

# THE MONTH OF ELUL

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

*"When you go out to war against your enemies, and God, your God gives them over to you and you take captives, and you see among the captives a desirable, beautiful woman who you want to marry"(Devarim 21:10-11)*

Elul Zman is upon us, the last month to get serious about life before Rosh Hashanah and the Heavenly Court arrives to judge the worthiness of our lives. The shofar is blowing, and in some parts of the Jewish world, Selichos is already being said. It may still be hot outside, but the summer is definitely over, according to the Torah calendar.

It is important to be a problem solver, something I learned to do from a very young age, from a man for whom I have always had great respect: my father. Working for my father, I was taught early that every problem is just another challenge in need of a solution, the finding of which is one of the greatest sources of excitement and accomplishment in life. I may still kvetch a lot when problems arise, but in the background, my mind is usually busy working on a solution.

Indeed, the Jewish people in general are good problem solvers. When you have had as many problems to solve as we have had over the course of our 3,300 years of history, you become quite good at it after while. Too good, sometimes, for, it seems, after a while, rather than see the problems as reasons to pray to God to end the exile, we just work on solving them instead.

Today, the Jewish people are experiencing many problems, both physically and spiritually. In one sense, nothing is new, for the Jewish people have always had to deal with Jews forsaking the way of Torah, intermarriage, and a whole host of other problems that seem to becoming more prevalent with each passing day, R"L. And, according to some, physical illnesses that used to by-pass the religious community seem to make no exceptions anymore.

Perhaps, it is more like some say, that nothing really has changed. It is just that modern medicine has become better at diagnosing problems than ever before, and therefore we are finding out more, and earlier, about health problems we always had, but just didn't understand or know about in the past. Furthermore, enhanced communication has served to amplify problems that have always existed, in one form or another, but which we didn't always find out about, since communities were not as in touch with one another as they are today.

Perhaps. However, historically that has not been the case, starting at the beginning of Jewish history, with the descendants of Avraham in the Egyptian exile. Clearly, in that situation, the Jews called out

to God to help them from their suffering, not because modern medicine told them they were sick or dying, or because communication between communities improved. It was because the situation facing the Jewish people at the time became unbearable because of the exile.

Eventually the king of Egypt died. By that time, the Children of Israel were broken because of the servitude, and they cried. Their cry for help came to God, who heard their groaning. God remembered His covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, and saw the Children of Israel. God was aware of their suffering. (Shemos 3:23-25)

It was a two-step process. First the Jewish people had to call out because of their servitude, and this caused, so-to-speak, God to hear their groaning, and remember His covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. Well, not really, not in the conventional sense of "hearing" and "remembering," because, one can safely assume, God was there the entire time, heard every kvetch from the beginning of the exile until its end, and never once forgot the covenant He made with the ancestors of the enslaved Jewish people.

Then what? Why the charade?

It was no charade. The missing component in Egypt, and in every exile for that matter, is not God's hearing, or His remembering. Every single second God hears the complaining of His people, and every single second He is ready to fulfill ALL the promises made to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, as the Talmud indicates:

Rebi Yehoshua ben Levi met Eliyahu standing at the entrance of the cave of Rebi Shimon bar Yochai and asked him..."When will Moshiach appear?"

He answered, "Go and ask Moshiach himself."

"But where can he be found"

"At the gate of Rome."

"And by what sign [can I recognize him]?"

"He is among the poor people afflicted with wounds. They open the bandages of all their wounds at one time, adjust and dress them. He opens, adjusts, and dresses one wound at time, for the reason that when he might be called there should be no delay."

I went to him, and said, "Peace be upon you, my master and teacher," and he answered, "Peace be with you, Bar Levi."

I asked him, "When will the master appear?"

He answered, "Today."

I then went back to Eliyahu and asked regarding all that Moshiach said, and told him that he said, "Peace be with you, Bar Levi." Eliyahu then said, "I can assure you and your father a share in the World-to-Come." "But he made a fool of me," I told Eliyahu, "because he said that he would come today."

Eliyahu answered and said, "The expression 'today' means the same as it does in the verse, 'Today, if you will listen to His voice' (Tehillim 95:7)." (Sanhedrin 98a)

In other words, every single day redemption is in place. It's just that we're not. We may be waiting for the Final Redemption, but that is not enough. We have to WANT it, and want it more than anything else. For, embodied in the Final Redemption is everything we Jews are supposed to strive for and achieve. Accepting exile as a normal way of life is unacceptable.

The fact that we kvetch from day-to-day about our problems, something we are also fairly good at, is not called wanting redemption. The fact that we pay lip service to Moshiach and the ultimate era he will usher in, bi"V, does not count as yearning for such a period. It's hard to convince someone of your desire to leave when you seem to be having such a good time staying. We may not have smiled a lot over the last couple of thousands of years of exile, but we certainly have done a lot of it over the last 60 years in many of the Western countries in which we have grown up. The "good life" in these countries has drained the yearning for redemption and Eretz Yisroel right out of many people, perhaps even most, which, for the time being wasn't a major issue since we needed to be in these countries in order to build towards the redemption.

However, every exile has an end, even the Roman one. It's been a long haul, the longest of all, but it will have its end. It may not feel like it, but intellectually we know it is true, and we have to keep reminding ourselves of this everyday. How can one fulfill the mandate to anticipate the Final Redemption, and to anxiously await Moshiach's arrival, if they do not?

I have learned this the hard way. Ever since before Pesach, two (and now three) of my neighbors have been renovating their homes, which has involved a lot of demolition of concrete walls, and hence, some serious jack hammering. It is five months later, and I still have to put the music up full blast at times, and use earphones, just to drown out the annoying noise.

Part of the problem is that we live in a six house building, all of us having common walls. As a result, the jack hammering is noisier through the walls than in person, or so it seems, and there have been times when I expected to see one pop through my living room wall, it sounded so close. I have lost many hours of work as a result, and have suffered anxiety as a result.

I can't wait for it to end. I mean, I reaaaaalllly can't wait. Every day that I hear the noise triggers all kinds of negative emotional reactions, and I have to hold myself back from thinking not-so-nice things about my neighbors, and the workers. They are certainly in their right, but tell that to my psychological make-up. My nerves don't seem built to take such noise for so long.

I know that, by necessity, the construction has to end at some point, but it has been going on for so long now that I can't imagine that it will. I can't even imagine anymore what it will be like once it is finally over, not even on Shabbos or Yom Tov since I know they will start again the next day! I can honestly say that, I want this personal exile of mine to end NOW!

If only I felt the same way about our national exile. If only all of us felt the same way about our national exile! Then we'd be living in our national redemption, and all the problems we are frantically trying to solve would be no more - at all. All evil would be a thing of the past then, and all that would remain to do is to heal from all the spiritual scars we suffered until that time, and bask in the light of God, and not in the light of material success.

So, as we confront our national and personal problems that seem to be increasing in scope and intensity, and problem solve, it may worth our while to wonder if that is all we should be doing at this time. Perhaps, the days of problem solving are behind us now, and with the redemption being imminent, we need to start wanting it, and I mean, reaaaaalllly wanting it, something we seem to do best when we have more problems than we can solve, and all that we can do effectively is call out to God to end the exile.

If that is the case, and that is true, let's call out now as if it really hurts, which it does, so that it doesn't have to be made to hurt more, in order to really make us scream out to God. A high threshold of pain, in this case, is not a merit-worthy thing, for enduring suffering at this stage of history will only prolong the exile, something which may be appealing to many at this time, but won't be in the next moment, if our past has anything to say about the process of transition from exile to redemption.

Which brings me to our parshah.

This week's parshah begins with the law of the yafas toar, the beautiful gentile woman for which the Jewish soldier has fallen, emotionally that is. As the Talmud explains, knowing that the soldier has lost the battle to his yetzer hara, the Torah prescribes a course of action to regain some spiritual ground, even if the soldier does end up converting the gentile woman and marrying her.

However, warns the Torah, even still, danger lurks in the future. For, as Rashi explains, the section about the hated wife and the wayward child follow to portray what is more than likely to occur, if the soldier gives in to his whim and takes the captive woman as his wife. In the end, not only will the marriage be less than ideal, but it will backfire and produce offspring that will make his life more than difficult.

As the rabbis point out, though the halachah of the yafas toar is actual, it is also a parable for different situations in which the yetzer hara subdues us into thinking that the path we are pursuing is the one we will ultimately want as well. Huh! When was the last time a yetzer hara chose a path for us that was ultimately beneficial? It's simply not his job.

Exile in the Western world is a yafas toar: attractive, seductive, but ultimately dangerous for a Jew. There is a way to subdue it and bring it into the fold, so-to-speak, but ultimately, it doesn't work so well, and even backfires on us in the end. Whatever it produces has a way of coming after us in the end, as the string of recent scandals in the States has shown us, and we can be sure that it is not over yet.

The best thing? Yearn for redemption. Want it with all you heart. And, if you can't, at least want to want it. And, do it now, before the situation gets any tenser, and before we get to a point where we can't control our crying out for God because the situation has become unbearable. It has in the past, and it can and will again, unless we ourselves choose to the end the exile as much as we humanly can.

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