

FIFTY YEARS LATER

A Lesson for תשובה

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In the waning days of World War II (1944 --- תש"ד), my family tried to find refuge in Bratislava (Pressburg), Slovakia. At the time, Bratislava was ruled by Slovak Fascists; the regime was unstable in the face of a partisan uprising and we all felt that liberation was imminent. To our chagrin, however, the Germans came from Austria to take control and our lives were seized with uncertainty and fear. We lived on the *Judengasse* and we dared not leave our home unless absolutely necessary. My late father ע"ה moved the wardrobes to block our windows as the Germans would routinely drive past our building and shoot into the apartments. On Tisha B'Av in the evening and morning we huddled together in one of the apartments to recite Megillas Eichoh and Kinos. The emotional atmosphere of that Tisha B'Av remains to this day vividly fresh in my mind.

Shortly thereafter, the Germans implemented their murderous designs and started the round-ups of our people to send them away from the community; most of them never returned. Our family managed to hide for a while --- we spent Rosh Hashono and Yom Kippur in an underground bunker --- but in the end we were betrayed and handed over to the Gestapo. We were herded into cattle cars and sent on an arduous journey to the infamous Bergen Belsen concentration camp in Germany. Liberation came just before the end of the war in May, 1945 (תש"ה).

Fifty years after our liberation, events have been held in many circles to give **שבה והוראה** to **הקב"ה** for our survival and to share our experiences with others. Although I was very young and perhaps did not always fully comprehend the grim reality and gravity of our plight, those moments when death was near remain clear and fresh in my memory. As I matured, I began to focus on this aspect of my early youth. Why did we have to endure these experiences; what can we learn from them; and how do we ensure that they should not happen again **חר"ש**?

Jewish life differs from the pre-World War II era and perhaps we can discern in that difference an answer to our ponderous questions.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה הֵן שָׁכַב עִם אֲבֹתֶיךָ וְקָם הָעָם הַזֶּה וְזָנָה אַחֲרַי
אֱלֹהֵי נֹכַר הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הוּא בָּא שָׁמָּה בִּקְרָבוֹ וְעִזְבוּנִי וְהִפָּר אֶת בְּרִיתִי.
אֲשֶׁר כָּרַתִּי אִתּוֹ וְחָרָה אַפִּי בּוֹ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וְעִזְבוּתִים וְהִסְתַּרְתִּי פָנַי מֵהֶם
וְהָיָה לֹאכֹל וּמִצְאָהוּ רַעוּת רַבּוֹת וְצָרוֹת וְאָמַר בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא הֲלֹא
עַל כִּי אֵין אֵלַדִּי בִּקְרָבִי מִצְאוּנֵי הָרַעוּת הָאֵלֶּה (דְּבָרִים ל"א ט"ז-י"ז)

"And ה' said to Moshe, you will be laid to rest with your fathers and the people will rise up and go astray after the strange gods of the land where they will go in their midst and they will forsake Me and they will break My covenant that I have made with them. Then My anger will be kindled against them on that day, I will forsake them; I will hide My face from them; they shall be devoured and many evils and troubles will come upon them. And they will say on that day: It is because ה' is not amongst us that these evils have come upon us."

Our Torah clearly teaches us that there is a danger that we will go astray and follow strange gods. What defines "strange gods?" The Chovos Halevovos, in the introduction to the chapters on Bitachon, states that an individual cannot live without trust and hope. One either puts one's trust and faith in ה' or else one will trust some other entity that one feels will bring about the realization of one's hopes. Once we put our trust in something other than ה' one is by definition following a "strange god."

This concept of a "strange god" is expressed by Yechezkel (כ"ט ו') when he proclaimed the downfall of Egypt: "Then all the dwellers of Egypt shall know that I am ה' because they were a reed-like support for the family of Israel." Why should Egypt suffer because they were a "support" for Israel? Rav Elchonon Wasserman זצ"ל explains that Egypt was the "support" of Israel because Israel had put its faith and trust in Egypt. Egypt had become the "strange god" (ע"ז) of Israel and therefore had to be destroyed because ultimately strange gods must be eradicated from our midst.

Circumstances vary from generation to generation and "strange gods" appear in different forms. In the recent history of K'lal
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Yisroel, some of our people embraced alien ideologies --- socialism, communism, etc. --- placing their belief and trust in these systems. They were convinced that these systems would provide answers to the problems faced by our brethren. Others believed that assimilation would guarantee our future; by melting into the general population and abandoning our distinctive life and belief-system they felt that their security and well-being would be ensured. Yet these approaches were nothing more than an embracement of "strange gods."

In the face of such deviation, we are taught that the reaction of 'ה would be: "My anger shall be kindled on that day and I will forsake them and I will hide My face from them and they shall be devoured." Rav Hirsch זצ"ל explains that when 'ה withdraws His special care for the people and leaves them to themselves, they will fall prey to other nations. Our very existence is the work of the miraculous power of 'ה. Once we no longer merit His providence, our existence is threatened.

When misfortune befalls us our people realize it is because 'ה is not with us that these evils have come upon us. Yet 'ה responds (פסוק יח) "I will surely hide My face that day for all the evil they have done." The Ramban asks if they realize that their difficulties came about because 'ה withdrew His protection from them for embracing "strange gods," why should He hide His face from them now? The Ramban explains that because of their תשובה He will protect them but, as it was not a full תשובה, His protection will come in a hidden way until the time that a complete תשובה will set in at which time the full Redemption will come about.

ועתה כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת ולמדה את בני ישראל שימה בפיהם
"Now therefore write for yourself this song and teach it to the Children of Israel, put it in their mouth." Once we realize that the strange gods in which we believed are nothing more than our own misconceptions and of no merit or value, we then become clearly aware that the only approach to effect complete תשובה is through in-depth Torah study. Only through Torah study can we know what our true values should be and how we are to deal properly with all the vicissitudes of life without being lured by "strange gods."

The sufferings of our people taught us the fallacy of following "strange gods." Our people were persecuted because they were part of

כלל ישראל. The illusion of socialism, communism or assimilation as a means to escape was shattered.

Our people have not yet returned fully to the teachings of our Torah. This is due more to ignorance and apathy than actual apostasy. At the time of the decree of Haman, our Sages tell us that Mordechai asked Moshe Rabbenu to intercede on behalf of Bnei Yisroel. Moshe replied that at first he would have to determine if the decree was sealed with a seal of clay or blood. If sealed with blood there would be nothing which he could do; but if the seal was one of clay, he could intercede on their behalf. The Maharal comments that if the people went astray for spiritual, ideological reasons then there is little that can be done to reason with them. If, however, the cause for their drifting away is merely because of apathy or desire for physical indulgence, then it is far easier for possible rectification. In that case, the Torah tells us: Teach them, reach out to them, for they can be brought back.

Perhaps this can explain the difference between Jewish life today and what it was before the war and teach us the lesson of our personal tragic experience. Before the war there was a sincere belief in the "strange gods" of alien systems and approaches; this proved to be our glaring error. After the war, our people appreciate the essence of what defines our very being as a nation and individuals. We are therefore the witnesses of an upsurge of Torah learning and dedication and devotion to Torah throughout the world. If assimilation and non-observance nevertheless remain rampant, it is overwhelmingly due to ignorance and a lack of appreciation for Torah values. We are experiencing the protection of ה'. It is up to us to utilize this opportunity to bring about the complete תשובה through strengthening our own resolve and influencing others. And with this resolve we can be confident of our future בס"ד.

כתיבה וחתימה טובה