

THE FALL OF COMMUNISM

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Miketz / Chanukah

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 126, Dreams in Halacha and Hashkafa.. Good Shabbos!

The More Things Change, The More They Stay the Same

There are many times that the Talmud mentions the concept of "Haynu d'amri Inshi" [this is as people say]. That is what I wish to share with you - a "Haynu d'amri Inshi" - a common expression that people often say.

People say, "The more things change, the more they stay the same." In other words, as dramatic as changes occur in today's world, some things always remain the same.

The story of Chanukah is the story of some Jews who were faithful to their religion and other Jews who wanted to give up their religion in favor of a new idea. That idea was called Hellenism. Hellenism was a philosophy that was perpetrated by the Greeks. It was a philosophy that emphasized the centrality of man in the world, the importance of human intellect, the beauty of the human body and even worship of the human body to a certain extent. It was a culture that was totally foreign to Judaism.

This philosophy, this new idea, affected the Jewish people to the extent that there were High Priests who were caught up in the new 'ism' of Hellenism. Judaism persevered, because of a band of faithful Jews who stuck to their ideals and kept the mitzvos with great sacrifice. This is the Chanukah story.

In our own times we have witnessed the decline and fall of another 'ism' - Communism. Many people may not realize to what extent our fellow Jewish brethren originally embraced this 'ism'. Jews played a prominent role in the beginnings of the Communist party.

Some Jews felt repressed and isolated by the life of the shtetl and were overwhelmed by the arrival of a new order that promised a better world. Many Jews, who had already left their faith, channeled their religious fervor into Communism. Some Communist leaders, such as Julius Martov (1873-1923) and Lev Davidovich Trotsky (1879-1940) were Jewish. For many years there was a Jewish division of the Communist party in Russia. It was not until the 1930s that Stalin came to power and 'purged' the Jews from the Communist party.

In fact, in our times, when most Russians admit to the bankruptcy of the Communist movement, many of them blame the Jews, saying, "they are the ones who gave us Communism". In a sense, they are partially right. I am not even talking about Karl Marx (1818-1883), but in a sense 'we' made the Communist party.

In this century too, then, large numbers of Jewish brethren embraced another 'ism'. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Why Did Communism Fall? Rav Schwab's Intuition

Unfortunately, all of these people forgot the message of Mezzuzah. In the Laws of Mezzuzah, the Rambam writes, "Whenever he enters or leaves, he will come in contact with and remember the name of the Holy One Blessed be He. He should thereby awaken from his slumber and know that there is nothing that stands forever (i.e. there is no Eternal truth) except the Knowledge of the Rock of the World." [Hilchos Mezzuzah 6:13]

Torah and Judaism are the only things that last. Hellenism is a joke. Socialism is a joke. Humanism is a joke. Communism is a joke. They are all 'devorim betailim' (matters that are null and void). But some of our brethren made this mistake 2000 years ago and others made the same mistake over 80 years ago.

For those of us who grew up during the height of the cold war, the fall of Communism is hard to believe. I am a child of the Cold War. I grew up with the image of Krushchev pounding on the table. I remember listening to the radio when the Communists rolled into Hungary in 1956. I remember when they invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968. I thought Communism could never fall. It was a constant. It was always there.

Now, I turn around and it has all fallen apart.

On December 3, 1989, I traveled by train to New York City and I caught a cab from Manhattan to Brooklyn. It was a cold winter night and I started talking with the Cabbie to pass the time. He had a strong Eastern-European accent and I thought that perhaps he was a Russian Jew.

I asked him where he was from. He told me that he came from Romania. I told him "Romania will be next". [At that point, Hungary, East Germany and Czechoslovakia had fallen.] He told me, "Romania?"

Never! You don't know Ceausescu."

At the time, his statement made a lot of sense. The world had not seen such a dictator since Stalin's time. But in the end, the Cabby was wrong. Ceausescu fell and Communism in Romania fell.

Why did Communism fall?

Rav Schwab said two amazing things. He said that the reason why Communism was so extremely successful (between China and Russia and Eastern Europe the majority of the world's population was living under Communism) was because they were "lishma". They were real believers. The Communists were incredibly altruistic, devoted and sincere. They were willing to forgo money and honor for the sake of a cause - Communism.

When one does something L'ishma and with sincerity - even if it is the biggest lie - that gives it validity.

The Kotzker Rebbe was once asked why other religions, which are sheker, are so successful - they have spread throughout the world, while Judaism which is the Emes is so 'unsuccessful' - we are few in number and Jews are often deserting the religion. The Kotzker said an amazing quip: "They serve Sheker but they serve it with a sincerity as if it were Emes. We serve the Emes, but unfortunately we often serve it as if it was Sheker" - without proper sincerity.

When something is done with a single-mindedness and dedication of purpose, even if it is 100% false and deceitful, it has an effect.

Rav Schwab pointed out that when Bilaam wanted to curse the Jews, he asked permission from G-d. G-d refused to grant permission. When Balak's messengers returned and promised him money and honor, Bilaam took the request to G-d again and this time G-d allowed him to go.

What suddenly changed? Rav Schwab explained that when Bilaam was not offered any compensation, an altruistic curse (Kelala lishma) was at stake. That is very dangerous. However, once Bilaam was cursing for his own agenda - for the money and honor - then the threat was removed. G-d said that now there was nothing to worry about.

This was the secret of the Communists. They possessed tremendous sincerity. It was a misdirected sincerity, for something that was a terrible ideal -- Atheism and heresy -- but they approached their cause with the power of complete sincerity.

Why did it fall apart? Rav Schwab said that he felt intuitively that the only antidote to a Sincere Lie (sheker lishma) is Torah and Mitzvos Lishma. Rav Schwab explained that this antidote was the rejuvenation of Torah and Mitzvos in Russia, carried out by a small band of people with a great deal of mesiras nefesh [dedication, despite tremendous risk]. They had their circumcisions without anesthetics. Spouses abstained from sexual relations because the wives couldn't go to Mikveh. They lost their jobs and got kicked out of Universities. Those Jews, few in number, were the Chasmonoim

of the 1980s. They acted, not for honor or money, but because it was right. Torah Lishma unraveled the wickedness of Communism Lishma.

This can be poo-pooed. One can say that it was because the economics were falling apart. One can say that it was for this reason or that reason. Those were the superficial reasons. But what are the metaphysical reasons? What is the inner spirituality of the matter?

The inner spirituality of the fall of Communism was from Jews studying Torah lishma. The same 'mighty into the hands of the weak', the same 'wicked into the hands of those occupied with your Torah' that undid the Hellenists -- those same 'people who occupy themselves with your Torah' undid the Communists.

We Don't Realize What We Have

If this is correct, and I think Rav Schwab is right, it says something unbelievable about the power of Torah. We have this commodity, which we take so for granted, called being able to sit and learn. We have no appreciation for the power that it contains and what it means. But this is what we always have available to us. Limud HaTorah! We don't realize what we have!

I was driving this week and was listening to National Public Radio, a program called "All Things Considered". Noah Adams interviewed Adin Steinsaltz on the occasion of Random House's publication of (the first volume of) his Talmud in English. Noah Adams told him, "I see (that) to be a Talmudic scholar you need a keen mind, you need to employ textual criticism, you need to have a sense of history, you need to apply deductive reasoning powers, it really takes some brain to be a Talmudic scholar! Wouldn't you be better off in nuclear physics?"

Noah Adams could not appreciate it -- all this brain power and energy -- for what?

I thought to myself, if I had to answer Noah Adams, what would I say?

I would say, "Mr. Adams, you don't understand! 'For this is our life and the length of our days.' This Talmud, that seems so arcane to you, is not some mere intellectual endeavor. This is **it**. This is our life. This has kept us going. You don't understand what Torah is. It is nothing short of the most powerful thing in the world. It deserves the maximum effort possible on the part of every Jew because it is the key to our success and survival. The Torah kept the Chashmonaim going. It defeated Hellenism and we see that it has brought down Communism as well."

Personalities & Sources:

Rav Shimon Schwab -- (1908-1995); Baltimore; Washington Heights, NYC.

Kotzker Rebbe -- Rav Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787-1859); Poland.

Rav Adin Steinsaltz -- Jerusalem; contemporary creator of "Steinsaltz Talmud", Hebrew edition now covering more than 3/4 of tractates in Shas.

Glossary

P'shat -- Interpretation
mesiras nefesh -- handing over of soul; dedication, despite tremendous risk
sheker -- falsehood
emes -- truth
lishma -- for its own sake (with no ulterior motives)
Limud HaTorah -- Learning Torah

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