

new crop) is to be given to a Levite, however in the wake of the Levites' refusal to join with the returnees from the galut of Persia in order to rebuild Jewish life in Eretz Yisrael, Ezra the Scribe penalized them, declaring that one may now give the first tithe also to a Kohen. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya claimed that according to the Torah one may give the first tithe to either a Kohen or a Levi, and Ezra the Scribe penalized the Levites by declaring that one may now give the first tithe only to a Kohen.

Question: The Levites were not the only group to refrain from ascending to Eretz Yisrael, so why did Ezra single them out for punishment?

I suggest: Had the Levites not reacted with such zeal in the episode of the Golden Calf, Ezra would not have penalized their indifference, aloofness and apathy at the call to return to Eretz Yisrael. However, their indifference at the call to return home when contrasted with their zealousness at the Golden Calf, created the false impression that avoda zara is a terminal disease for the future of the Jewish nation, whereas life in galut might even have some advantages. Ezra was unable to remain silent in the face of this historic-halachic aberration and distortion, and he sought to diminish the damage done in the Jewish consciousness by publicly chastising the Levites.

What was Ezra's halachic source for equating living in the galut with avoda zara?

It appears in the Gemara (Ketubot 110b):

אֲשֶׁר יֵשֵׁב בְּגִלּוּתוֹ כְּאִשְׁתֵּי אַבִּידָה – וְעַל כֵּן עֲזָרָה בְּעִירָתָהּ

Whoever resides out of the Land is as if he worships avoda zara

This assertion has two meanings; both devastating for the Jews

in galut. The literal meaning equates the severity of residing in galut with the sin of idolatry. The other meaning is equally disheartening. That just as idolatry defines the "faithful" as an alien and outsider, so too will residence in galut eventually terminate that family's connection with the Jewish nation. The difference between avoda zara and galut is not in the final demise of the Jew, but one of timing. Avoda zara is a bullet to the head, a killer germ which destroys its human host immediately. While residing in a "sweet" galut is a lingering, debilitating and painful death, with every passing generation slipping ever deeper into unconsciousness of their Judaism, concluding with Marvin placing a ring on Christina's finger.

Statistics do not lie.

A survey by the Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project shows that the intermarriage rate, a bellwether statistic, has reached 71 percent for non-Orthodox Jews! Two-thirds of American Jews no longer belong to a synagogue! One-fourth do not believe in God and one-third had a Christmas tree in their home last year!

Where Best to Apply Our Limited Resources?

Last week, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, the former Chief Rabbi of Israel and present rabbi of Tel Aviv, spoke at a rabbinical convention in Eilat which I attended. He spoke of our responsibility to prevent intermarriage in galut through "kiruv" of those American Jews who are now far from Judaism. I took issue with Rav Lau, because we do not have the time it would take to stem the tide of intermarriage of the Reform and Conservatives.

Our resources are limited. The funds, man-power and time at our disposal must be directed to one end only – to cut our losses and promote the escape from galut with what we have left.

The non-observant will not understand what we are saying, and the chareidi-Hassidic segments will always choose galut over Eretz Yisrael. What is left is only a narrow segment of educated historically-orientated people who have the potential to see where HaShem is leading the Jewish nation.

Those who will come home to Eretz Yisrael – they and their descendants will live on. Those who will remain in galut will disappear, and will be no more than a footnote in the future history books of the Jewish nation.

This might sound callous, but it is no more than a repetition of what has happened time and again in our past, beginning with the 80% of the Jews who died in Egypt after refusing to leave, and the 600 thousand men who refused to enter the Land at the time of the meraglim (scouts), until we find ourselves today to be no more than 10 million halachically recognized Jews in the world.

These words will fall on deaf ears as long as the galut religious leaders, both rabbaim and roshei yeshivot will continue to find reasons to evade their national-religious responsibilities.

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

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