

NO ONE TO HIDE FROM

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

This week we read the Tochaha, a series of unimaginable curses that, with prescient clarity, foretold the horrors that were destined to befall our people in its wanderings in exile.

Listen to the tales of the inquisition, the cruelty of the crusades, and the horrors of the Holocaust. They reflect the Torah's stern admonitions of a wayward nation cast asunder from the land of its inheritance. It tells of the destruction of cities and the starvation their citizens. And one of those curses is about running from our enemies. "And you shall run the flight of one who flees from a sword, yet no one is pursuing you" (Leviticus 26:36). Simply explained, the Torah is telling us of the inherent fear that we shall have from the suffering that we have endured. We shall run at the slightest thought, even when there is no one in pursuit. Recently I saw a question: Is it not better to run from a figment of imagination than having to flee an actual pursuer? All in all, the imagination can not brandish a weapon!

As I listened to a survivor tell the tale of his survival and its aftermath, I wanted to offer a homiletic interpretation.

Al Feurstein is a retired businessman who volunteers in our yeshiva's financial office. But more than that, he is a Holocaust survivor who recently told the story of his ordeals of concentration camps and death marches that wracked his 16-year-old body but were unable to conquer his faith and conviction.

After enduring years of unspeakable horrors, the war ended and Al arrived in the United States. With the help of relatives, he resettled in Laurelton, New York. A few weeks after his arrival, he was invited to speak at his cousin's synagogue.

As he recounted his personal story and detailing the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis and their willing civilian executioners, mouths fell open in literal disbelief. News had reached the US of mass murders and barbarism, but never had these congregants heard in full detail how men born to human mothers performed such horrific crimes.

What happened after his talk back then was most depressing, compounding the terror of his experience a hundredfold. A few prominent members of the congregation approached him. "Al, my dear boy," they coddled him. "You couldn't have seen and experienced those tales you told! We are sure you are shell-shocked from the terrible hardships you endured. After all, it could not have been all that bad."

The worst curse may actually be when no one believes that the other calamities happened. Perhaps that is also included in the curse "no one shall pursue you."

A great Rosh Yeshiva was complaining bitterly about not feeling well. Some colleagues did not take him seriously at first, and humored him by saying that the pains were more in his mind than in his body. Before those pains were actually diagnosed as the disease that eventually claimed his life, he lamented: "The Talmud in Bava Basra (15a) debates the historical timeframe of the story of Iyov (Job). Some say he lived during the time of Moshe, while others maintain he lived during the period of the Judges, and yet others even claim that he lived during the period of Purim. However, there is one opinion that Job never existed at all and the entire episode is only a parable."

Painfully, the Rosh Yeshiva sardonically commented, "that opinion was Iyov's worst tzarah (distress). Imagine, after all the pain and suffering Iyov endured, there is an opinion that he did not even exist!"

Perhaps this week, the Torah alludes to another form of curse. "When there is pain and suffering, when there is persecution and oppression, yet the world ignores the cries of those suffering - as if "no one is pursuing," -- that is a terrible curse, too. Perhaps that curse is as unfortunate as when the aggressors are clearly recognized for whom they are. Often our greatest enemies are not recognized as such. We are told that they are our partners and our fears are nothing but paranoia. Even our past experiences are being discredited by deniers, scoffers and skeptics.

We cannot control the ears and eyes of our detractors, but we can do our utmost to tell the story and make sure that they live on. And we can do our best to hear, too, the pain and suffering of those who cry to us, to make sure we understand the pursuers behind the pain.

Good Shabbos!

Rabbi Mordecai Kamenetzky

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