

# HARPSTRINGS OF THE HEART

*by Rabbi Naftali Reich*

Entering Jerusalem one never fails to be impressed by the graceful features of the gesher hamitarim, the soaring harp string bridge that spans the city's entrance. The subject of whether to construct this extraordinary bridge was hotly by municipal authorities and Yerushalayim residents, on many of whom the bridge's aesthetical appeal was lost. Nevertheless, now that it is complete, it exudes a majestic aura and seems to have been embraced as an appropriate symbol for our nation's capital.

It's soaring architectural features present a magnificent landmark for the City of Gold, all the more so since the impression of a harp hovering in the air recalls the Biblical imagery of King David's kinor. For many, that instrument is an appropriate symbol to encapsulate the essence of Jerusalem's sublime and eternal importance. A deeper reflection on the message of Tisha Bav and Shabbas Nachmu will yield insight into why this is so.

One of the most poignant pieces of our Tisha B'av kinnos liturgy is undoubtedly the stirring kinah penned by the great R' Yehuda Halevi, "Tzion haloh tishali". In this kinah, Rabbi Yehuda articulates the powerful yearning of the Jewish heart to experience the return to Zion. Many of the lines in this magnificent poem are immortalized in our liturgy and culture.

The poet begins by declaring that the vision of the Jewish people returning to their homeland transforms him into a harp that extols in music this cherished, long-dreamed of moment.

Was the saintly R' Yehuda Halevi merely employing poetic imagery? Or is there a more literal dimension to his language?

The Talmud in Brochos tells us that King David's harp played an important role in his daily service of Hashem; at midnight, a 'ruach tzifonis,' a northerly wind, would blow across the harps strings, producing a melody that roused King David. Upon awakening, he would devote the rest of the night in the joyful study of Torah.

The question is why Dovid Hamelech chose to arise in such an odd fashion. And how could the wind blow with such accuracy at exactly the middle of the night? Furthermore, who has ever heard of a harp that produces a melody simply from the wind flowing through its chords?

This past Shabbos I heard a beautiful interpretation of this enigmatic Talmudic piece from my Rebbe, the Slonimer Rebbe of Yerushalayaim, shlita. He explained that the word used to describe this

powerful wind 'tzifonis' is grounded in the word tzofun, meaning veiled and hidden. This wind, he explains, was not necessarily a physical wind current but rather reflected the concealed spirit and ruach that lies embedded in the deepest recesses of every Jewish soul. It springs from deep within us, arousing our spiritual yearnings and awakening us to return to our heavenly Source.

This wind that embodies the Jewish people's yearning to return to Jerusalem has the capacity to transform the darkest of moments of life with faith and song.

No one gave greater expression to those powerful stirrings of the soul than King David whose life was a sequence of painful ordeals, upheavals and endless torment. Yet every challenge gave rise to praise of the Creator and was immortalized as such in the book of Tehillim.

What inspired King David and imbued him with such profound faith in the face of constant adversity? It was his extraordinary ability to view all of life's circumstances as an opportunity for song. Instead of reacting to misfortune by feeling rejected by G-d, and withdrawing from faith, King David viewed life's afflictions through the lens of faith and gratitude.

It was precisely at the darkest moment of the night that his internal harp brought forth its beautiful music, testifying to G-d's nearness to a person even in the darkest hours, and His control of all of life's events. This ability to utilize misfortune to uncover the wellsprings of faith is what transformed King David into a virtual harp.

This then is what the great liturgist, R' Yehuda Halevi, alluded to when he pined for the return of Hashem's presence to Zion and envisioned our nation's homecoming. "When I envision the return of your captives, I am but a harp for your song"!

Our nation's source of inspiration has always been the Akeida, Avraham's tenth test, where he stood ready to sacrifice Isaac on Mt. Moriah, the site of the future Beis HaMikdash. Avraham was tested to the apex of human endurance and he demonstrated the ultimate devotion to fulfill Hashem's bidding. The Torah tells us that even after hearing the angels' assurances that he was merely being tested, Avraham's spirit remained unsettled. He had an overwhelming desire to give expression to the surge of love that overflowed within him. When he saw a ram caught in the thicket by his horns, he offered the ram as a sacrifice instead of his son. This took place at the hallowed spot of Har Hamoriah, where our bais hamikdash would ultimately be erected.

At that point the angel reappeared promising him an eternal and unbreakable bond between his progeny and Hashem. It was at that moment that our role as the chosen people was secured for eternity.

The midrash tells us that every part of the ram was used. Nothing was discarded. The skin became the 'ezer ar bemasnav', the leather belt that the Scriptures tell us girded the prophet Elijah's loins. The sinews became the material out of which King David's harp was constructed, and the horn is the one the Messiah will trumpet to herald his arrival to usher in the final redemption.

This fascinating Midrash invites a number of questions. Could the skin of this sacrificed ram have held up over so many generations to the point where it served Elijah the prophet? Did the ram's sinews actually weather the centuries and survive intact to become incorporated into King David's harp?

Perhaps the Midrash is to be understood on a symbolic level.

Hashem declared to Abraham at the time of the Akeida, that henceforth his seed would become the chosen people. What particular characteristic distinguishes us as the only nation that deserves the appellation of Hashem's "chosen people?"

It is none other than the spirit of self-sacrifice and the willingness to give up all for His bidding that endows us with meritorious status. That devotion to our special relationship with Him has enabled us to be identifying Jews today. Our history is bathed in rivers of blood. Our ancestors, throughout history's millennia, were subjected to the most difficult challenges, yet they maintained their faith and devotion to Hashem.

While many surrendered to the blandishments of an easier and more comfortable life in the bosom of other faiths, our forbearers were willing to sacrifice. It is due to their sacrifice that we remain Hashem's chosen children today. The undying spiritual energy generated by Avraham's sacrifice fueled Elijah's zealousness to fulfill the will of Hashem. It was Abraham's sacrifice that forged the strings of King David's harp, enabling him to sing and exalt his creator even in the valley of death.

It is this forceful spirit connecting heaven and earth that wells within the collective soul of the Jewish people that will generate the ultimate redemption in the messianic era.

In our own lives we too are pulled down by the nagging needs and emotional shortcomings of our life conditions. We, too, like Abrahams' ram, are caught in the thicket of life's problems and roadblocks. How can we break free of the limitations that thwart us from fulfilling our potential?

We can only hope to succeed by following Abraham's example, imbuing ourselves with a spirit of self-sacrifice and affirming our allegiance to the Torah. We must demonstrate a willingness to transcend pettiness and superficiality, and to dedicate our energies, instead, to our beloved Creator. Only then can we hope to transform ourselves, as did King David, into "musical instruments" that will carry us through all the vicissitudes of life with a soaring, unflinching faith.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos.

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