

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

Chapter 66

A young lad lies in his bed. He holds a sefer in his hand. It is an English translation of the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, and he is memorizing it page by page. The year is 1957, the place, the green suburbs of Long Island, New York. The youngster, not even bar mitzva, reads the sefer under his covers, by the light of a hand-held flashlight. His father has forbidden him to learn any Torah; he fears the boy is going all out in this religious business and has been watching out for any signs of disobedience. The boy wants to learn everything he needs to in order to be a worthy bar mitzva, and despite parental pressures he is determined to go to a yeshiva. He wears a kappel, and in the dim light he revels in the knowledge he is gaining.

Suddenly a shaft of light crosses his bed, the door is flung open and the shadow of his tall father enters the room. The blanket is pulled aside and there, lying exposed, is the lad with his treasured sefer in hand.

The father grabs the "book," throwing it to the side. "I told you that I don't want you to study this stuff. Those Rabbis are making you crazy!"

The child's eyes tear, and then the father sees the kappel on his head. "What is that for? You're not in synagogue. Take it off!" The irate man grabs the humble head covering and gives the boy a slap for good measure. "If you don't stop this, I promise you will never get bar mitzva'd!"

The door slams shut; the young boy shivers in despair. He gets up, lifts the sefer and gives it a kiss. He then goes to his closet and rummages about until he finds a small siddur. He creeps back into his bed, opens to a page in the prayer book and starts to pour out his heart to Hashem. This story is a true one. The boy grew up to become a renowned mechanech who has raised many talmidim and taught them the path of true Yiddishkeit. He told me his tale to describe how difficult it was in those far-away days for an American kid to become frum. Many post-war parents had no understanding of what Torah Judaism was all about. Frum people were seen as some exotic throwback from ancient times, something to be kept in a museum, not on Long Island.

"What," I once asked him, "drove you to want to be frum despite such adversity?"

"It was the siddur, it was hearing people daven," was his reply. Those who daven on a daily basis

sometimes forget what a powerful human expression our tefillos are. We mumble along, not always in synch with what the holy words are saying. That little boy heard them with fresh ears. He felt their sweetness. He told me that in the Hebrew School he attended (a necessity for his fancy bar mitzva party), he encountered for the first time the sound of real prayer. He had a teacher who sang all the Shabbos tefillos with his class, and it was this that opened up his young innocent heart. He was to face many trials and many battles, and always he would hearken back to those sounds for comfort. He told me of intimidation, physical abuse, mental harassment, police - you name it, and all the time he focused on the sounds of our tefillos.

Is he a hero? Most definitely. Is he unique? The answer is no. For as long as we have been a people we have gained strength through the words of our tefillos. Every one of us is called upon to face adversity, challenges that try to corrupt our very identity. Some will fail, others will grow, and many will stumble a bit and then pick themselves up and regain their Torah momentum. The one sure vessel that will carry us through our individual trials will always be the words of our tefillos. These ancient and sweet words have been drenched in thousands of years of Jewish tears, soaked in our aching hearts, and made bolder by our belief in Hashem. This kapitel encapsulates this understanding. David Hamelech composed it with an eye to future generations. It speaks of our trials and of our victories, but most importantly, it speaks of the power of our prayers. *Hari'u l'Elokim kol haaretz...*, "Shout to G-d all the earth. Sing to the glory of His Name, make glorious His praise." Yidden are dispersed throughout the world, in all four corners of the earth. The purpose of this is so we can sing His praises, thus making His name known to all. *Lechu ure'u mifalos Elokim...*, "Go and see the works of Hashem; awe-inspiring in His acts toward the sons of man. He turned the sea into dry land, through the river they passed on foot; there we rejoiced in Him." We small little Yiddilach wonder, how can we get through our current problems? We are stuck in our own rut, thinking we are so alone. Comes David Hamelech and reminds us - Look! See, this is real!

What does he speak of? The wondrous acts of utter pure chessed that Hashem has wrought for His people. Hashem changed the whole natural world so that His children could walk through the sea on dry land. What was expected in return? We must rejoice in His love for us.

Every one of us has to walk through our personal sea of bitterness. "Go and see" - look around you, everyone has their peckela, but if you remain steadfast, it will be as if you are walking on dry land. It will be difficult, for that is the essence of one's trials, but dry land will never drown you, and if you are focused you will get to the other side and will be blessed in rejoicing in Hashem.

Hasam nafsheinu bachaim..., "He set our soul in life and did not allow our feet to slip. For You tried us, Hashem; You refined us as if refining silver." An American poet once said, "There are those who wish they were born in another time or place. But you can bet yourself, times ten and double, that G-d knew exactly where He wanted you to be placed." Where you are is where Hashem wants you to be. His will is for you to become refined in the circumstances He has placed you; that is why you are here in the first place.

Haveisanu bametzuda..., "You brought us into closed quarters, You put a constraint upon our loins." This is so comforting! You are not alone, nor are you the first. Hashem puts us all in "closed quarters," places we feel are keeping us from our goals. In reality, however, it is for our own good, for through it we will grow.

Hirkavta enosh lerosheinu..., "You made mortal man ride over our heads, we went through fire and water, and You brought us out to abundance." We went through so much, Hashem, and for what? For the "abundance." The day will come when we will look back at the difficulties we have gone through both as a people and as individuals, and we will say that it was all worthwhile, for at that time we will appreciate and savor the loving light that is Hashem's wondrous abundance.

Lechu shimu vaasapera kol yirei Elokim..., "Go and hearken, and I will declare to all those who fear Hashem, what He has done for my soul." When one gets through difficulties and feels the strengthened closeness to Hashem, then he wants to sing with joy and tell all what Hashem has done for his soul. There is nothing as dark as the world without the knowledge of Hashem. Through our experiences we can get past this and actually see the difference in our soul.

Achein shama Elokim..., "But Hashem has heard, He has hearkened to the voice of my prayer. Blessed is Hashem, Who has not turned away my prayer nor His kindness from me." Hashem always hears our tefillos; that is what we are. Our very name Yehudim, Jews, comes as an expression of prayer to our Father. He hears us from every place we have fallen, even under the covers of that little boy's room. This voice that cries out is our passport throughout the eternity of life's trials. It is the one overriding truth we must never forget: Hashem always listens; we need but speak.

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