

YOM HASHOAH AND LESSONS TO BE REMEMBERED

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

There is a widespread custom to study Pirkei Avos during the weeks between Pesach and Shavuot. The lessons in Pirkei Avos, known also as the Ethics of the Fathers, are contained for the most part in the tractate Avos, one of the books of the Mishna. What distinguishes Avos from other tractates is the topic and focus of the book. Instead of dealing with legal precepts, it deals with how one should lead his or her life. These lessons from our Sages, the ethics of our Fathers, are lessons for all time.

In the first chapter, we find the teaching of Nittai HaArbeli: Distance yourself from a bad neighbor; do not associate with a wicked person; and do not despair of retribution.

There are varying explanations for the last piece of Nittai HaArbeli's lesson. One is that a person must realize that ultimately G-d will punish the wicked. Frequently, we see the righteous and innocent oppressed and the wicked prospering. At these times, we may "despair of retribution." How can G-d let this happen? How can the wicked go unpunished? Because of our limited "sight," we are not always capable of seeing the impending downfall of the wicked. The lesson is that we must remain confident that the evil will eventually get what they deserve, although it seems to us slow in coming. If we let ourselves believe that the wicked will be allowed to perpetrate their evil without any retribution, we run the risk that we will feel that evil and dishonesty will triumph over good and truth, an attitude which is destructive to an individual and society.

According to a second explanation, the lesson is that we should always be on guard. We should not think that just because we have wealth, tranquillity, power, etc., that we are untouchable, that no bad can happen to us. "Don't 'give up' on retribution" we are told: Don't think that bad things just can't happen to you. One's fortune can change in a split second. One should never become too secure with their status, as it can change.

According to a third explanation, the lesson is intended to boost our morale in times of despair. At times, we may find ourselves oppressed and in pain. In those times, we should not despair, we should not give up hope that G-d will help us. When the retribution is against us, we should not despair. We should not give up on praying to G-d. G-d is there to help us. We may not experience salvation immediately, but salvation will come.

Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, is the 27th day of Nissan, this year, Tuesday April 16. On this day, the lessons of Nittai HaArbeli are all too applicable. We have seen how evil triumphed. This is so difficult to understand: How could this happen? How did these murderers perpetrate the atrocities

for so long without retribution? Although we may not have answers as to why, we know one thing: Retribution will come.

A question many ask is: Could a holocaust happen again? Could such evil be allowed to continue unfettered in our democratic society? Again, we may not know the answer, but there is something we do know: We can not feel too comfortable with our status. While we might live in a democratic society now, and a holocaust seems highly unlikely, who knows what is going to happen? We don't, and therefore we must be alert and prepared.

When we do find ourselves in pain and persecuted, we may wonder if G-d has forgotten us. We may wonder if there is a G-d, and will salvation ever come. The lesson, Nittai HaArbeli tells us, is that salvation will come. The nation of Israel has survived persecution time and time again. So much blood and so many tears have been shed. At times, it appears that our end is near. However, we have to remember that although we may not understand the reason for what is happening or what has happened, we know that we will be saved and our persecutors will be punished.

Hopefully, we will soon see the construction of the Third Temple. Hopefully, we will never again have to suffer the pain that our fathers and mothers did. However, until that time comes, we must never forget these lessons that have allowed the nation of Israel to survive until this very day.

At the end of the second volume of "Nezikin" in the set of Mishna with the explanation of R' Pinchas Kehati, there is a prayer to be recited after completing a chapter or tractate of Mishna in memory of those who perished in the Holocaust. A translation follows:

Please, Hashem, who is full of mercy, that the soul of all living beings and the spirit of all man is in your hands, our Torah (that we have learnt) and our prayers on behalf of the souls of those millions of Israel, old and young, men, women and children, who were killed while sanctifying the name of G-d, should be pleasing before you. These who sanctified Your name were slaughtered, strangled, burnt to ashes by the hands of the German oppressors, may their names and any memory of them be blotted out. Among these who were killed were great cedars of Lebanon, the mighty of the Torah, holy and pure, the heads of Yeshivas and their students, the young children of Israel who never tasted the taste of sin, and the righteous of the world, leaders of Israel with their congregations, their holy congregations, who gave their lives in sanctifying G-d's name, and our relatives who were among them. May G-d remember them for good with the rest of the righteous of the world, and exact revenge for His servants' spilled blood, as it is written in the Torah of Moshe, a man of G-d: "O nations, sing the praise of His people for He will avenge the blood of His servants, and He will bring retribution upon His foes; and He will appease His land and His people." Any by your servants, the prophets, it is written saying " Though I cleanse (the enemy) - their bloodshed I will not cleanse when Hashem dwells in Zion." And in the Holy Writings it is said "Why should the nations say 'Where is their G-d?' Let there be known among the nations, before our eyes, revenge for your

servants' spilled blood." May their souls be bound in the Bond of Life, to see their revival with the resuscitation of the dead with all of the dead of your nation of Israel, with mercy, and send to us the Messiah to redeem us from our exile, to gather us together from the four corners of the earth to our land, and may we merit a complete redemption speedily, Amen.