

THE DARKEST CORNER

by Rabbi Label Lam

The 9th of the month of Av is a time we sit low to the ground, as mourners, not merely to wallow in sadness but for the purpose of getting in touch with a certain raw truth that doesn't come easy. It's a day, like a doctor's appointment, that's hard to face. We wouldn't go there unless it was scheduled. So it says in Eicha, "He called a meeting time for me." We are all being called to that dread appointment.

Yet, in sharp contrast, our Sages tell us that Moshiach is born on that auspicious day. Hope like the phoenix grows from the ashes of destruction or as the Zohar on Parshas Devarim declares, "There is no light like the light that comes from darkness!" Choose your metaphor. Oddly the 9th of Av is laced with optimism. We are to appreciate at this time, as the Talmud states that here is a case of a "movement down in order to go up".

Almost 12 years ago Chanukah I was asked to be a guest speaker at a Chanukah party on a nearby college campus. The party consisted of me to be followed by jelly donuts. I had one shot to reach and inspire these young Jewish students.

I told them about the Bluszhever Rebbe lighting Chanukah candles in 'the camps'. The Rebbe looked around the room before reciting the brocho Shehechyanu and with tears in his eyes made that final blessing before lighting the makeshift menorah.

When asked afterwards by one broken soul how he was able to thank G-d for bringing us to this terrible time and place the Rebbe answered, "I too could not bring myself to say it until I saw how the people who, after having been so tortured were shouting with their eyes that they wanted nothing else but to see the candle lit. On this evidence of the indestructible spirit of the Jewish people, I made that final blessing!"

In the end I was moved to tears and all the students looked at the program director as if to say, "Can we have the donuts now?" Three months later I got a call from one of the students. The Gulf war was just warming up. Scud missiles loaded with who knows what were pointed at our people in Israel. Scott asked me if I could talk with him privately. He said he didn't think anyone else would understand him.

I found his dorm. In the front room there were these larger than life pictures of basketball players slamming the ball in the hoop. On the TV there was a game acting out exactly what the posters were showing and sitting there were a group of young men with a distinct cloud overhead and they too

looked like they had just stepped out of the looking glass. I asked them, "Where's Scott?" They grunted and motioned to the back room. There was Scott hunkering under a bunk bed. He thanked me for coming and asked me to sit. There was no chair, just a beanbag. So I sat and sat until I sunk down to the ground.

We talked for a short while smallish talk until he unloaded the bomb. I had asked him what was on his mind. It wasn't easy to get out. He started and stopped half a dozen times. "Rabbi I can't stop thinking about..." I told him, "Scott you can't possibly shock me. I'm not here to judge you." Then he just let it out. "I know you're going to think I'm crazy but I just can't stop thinking about G-d!"

He looked for my reaction. I reached out my hand mostly to get out of the beanbag. I congratulated him and told him, "Scott you're one of the only normal people I know! I don't understand how someone can glide and surf through 70 years here on the planet and not be taken over with awe and wonder about G-d!"

I had in my hand a Tehillim-Psalms. I gave it to him and asked him to open to any page. "These are the words of David, King of Israel. Our sages tell us, "The king is the heart of the nation." That means that as the leader, he doesn't just impose his ideas but rather he expresses what's latent in the hearts of the people. He educates about their deepest desires. Look on any page and read. See if you can go one line or two without The Almighty's name being evoked over and over again. We, the Jewish People, are supposed to be a G-d intoxicated people."

Scott started to learn. He gradually kept more and more Mitzvos. Eventually he married. He has a child now and has finished a few tractates in the Talmud. Over time he has learned well how to harness his thoughts into practical action and not because of me a light was found in the darkest corner.

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