

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

Hospitals have a certain smell, a mixture of aromas unlike any other place. It matters not if it is day or night; the place smells the same. I often think that contributing to this aroma are the combined prayers of all the patients and their loved ones. The ill pray for relief of their pain, new mothers ask for a bright future for their child, a distraught family pleads for a miracle cure, and on and on it goes, each bed telling its own tale. The sheer sweetness of these beseeching words scents the air as it floats its way up to the heavens.

Yes, a hospital must be one of the holiest places on earth. Where else are so many so close to Hashem?

Whenever I go to visit people in the hospital, I come in with a mixture of emotions. I often fear going into a room where I know a patient lies critically ill. I feel incompetent and humbled when facing someone I knew as strong and vibrant but who is now so weak and pain-filled. What can I say to the family, who must endure the sight of a loved one becoming a weak shadow of the person they knew and loved? The truth is, after such visits one tends to seriously look at one's own mortality, staring it in the mind's eye. It is a chilling sight, often bleak and dark, leaving many of us fearful of a cruel, incurable disease invading our bodies. And although medical advances have made it almost normal for humans to live longer than previous generations, this too has brought with it added fear and anguish. Many are fearful of an old age that will be marred with what seems like senseless days of befuddled unease.

You may be walking in the sunlight of your years, thinking the most pleasant of thoughts, dreaming of a future filled with bright-filled moments, when the cloud of these fears scuttles past and blocks out the light, throwing a chill of apprehension across the path.

Before you decide that this makes for too sad a reading, please let me explain. I touch on these matters because they are part of us all. We all have those dark moments when we feel the gloom of fear running through our hearts; it's part of the human condition. There are ways of facing these emotions, but first you must admit that they are there. If not, you will just carry them about, allowing them to gnaw away at your soul.

To the Torah Jew, all of this is part of the totality that binds us with the holy cords that tie us to Hashem. We can learn to face and deal with everything, no matter the time or place, if we see circumstances for what they really are.

David Hamelech's words are a veritable handbook for life, for he too suffered and he too worried. He was holy enough to admit this, and with his gift of divine insight he leaves us words that can give us all the courage we need. Once we understand that we are not alone, and that in fact our fears are the same as those that came to people much greater than us, then we can begin to follow their directions. Obviously, the thoughts of the truly spiritual are on a far different level of thinking than ours, but if they are clothed in the same garb that our fears wear, we can relate them to our own situation.

David was far beyond our conception, yet he chooses his words for us, and we should take them into our humble hearts.

Becha Hashem chasisi..., "In You, Hashem, I have taken refuge, let me not be ashamed, ever." David states firstly that he has always sought refuge in but one place - Hashem. He wrote these words in his old age, and he is asking that in this new reality he should not find himself ashamed of anything. We all fear that as we get older we may lose some of the gifts of our younger years. This is part of life. David asks simply that this phase of life not cause him to be shamed.

Heyei li letzur ma'on..., "Be for me a sheltering rock to enter at all times, You ordered my deliverance; for You are my rock and my fortress." David proclaims that the "sheltering rock" he found as a young man, is the same one that is there for him in his old age. The youthful vigor we exercise when we are young leads us to the shelter of Hashem, and that shelter is a sturdy rock that never disappears, even with the passing of time. Hashem never leaves us, nor should we leave Him. At every age we need the "fortress" of Hashem, perhaps for different reasons, but always for ultimate deliverance.

Elokai palteini miyad rasha..., "My G-d, rescue me from the hand of the wicked, from the hand of the scheming and violent." In our hearts lurk questions that have no answers, and they sometimes twist and bite so that we become petrified with fear. This is the hand of the wicked; the schemers that seek to drive a wedge between Hashem and us. If we remain focused in the realization that everything is Hashem, then we will never be lost to despair.

David says these words aloud and clearly. Sometimes thinking them is not enough; you have to articulate the truth with the clarity of purpose.

Ki ata tikvasi..., "For You are my hope, my Master, Hashem, my trust since my youth." When we are young we trust in Hashem with youthful exuberance. That young hope can remain constant if we but allow it to.

Alecha nismachti mibeten..., "On You I have relied since birth, from my mother's womb You drew me; of You is my praise continually." In these times of medical magic we can forget what a glorious miracle life truly is. The very act of our birth is a miracle wrought by Hashem, and with every breath we take we continue to live that miracle. David praises Hashem at all times and at all stages of his life, for he realizes that it is only through Hashem's will that he lives at all.

Yimalei pi tehilasecha..., "Let my mouth be filled with Your praise, all day long with Your glory." David asks that he be able to fill his mouth with continuous praise for Hashem. Even in those "long days" of old age he seeks only to extol Hashem's glory.

Al tashlicheini le'eis zikna..., "Do not cast me off in the time of old age, when my strength fails do not forsake me." Here David speaks of his deepest fear. Hashem, he pleads, do not forsake me; do not cause me to become incognizant of Your presence in my old age. I am afraid that through my weakened condition I will feel as a castoff from the rock - the fortress that is Hashem.

It may seem ignoble for such a spiritual giant as David to articulate such thoughts, yet perhaps he says them for us.

Avo bigvuros Hashem..., "I will assert the mighty acts of my Master, Hashem; I will mention Your righteousness, Yours alone. Hashem, You have taught me from my youth, and to this day I declare Your wonders." From the moment of our miraculous birth we are sent to fulfill different tasks. With each day we are meant to assert that everything is a mighty act of Hashem. There may be times when we see no reason behind certain events, but as we look back at the path taken from our youth, we can see a clearer pattern of the righteousness that is Hashem's.

We are meant to learn through life's travails that everything Hashem sends us is for a purpose. We can grow closer to His essence only when we accept this as our reality. Then, even when we feel our deepest fears are coming upon us, we will find strength, as we did in our resilient youth. This is the strength to rise beyond the mere reckoning of humans to hold onto that "fortress" that is truly Hashem's wonder.

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