

Shoftim 5777

BS"D Parashat Shoftim 5777

Rabbi Nachman Kahana

Jews in Government Service

Messrs. Jared Kushner, President Trump's son-in-law, and special envoy to the Middle East, David Friedman, US Ambassador to Israel, and Jason Greenblatt, special envoy for the impossible, are all observant Jews. They are criticized for removing the ubiquitous symbol of our faith – the kippah – when in public (unless the President demanded that they do so, in which case I would prefer not to accept the position).

After airing the usual mundane excuses, the real reason which applies to almost all Jews of the galut is not touched upon. It is this behavior which I wish to discuss.

The monarchy and the Bet Hamikdash

When we reach parashat Shoftim in the yearly cycle of Torah readings, I am always exhilarated by the grandeur of the Jewish state as mandated in the parasha.

The Torah requires that the nation be led by a four-branch system of government: Monarch, Sanhedrin, Kohen Gadol, and Prophet.

1- The King is charged with administrating civil affairs, including defense and economics.

2- The Sanhedrin, situated in the "Lishkat Hagazit" (hewn stone chamber) of the Bet Hamikdash, is charged with duties including resolving halachic problems, verifying the authenticity of kohanim to serve in the Bet Hamikdash, and

determining if a particular situation warrants the King to wage war for economic or political purposes.

3- The Kohen Gadol is charged with the functioning of the Bet Hamikdash.

4- The prevailing prophet, who would receive messages from the spiritual world, was meant for the nation or for the other three branches of power.

This was the Jewish state for the first 410 years from King Shlomo until the reign of King Chizkiyahu, when the Babylonians destroyed the Temple and exiled the Jews. After 70 years of galut, Ezra the Scribe rebuilt the Bet Hamikdash, which stood for another 420 years until it was destroyed by Rome.

During the 830-year existence of the two Batei Hamikdash, and the 400 years preceding the first Temple from the time of Yehoshua Bin Nun, we were in control of our national future – for good or for bad. A citizen felt pride in the grandeur of the monarchy and the Bet Hamikdash, which many claim should have been included as one of the wonders of the ancient world.

The Jews were known in every civilized region of the world. We were involved in the international political and spiritual issues of the time.

There was great pride in being a Jew, who 2000 years ago had been already a people with a history reaching back over 1000 years, as in the words of the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli to an anti-Semitic member of Parliament, to the effect: “My ancestors had already written the Bible when yours were swinging from trees”.

But this feeling of pride, self-esteem, dignity and honor degenerated into humiliation, mortification and indignity due to the deprecating behavior of the gentiles in whose lands we were forced to live in the 2000 years of galut. There was no

form of physical or mental torture and abuse that was not used against our people at the hands of European Christian Esau and the savage Muslim Yishmael. From our sense of being God's chosen people, we evolved into a psychological state of a hunted, persecuted, downtrodden minority with no hope of escaping our fate.

How can our nation view itself when civilized nations turn us into soap after murdering our people in gas chambers? When any gentile can, at will, perform the most dastardly acts to a Jew and be commended for it by his spiritual leaders?

A parable

I offer a short story to explain where we were for the most part of our galut experience:

The body of a young boy was found near the river of a small town in Lithuania on the day preceding Pesach. The small Jewish community knew that that very night there would be a pogrom from which no Jew would survive; when the local goyim would seek revenge for what they imagined was our "using" the blood of a gentile boy for making matzot. The Jews gathered in the bet kneset (synagogue), rent their clothing and recited the Vidui prayer, as one does in anticipation of death. At that moment, the shamash (personal assistant to rabbi and caretaker of a synagogue) came running into the Bet Kneset screaming, "Yiddin, HaShem has made a miracle, we are saved – it was a Jewish boy".

Inferiority complex

To feel as a minority, is to tread on egg shells lest you arouse the anger and disdain of the goy next door, or your fellow worker in the office or the rider sitting next to you on the train.

This feeling is present even in so-called democratic nations, because we are only tolerated in those lands but never really accepted. A black is an Afro-American, an Asian is a Chinese-American, a Cuban an Hispanic-American; but a Jew is always an American Jew.

Gentiles in the lands of the galut are like matches; as long as they are in the box, there is no fire; but when one rubs them, they ignite. Even when a Jew reaches high office in a foreign land, the whispering behind his back is, "the Jew said", or "the Jew did".

Years ago, I was invited to speak at an OU meeting at the Plaza Hotel in Jerusalem. I was to follow the main speaker, Don Kurtzer, the then US Ambassador to Israel. Among his topics, Mr Kurtzer spoke about the US plan of land for peace. His closing remarks were, "I would like to read from the writings of the fathers", and then began reading from Jefferson, Adams, and others.

My turn came to speak. I said, "Mr. Ambassador. I strongly envy you, because you know who you are – the US Ambassador to the State of Israel. My problem is that I, too, am an ambassador but don't know who I represent. There is a discussion in the Talmud as to whether a kohen is HaShem's ambassador to the Jewish people; or the Jewish people's ambassador to HaShem. I ended my remarks by saying, "Mr. Ambassador, I too would like to read from the writings of the fathers, and proceeded to read from Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) and ended by pointing out that these are our fathers, not Jefferson or Adams.

When I came to Israel, I threw off my minority cloak and quickly and consciously felt for the first time that I was a part of the majority in my homeland. I would speak our holy language as best as I could. I would serve in our army and become as Israeli as best as I could in order to remove the 2000-year-old scars of being a harassed minority.

The cure for the minority burden

Messrs. Kushner, Friedman and Greenblatt are observant Jews who cannot escape the deeply imbedded, uneasy feeling, that among gentiles it is better not to appear overly Jewish.

In my youth in Flatbush we lived in a predominately Italian and Irish neighborhood. At the end of the street, there was a candy store which served as the gathering place for the local rowdies. Often, I was harassed by the teenagers who would start with words like “dirty Jew” and quickly go into shoving and hitting. Never once did I take off my kippah, even when I knew that it would cost me. One day, I alighted from the bus across from the candy store and saw my brother Meir and several of his friends from the Betar organization. They were the three Bieber brothers who were very powerful young men who worked as roofers. I saw Ralph Bieber pick up one of the goyim who had been my constant bully. Ralph held him in the air and then threw him down with a crash. From that time on, I went to the store unharassed.

As long as a Jew remains in the galut, he will have to wear the skin of a minority whether he lives in Flatbush or walks the great halls of the White House.

To be cured of the minority albatross, one must come home and breathe the air of a free Jew in HaShem’s holy land.

The consequences for Jews living in the USA

I once again want to warn my brothers and sisters in the US of a pending disaster, which will bring home the feeling of what it means to be a minority Jew. President Trump is proceeding on a path that will lead to a dramatic increase in the size of the military; the selective service law will return.

Following is part of a message I once sent:

In the near future, we shall see the return of the United States Selective Service Law (draft), to fill the ranks of the military and of the internal security services which are now being set into place. So, instead of young Jewish men coming to study in yeshivot with names such as Hakotel, Netiv Aryeh and Kerem Be'Yavne, and young Jewish women coming to the seminaries of Har Nof, or being accompanied by their parents under the chuppa, the dedicated Yiddishe tattes and mamas will be accompanying their children to the Port Authority Bus Terminal for their children's trips to camps with names such as Fort Knox, Pendleton, Quantico, Lejeune, and Paris Island.

I recall a poem we learned in high school. It described two soldiers in the First World War who were shooting at each other. One was in the German army and the other in the Russian army – both were Jews. The stanzas revert from the thoughts of one soldier to the other. The German Jew asks HaShem why he has to serve the Kaiser, and the Russian Jew asks HaShem why he has to serve the Czar.

Both take careful aim and mortally wound each other. With their waning strength, they both crawl out to meet the man who is taking away his life. When they are very close, one says, "Sh'ma Yisrael". The other says, "HaShem Elokaynu". And then gripping each other's arms both call out, "HaShem Echad".

So tonight, go into your son's bedroom and look at him sleeping so peacefully.

Don't forget to pull up the blankets. You wouldn't want him to catch cold.

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

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