it that its dedicational song is attributed to David? Rashi explains that David composed the song that would be sung in the days of his son, King Solomon. This may also indicate that all future places of heartfelt prayer were and are continuously revitalized by David's unique words. Perhaps that's why we start each morning's prayers with this kapitel, placing the dedication from then into our here and now.

I will exalt You, Hashem, for You have raised me up and did not give my enemies cause to gloat over me. The Sfas Emes tells us that the downtrodden state of Klal Yisrael is actually part of their uplifting. The word dilisani, "raise me up," has its root in the word deli, a bucket. Just as a bucket must be lowered to bring up fresh, life-giving waters, so too Klal Yisrael must sometimes be brought to a lower depth before being raised up. The descent is part of the rising.

Hashem, my God, I cried out to You, and You healed me. The Mezibuzher Rebbe said this signifies that the act of crying out to Hashem is itself a source of healing for spiritual ailments. The Kobriner Rebbe touches on the same thought. He explains the words from Shemos (15:26), "For I am the Master Who heals you," to mean that the knowledge that Hashem is the Master is a cure for maladies of the mind and heart.

Hashem, You lifted my soul from the netherworld. You kept me alive, so I didn't *descend into the pit of Gehinnom.* The netherworld is usually understood to be referring to Gehinnom, a place for sinners after death. Here we see that even during one's lifetime a person can find himself in such emotional

pain that it is as if he is already visiting that place of purgatory.

David tells us that even from within such total misery one can find life. Through our connection with Hashem, we can find a way of preventing ourselves from falling into life's deep pits.

Let Hashem's pious ones sing to Hashem and give recognition to His holy name. David shouts out to all generations, "Let Hashem's pious ones sing" as a kehilla, we become part of the pious ones, part of the many and the searching. This group, just by being together, expresses deep recognition and appreciation of Hashem.

In the evening, one retires weeping, but in the morning, there is joy. At the end of a long day, we may feel vulnerable, but if we come to reclaim our devotion in the morning, we can find life's true joy.

You have turned my eulogy into dance. The past pain becomes cause for future dancing. If we bond together, we can help create an ambiance of kedusha that allows for each individual to defy the gravity of this mundane world. As one, our dance raises us above the ties that bind us to earthly wants.

So that my soul sing to You and not be stilled. Hashem, my God, I will thank You forever. There is voice-song and there is soul-song. They may seem the same, but the sensitive ear knows the difference. The song sung from the soul will go on forever. It comes from eternity and has no beginning or end. This song will not be stilled, not by our enemies and never by the holy nation of Israel. Hitler, may his name be blotted out, tried and failed. You can still hear our soul-song as I heard it in that shtiebel, and who knows how many generations will continue to sing its glory.

We start our davening with this kapitel, for it inaugurates our mikdash me'at and gives meaning to our coming together.

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