

NO ATHEISTS IN FOXHOLES

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

In this week's reading, we find a passage that plays a prominent role in the Passover Haggadah. "An Aramite [attempted to] destroy my father, and he went down to Egypt... And the Egyptians oppressed us... and we cried out to HaShem the G-d of our fathers, and HaShem heard our voice... and G-d brought us from Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with great awe, with signs and wonders... And He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey." [26:5-9]

In the Torah, we are commanded to recite this encapsulation of early Jewish history while standing with our Bikurim, the first fruits of our fields and orchards, before the Kohen. Maimonides and others view this recitation as a Mitzvah unto itself, performed along with the Bikurim offering. Therefore, one was "missing out" on a Mitzvah if he just brought Bikurim without making the recitation. We must wonder, then, why the recitation was so important, why it warrants a separate Mitzvah.

The Bikurim offering came at a time when a farmer looked in the mirror, and saw success smiling back. The commentator Rashi tells us that the declaration could be said only during the harvest season, from Shavuot through Sukkot, when, after months of cultivation, "a person gathered his grain and his fruits, his wine and his oil." The "first fruits" were his finest crops, and the best that Israel had to offer -- Bikurim came only from those seven species for which the Land of Israel was praised. On a communal level, the Talmud points out that the Mitzvah of Bikurim applied only once the entire Land was conquered, and people were secure. In short, this was exactly the time when a person could sit back on his laurels, and say, "see what I've accomplished!"

The Bikurim recitation says exactly the opposite: "without You, G-d, none of this would have happened." One who brought Bikurim acknowledged the Hand of Providence in his life and his success. At that point, he was sent home with a further admonition: enjoy it! "And you shall rejoice in all the good which HaShem your G-d has given you and your house..." [26:11]

Have you heard the adage "there are no atheists in foxholes?" The following happened during the Yom Kippur War, if I recall correctly. A tank in a Hesder unit (consisting of religious soldiers who divided their time between study in a Hesder yeshiva and military service) was assigned a gunner who came from an avidly secular kibbutz. The gunner teased them about every Jewish practice. He was a friendly enough guy, but openly hostile to all things Judaism.

In the heat of battle, their tank crested a hill to find themselves facing a full unit of their Jordanian

counterparts. They threw their tank into reverse, but they were unable to back over the hill. The situation was bleak, to say the least.

Suddenly, the gunner found himself shouting, "Shema Yisrael -- I don't know the rest! Shema Yisrael -- I don't know the rest!" And that is when their tank was caught by a grappling hook, and helped back over the hill.

The Torah's message is simple: the foxhole is a lousy place to "get religion." G-d wants us to be overwhelmed by gratitude, not fear.

But wait -- you ask -- don't we find threats of disaster in this week's reading, as well? True enough. But why would tragedy befall the Jewish people? "Because you did not serve HaShem your G-d with joy and a good heart, from an abundance of all." [28:47] G-d does not want to send tragedy to wake us up. He wants us to wake up with gratitude and abundant joy, every day!

What do we do instead? When there is a crisis, we recognize our lack of control over the world. But when all is well, we sit back, enjoy ourselves, and praise no one but ourselves for our accomplishments. This is our failing.

These are troubling times. At home, many of us feel the pain of a constricting economy. There is no peace in Israel. And as we were just reminded in Durban, the majority of the world suffers from anti-Semitism. Several billion people hate us. We are getting a wakeup call.

And nonetheless -- we have so much for which to be grateful. We see all of that ugly anti-Semitism in the news, but rarely in our own lives. We read that suicide bombers kill far more of their own in "work accidents" and self-immolation than Jewish children. The Passover Haggadah tells us: in every generation there are those who want to do away with the Jewish people, but G-d saves us from their hands. G-d is doing this right now.

Let us take advantage of this time of introspection to see, and be grateful, for all that G-d has done for us and is doing for us, and let us strive to be more G-dly ourselves in the year ahead. May we all be written and sealed in the Book of Life for a year of health and abundant blessing, and peace upon ourselves and all Israel.