

REACHING OUT

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

The Torah tells us that when G-d brought the Jewish People out of Egypt, he made sure that they were prepared for the trip. Perhaps they rushed out with unleavened bread, but they were armed and guided by pillars of cloud and fire. G-d even took them via a roundabout way, so that the first thing they see not be warfare with the Philistines.

The Midrash gives us another, less happy thought: only those who were prepared got to go. Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki records this Midrash in his classic Torah commentary, explaining that the word for armed, "chamushim," is closely related to the word for five, "chamesh."

Only one in five Jews actually left Egypt, while four-fifths of us were lost. They had so assimilated into Egyptian culture, albeit as slaves, that they were unable to become part of a new, free, Holy Nation.

The stories of the fathers are signs, indications, for the children. The Midrash also warns us that the journey through our current exile will be like the first one: we will lose more than we keep. We will go "chamushim" into the Messianic Age.

Thousands of years ago, Jewish Midrash indicated that the majority of the Jewish People would surrender their Jewish identity. Today, we see that Midrash unfold before our eyes.

How do we respond to that? What do we do when we see Jews assimilating by the millions?

A Toronto-based freelance writer offered a novel response in a syndicated column several weeks ago: "let our people go." They are assimilating? Good, let 'em! Good bye and good riddance, and we who remain will "hold onto something Jewish."

Strangely enough, Moshe our teacher suggested a different answer. The Midrash tells us that G-d selected Moshe to lead the Jews out of Egypt because, as a shepherd, he personally went after lost, stray sheep. Moshe's concern for a lost sheep is what made him the shepherd of G-d's Holy flock! Every Jew is precious to G-d, and G-d needs Jewish leaders who share that belief.

We cannot afford an attitude of "live and let live" that ignores a fundamental tenet of Jewish thought: all of Israel is responsible one for the other. If my fellow Jew is hungry, I must help ensure that he or she is fed. If my fellow Jew is sad or in distress, I must help bring happiness and relief. And if my fellow Jew is losing his or her connection to our Holy Nation, then I must see what I can do to interest that individual in Jewish learning and life. If we do not feel that sense of obligation to reach

out to our brethren, then we ourselves are missing something in our Jewish connection.

The author also expressed his belief that outreach programs have "preposterously high" budgets. My immediate reaction was to wonder upon what island (save one operated by Ricardo Mantelban) an outreach professional might find such resources, for I would fly there immediately.

It is true that every synagogue, JCC, Hillel, every Jewish organization of whatever size, does "outreach" at some level. This is a matter of institutional survival. In order for a synagogue to continue and a Hillel to have a mandate, they must attract a membership. To do that, each must agonize over investments in advertising, promotion, and outreach programming.

The question is, then, how much is spent on outreach "for its own sake." The numbers are hardly generous, and indicate that outreach has yet to become a true communal priority. Outreach organizations have insufficient resources to reach those who desire their services, much less lush funding for pipe dreams.

The Torah gives us a cold prediction: most of us won't make it. This hardly frees us from our obligation to bring back each and every Jew we can reach. Saving even one Jew for the Jewish community is saving an entire world -- and we have an awful lot of worlds to save.

Reaching out to other Jews is the challenge of our era. May we find the courage to meet it, and great success when we do!

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Yaakov Menken