

LESSONS IN EXILE

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

This issue of YomTov is dedicated by entire WITS/Yeshiva Gedola of Milwaukee family in memory of Adina bas Yaakov Tzvi Kader a"h. May her parents, Yaakov and Sarah Esther, and her entire family, be comforted and know no more sorrow.

The onset of the month of Nissan, the month in which we celebrate Pesach, brings with it feelings of hope. "In Nissan we were redeemed, and in Nissan we will be redeemed in the future." The exile in which we currently find ourselves has been long. We pray every day that we should merit to once again serve G-d in the Bais Hamikdosh, the Holy Temple in Yerushalayim. These longings are clearly expressed as well during the Seder, with no better example being the utterance of the famed phrase "L'shana ha'baah b'Yerushalayim," "Next year in Jerusalem." Yet, the Seder teaches us important lessons about our stay in exile as well.

The Hagadah quotes Devarim 26:6 "And the Egyptians dealt badly with us, and afflicted us, and placed upon us hard labor," "Va'yorai'u osanu haMitzrim va'yi'anunu, va'yitnu aleinu avodah kashah." R' Yaakov Chai Zerihan of Teverya noted that the wording of the pasuk illustrates a reality that the nation of Israel faces when in exile. When conveying the message that the Egyptians were evil to the nation of Israel, the pasuk does not state "va'yorai'u lanu," "and they were bad _to_ us," a language that would be more precise and accurate if that was the sum of the message. Instead, the pasuk says "va'yorai'u osanu." These words, the rabbi of Teverya said, teach us how our enemies go about persecuting the nation of Israel.

No one wants to be accused of being outright cruel and evil. No one wants to be perceived as heartless and wicked. Yet, we know that the nation of Israel has been on the receiving end of treatment that can easily be described as cruel, evil and heartless. Our oppressors, before engaging in such activities, find a way to justify their hostility. They fabricate libelous stories; they perpetrate falsehoods and spread venomous slander about the nation of Israel. The lies are repeated and accepted. Oppression of the nation of Israel then becomes justified. This, the pasuk tells us, is what Pharaoh did. "Va'yorai'u osanu haMitzrim," The Egyptians made us out to be bad, to be evil. And after that, "they afflicted us and put upon us hard labor."

Our only hope, our only salvation, when faced with oppression that stems from baseless hatred, is

G-d. We cannot combat the underlying falsehoods. We cannot eliminate the tyranny. We can only rely in G-d to save us. What is dangerous, however, is that we sometimes think we are not being oppressed. We live in free and open societies that allow free practice of religion. Rav Abdallah Somech of Baghdad noted that the Hagadah says, "In every generation our enemies rise up against us to destroy us." How can we possibly say that our enemies are trying to destroy us in times when the nation of Israel is allowed to flourish and live freely? But the truth is that mortal danger exists in such times as well.

Rav Berachya HaNakdan explained by means of a parable. The wind and the sun were arguing over who was more powerful. The sun boasted about its radiance and beauty, the warmth it provides. The wind bragged about its presence regardless the time of day, its ability to uproot trees and cause devastation. The sun noticed a man walking in the street, and he challenged the wind to get the man to remove his coat. The wind began to blow, and the man pulled the ends of his coat closer together. The wind grew stronger, and the man reacted by buttoning up his coat and pulling up his collar. As the ferocity of the wind grew, the man only pulled his coat closer around him, to provide him the needed warmth. The wind saw he could not accomplish the task, and challenged the sun to do such. The sun started shining and the temperature began to rise. First, the man loosened his grip on his coat. As it grew hotter, he unbuttoned his coat. The temperature grew so pleasant and warm that the man finally removed his coat. The sun had won.

The coat is G-d. When our situation deteriorates, when our pain hits us like a biting, frigid wind, our instinct is to get closer to G-d, and we therefore "pull the coat" tighter around us. We know that Hashem is our only hope and we come closer to Him in hopes that He will rescue us. The danger is that when things get too sunny, we should not throw the coat away. We have to remember Hashem always, even when things are going well. If the nation of Israel forgets Hashem during periods of peace and tranquility, our oppressors have succeeded in "destroying" us as well.

We live in exile. Many of us live in relative peace; many of us do not. The common denominator of our situations is that we must all remember, always, that Hashem is there for us, and that we are here to serve Him. May we no longer need to learn the lessons of exile, and may this month of Nissan be the one of our redemption.