

THAT IS THE QUESTION

by Rabbi Label Lam

And HASHEM called to man, and He said to him, - "AYECHA" -Where are you?" (Breishis 3:9)

Now after Adam ate what he was commanded not to eat he became spiritually distant from HASHEM. We understand that HASHEM knew where he was geographically like a GPS satellite, but he wanted Adam to consider where he had moved to in relationship to his Creator. HASHEM asked Adam so Adam would understand what happened? The Midrash here is sensitive to the language and detects that the very same letters used in asking that dramatic question are the very same letters that compose the name- the title for the Megilla we read on Tisha B'Av- "Eicha"- How!? How did it happen that a nation became so dislocated from its source? It's the same gnawing question that echoes through the cosmos till today! "Where are you!?"

Exactly 24 years ago, while running a program for prisoners, I brought a colleague of mine who travels widely as a guest speaker. Because the prisoners crave to know what's going on "out there" and they live vicariously through the adventures of others, they nudged the Rabbi with desperation to tell them where he had been recently. He answered glibly, "I was just in the world's largest prison and there I confronted the most- fierce warden of them all!" Some started to guess which place and which person he was referring to.

After they got quiet, he told them, "The largest prison in the world is the whole world!" I felt an awkward silence in the room and I glanced up sideways signaling that he ought not to continue peddling these soft parables or this was going to be a long night or a short night. As I expected, they chorused "All of us would love to go to that prison! Let us go out there!" The second answer shed light on the first and his words became poignantly clear. "Who's that fierce warden? Myself!" He explained "This guard keeps you from going a few feet to your left and right! This one stops you from getting beyond that point! I have my limitations too. If I travel north I cannot go south. Of course my limitations are far more expansive than yours.

On the horizontal plane, but who keeps us from going up, from climbing vertically, transcending the confines of this place and reaching the fullness of our real potential, even here in prison? Nobody stops us but ourselves!"

I know it was exactly 24 years ago, because my wife gave birth a week later, on Shabbos Tisha B'Av to a baby boy who is turning 24 this Tisha B'Av. Thirty seconds into the world, I held him for the first time. Maybe it was the footprint reminding me of the finger printing when entering prison but the

first unrehearsed words that escaped my mouth at that time was, "Welcome to the prison!"

My wife looked up at me with bewilderment. I owed her an explanation but I needed to explain it to myself first. It dawned on me that here, this lofty soul, a breath from The Almighty Himself, bigger and brighter than anything in this universe, aware of the whole Torah on some sublime level has just been crushed into this tiny body, sans teeth and sans vocabulary. He thinks he wants soda and pizza but deep-deep down he wants much-much more. We pray for the wisdom of the warden.

After that visit to the prison we launched a new orientation program for anyone entering the prison system. We would ask him, "Where do you live?" The fellow would answer, "Green Haven!" The question would persist, "Where do you live?" The answer would expand to "New York". Again the question and then, "America" and next the "world?"! Very nice but where are you???

The answer we repeated till it was real: "We are in front of HASHEM!" If that's your mind-set then you are not in prison! Sure your feet are here in this shoe but that's not where you need to be a whole day! The Baal Shem Tov said, "Wherever a person's thoughts are, that is where he is entirely!"

Now back to the question of the day, the question for all time, "Where are we?" Are we in New York or Jerusalem? In a cell phone or with family?! Are we in a prison cell or are we living with HASHEM?

That is the question!