

FEAR-YES; HOPELESSNESS-NO!

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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Approaching the Day of Judgment: Fear -- Yes; Hopelessness -- No

Rash"i cites a very famous Medrash explaining the juxtaposition of the verse "You are all standing here today..." [Devorim 29:9] with the section of the 98 Curses which we read in last week's Parsha. The Medrash says that after hearing all of the curses, the Jewish people turned green and became despondent, asking, "who can withstand all of these curses"? They lost hope. "What is going to be with us?" they asked.

Therefore, in this week's parsha, Moshe tries to appease them. "You are still here after forty years in the wilderness. You many times angered G-d -- the Calf, the Spies, and the complainers -- and He never destroyed you. You are still here..."

Consider what Moshe Rabbeinu is doing here. This appeasement appears to beself-defeating. The whole purpose of the Curses was to put the 'Fear of G-d' in the people. The curses were very effective. The people were scared stiff. He accomplished what every leader wants to accomplish -- he shook them up. But now he seems to be undoing the whole thing. "Don't worry, you've gotten away with a lot in the past, etc..." Doesn't this destroy the whole impact of the Tochacha?

Many commentaries direct us to a very simple truth. There is a vast difference between 'The Fear of G-d' and hopelessness. It is one thing to be afraid and frightened and nervous about the future. It is a totally different thing to feel that the situation is hopeless (to be meya-esh).

That is what had happened. The Jews gave up hope. They threw in the towel.

The worst thing that any Jew can do is to give up hope. This is a lesson we should all bear in mind as we approach the Day of Judgment. The Yom HaDin is nothing to take lightly. It is serious business. If we really understood, honestly understood what it was about, we would be scared and frightened.

But this is not the same as looking at the situation as hopeless. Hopelessness is not a Jewish characteristic. Never give up hope.

Our Sages tell us that after the destruction of the Temple, "all the Gates (which prayers travel through) were closed, except for the Gates of Tears" [Bava Metzia 59a]. It is much more difficult for our prayers to penetrate the Heavenly Court after the destruction of the Temple. But there is one Gate that remains open -- the Gates of the Tears.

It is said that the Kotzker Rebbe asked: if the Gates of Tears never close, then what is the purpose of the Gates? A gate implies that some get in and some do not. He answered that tears of desperation don't get through. When a person cries because he feels he needs the help of G-d, when the tears represent the innermost and purest of a person's thoughts ('the sweat of the soul') those tears have terrific power. But not if they are tears of helplessness and hopelessness -- those tears don't get in and that is why the gates are necessary.

In halacha, if a person has an object stolen from him there is a concept of 'yiush' -- giving up hope. If an object is stolen, and the former owner gives up hope of ever getting it back, and then it is sold to a non-suspecting purchaser, the purchaser is allowed to keep it.

The reason for this is that once the victim gives up hope (of getting the object back), his last connection with the object is severed. As long as one has not given up hope, there remains a thin thread that still connects him to his lost object. It is not totally lost from him.

In Jewish thought (hashkafa) as well, the same concept exists. For every plague there is a cure. G-d creates the remedy before he creates the plague [Megillah 13b]. We somehow need to connect with that remedy.

How do we connect with the remedy when a plague seems to have no end? There is only one tenuous connection between that remedy and us. The connection is hope.

The same hope that according to Jewish law connects me to my lost object is the connection that can connect me in the dire straits of my illness to the cure that G-d potentially has for it. But once one gives up hope, once he feels the situation is futile, he has severed the connection between the Cure and the Plague.

That is why no matter how desperate and overwhelming a situation may seem, a Jew cannot give up hope. The Izbiter Rebbe once commented that the reason all Jews are called after the Tribe of Judah (Yehudim) is because when Yosef confronted his brothers and planted the incriminating evidence, all the brothers gave up hope. Only Yehudah didn't give up hope. "And Judah drew near to him..." [Bereshis 44:18]. Yehudah never gave up hope -- and that is the attitude that must typify all Jews.

As frightening as the Yom HaDin should be for every Jew, there is a difference between fright and hopelessness. We have to enter the Day of Judgment sober and afraid, nervous as if we were

entering a Court. But we cannot enter the Yom HaDin without the attribute of Yehudah -- the attribute of hope.

Glossary

Yom HaDin -- Day of Judgment

Tochacha -- Chastisement

Halacha -- Jewish Law

Hashkafa -- Jewish thought

Sources and Personalities

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

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.
Technical Assistance by [Dovid Hoffman](#); Yerushalayim.

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