



Ohr Somayach Light Lines

Published by OHR SOMAYACH INTERNATIONAL • Jerusalem, Israel

4 Av 5760 • August 5, 2000 • Parshat Devarim • No. 98

Light Insight

In Front of the Children

Last Shabbat, as I was standing in synagogue, my five-year old son came over to me. We had reached the part of the service where the Kohanim ascend the steps in front of the Holy Ark, cover their heads and arms with their prayer shawls and bless the congregation. The Kohanim have been blessing the people like this for over three thousand years. I covered my own head with my prayer shawl and I felt a light tug from outside. “Daddy, can I come under your tallit?” whispered a young voice.

I brought my son under my tallit, and as the priests were blessing us, our eyes met. I thought, G-d willing, one day my son will be standing in my place and looking down into his son’s face.

Sometimes you feel like a link in a chain that stretches back across the millennia. Sometimes you understand what tradition really means.

Tradition doesn’t mean bagels and lox. Tradition doesn’t mean chicken soup and kneidlach. Tradition means passing down the heritage of our fathers intact to our children. Tradition means “My father told me that his father told him that his father told him that G-d gave us the Torah at Sinai.”

The Jewish People believe in G-d, not because the odds that the universe just “happened” out of some primordial cosmic “soup” are gastronomically impossible. The Jewish People believe in G-d not because some missionary landed on our shores and told us some fable that happened away in a manger. The Jewish People believe in G-d not

because some whirling Dervish told us to convert or die (a very persuasive theological argument). The Jewish People believe in G-d because we are the great, great, great, great... grandchildren of those same Jews who stood at Sinai and saw and heard G-d speak to them.

We believe in G-d because we hold it axiomatic that parents don’t lie to their children about things which it is important for the children to know — and G-d speaking to an entire nation and making them the chosen instrument of His world-plan certainly qualifies as something important for one’s children to know.

This week we begin the synagogue reading of the fifth book of the Torah — Devarim or Deuteronomy. The Greek title is apt. It means repetition. In the last five weeks of his life, Moshe repeated the entire Torah — and the entire history of the Jewish People.

Nothing in the Torah is superfluous. Maybe Moshe’s intent was to symbolize that the lifeblood of Judaism is the repetition of the parents to the children. For it is this repetition which has carried Judaism across the millennia in an unbroken chain down to a little boy looking up into his father’s face under a tallit one Shabbat morning some 3300 years later.

Why Cry? — A Tale of Two Cities

How can a Jew weep on Tisha B’Av for the destruction of Jerusalem and the Holy Temple which took place thousands of years ago, when he sees how beautifully Jerusalem has been rebuilt in our days?

Perhaps we can learn a lesson from Rabbi Gershon Kitover, brother-in-law of the Ba’al

continued on page two

Shem Tov, who arrived in Jerusalem two and a half centuries ago with the first group of Chassidim to settle in the Holy Land. He looked around at a city which sported foreign delegations and all the signs of a serene community restored, in sharp contrast to the desolation described by Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban) in his famous letter reporting on his visit to the city some five centuries earlier.

Rabbi Gershon broke into tears. Now, he said, I fully understand the words of the prayer that Jews say at the end of the final *ne'ilah* service on Yom Kippur, when the gates of Heaven are about to close. As we stand at this dramatic moment, weakened in body from a long day of fasting and strengthened in spirit from prayer and repentance, we strive to send one more prayer heavenward, invoking the 13 attributes of Divine mercy. The opening lines, sounding more like a Tisha B'Av lamentation than a Yom Kippur prayer, cry out: "I recall, O G-d, and I am overcome by emotion, as I see every city solidly built on its foundation, while the City of G-d is reduced to the depth of the grave. Nevertheless, we are with G-d and our eyes are turned to G-d."

Until Rabbi Gershon saw the rebuilt Jerusalem of his day, he assumed — as we all do — that the above lament contrasts a desolate Holy City with the mighty capitals of the world, Rome, Paris, London. But when he saw the beginnings of a rebuilt Jerusalem and contrasted it with the ruins of the Holy Temple he sensed a deeper meaning in those words:

'Every city' — said Rabbi Gershon — refers to the Jerusalem of Below, the city of brick and mortar; while the 'City of G-d' refers to the Jerusalem of Above, the heavenly city characterized by the Holy Temple.

It is certainly painful to contrast these ruins with the prosperity of foreign cities. But the pain is indescribably greater when one sees the contrast between material prosperity and spiritual ruin before his very eyes. Small wonder that this great man of spirit, who finally realized his lifelong dream of reaching Jerusalem, was moved to tears when he sensed the awful contrast.

The above account of Rabbi Gershon Kitover's experience and observation is recorded by one of the great halachic authorities, Rabbi Yosef Tumim, who served as rabbi of Frankfurt, Germany two centuries ago. In his classic commentary on the Code of Jewish Law, he quotes his father as the source for this moving story about Rabbi Gershon Kitover.

A footnote to this is the sentiment expressed in the last line of the above mentioned prayer — "Nevertheless, we are with G-d and our eyes are turned to G-d." This sense of hope amidst mourning reminds us of the story of a father who took his young son to the Western Wall for the first time. It was the Ninth of Av, and the youngster asked his father why grown men were weeping.

"Here," said the father, "our Holy Temple once stood. The *Har Habayis* (Temple Mount) on which it stood was surrounded by four large walls. Now the Temple is destroyed, as well as the walls around the *Har Habayis*. All we have left of all our sacred glory is this one wall where you see people praying. Is it any wonder that they cry when they remember what once stood here?"

"But Father," responded the son, "isn't it true that Messiah will soon come to redeem us, rebuild the Holy Temple and the four walls around *Har Habayis*? We should take comfort in the fact that one of those walls is already standing, and there are only three more to go!"