

HGS INSPIRE

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Rabbi's Message

The month of Nissan started this week. It is the month of Passover, when we celebrate our ancestors' exodus from Egypt. But although the Exodus occurred more than 3,300 years ago, our sages remind us that in every generation, and indeed every single day, a Jew must view himself as having left Egypt too.



We all deal with our own Egypts—the various inhibitions that restrain us from being who we should be—and when we break free that is as great as the original Exodus.

Moreover, the name of the month itself implies that we can still experience a miraculous exodus even today. The word "Nissan" shares a root with the word "nes" — meaning, "miracle." So not only can we break free from our inhibitions, we can do so in the most miraculous way possible, just like our ancestors did, and just as the Jewish people have done throughout history.

Our existence is miraculous in the first place, so it isn't out of the question for us to demand that we continue seeing miracles. So as this month of miracles is now upon us, we turn to G-d and demand that He show us revealed miracles: may the Israeli hostages be freed, may the IDF succeed in its mission of protecting the Land of Israel, and may we finally experience the ultimate miracle — the coming of Moshiach!

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Gedalia Hertz

Lessons from the Parsha

When Was Your Last Spiritual?

By Yossy Goldman

In this week's Torah reading we read all about the *kohen* examining people to determine whether they were afflicted by *tzaraat*, the leprous curse. It was a physical inspection which had spiritual implications. The person might be pronounced *tahor* (pure) or, G-d forbid, *tamei* (impure), all depending on the results of the *kohen's* examination.

I couldn't help thinking about going to the doctor for the requisite annual medical examination, or "physical." We go through the routine checkup—height, weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, and stress tests on the treadmill and up and down the little staircase.

But have you ever thought of going for a "spiritual"?

What's our "height"? Do we walk tall? Are we proud and upright Jews, or are we apologetically stooped and bent over by the burden of an inferiority complex?

What about our "weight"? Are we on a well-balanced diet of Torah, the sustenance of our souls, or do we suffer from spiritual malnutrition?

And how is our heart doing? A Jewish heart doesn't only pump blood; it pumps warmth and love. A healthy Jewish heart is the emotional centre of the person. It emotes and feels the pain of another. And healthy hearts are inspired by events that point unmistakably to the hand of G-d in the world. If we aren't feeling what we should be, then we might be suffering from blocked arteries.

When the doctor took my blood pressure, I immediately made the obvious connection—tefillin. I remembered the story of the simple farmer who went for his first medical checkup. When the doctor checked his pressure, he asked what that was all about. The doctor explained patiently that he was checking the heart rate. "But why are you holding my arm if you want to see how my heart is?" "When I check your hand," replied the physician, "I know how your heart is." The hand that gives charity, for example, indicates that it's connected to a healthy Jewish heart.

Then came the stress test—up the stairs and down the stairs, up again and down again, and again and again. How do we handle the ups and downs of life? Are we smug and arrogant when we're up, and dejected and depressed when we're down? How do we deal with stress? Do we trust in G-d that everything has a purpose, and a positive one at that? Or do we become angry and bitter at life's unkind twists of fate?



Finally, there was the treadmill. I really dislike treadmills. After two minutes, I said to the nurse I'd had enough. "The doctor said you must do four minutes," she informed me sternly. "Four minutes?" I cried. "This feels like four hours!"

Life can be a tedious treadmill. We find our-

selves running and running and getting nowhere fast. A gruelling rat race, where even if you win you're still a rat—all of it leaves us wondering what it's all about and why we are working so hard with no meaningful, consequential reward.

So this year, in addition to going for a *physi-*

cal, why not go for a *spiritual*? Find a *kohen*, a Jewish spiritual teacher/healer, who can search your soul for its healthy characteristics as well as your necessary growth points, and prescribe a spiritual fitness program tailored for you and your *neshamah*. May we all be healthy, physically and spiritually. ■

Parsha Matters

Words and Stones

By Yanki Tauber

In Mezhibuzh, the hometown of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (founder of Chassidism, 1698–1760), two local residents were involved in a bitter dispute. One day, they were angrily shouting at each other in the local synagogue, when one of them cried out: "I'll rip you to pieces with my bare hands!"

The Baal Shem Tov, who was in the synagogue at the time, told his disciples to form a circle, each taking the hand of his neighbour, and to close their eyes. Rabbi Israel himself closed the circle by placing his hands upon the shoulders of the two disciples who stood to his right and his left. Suddenly, the disciples cried out in fright: behind their closed eyelids they saw the angry man actually tearing his fellow apart, just as he had threatened!

Words are like arrows, says the Psalmist, and like smouldering coals. Like arrows, explains the Midrash, for a man stands in one place and his words

wreak havoc on another's life many miles away. And like a coal whose outer surface has been extinguished but whose interior remains aflame, so too do malevolent words continue to work their damage long after their external effect has evaporated.

Words kill in many ways. Sometimes they set in motion a chain of events that turn them into a self-fulfilling prophecy; sometimes they are deflected off the object of their venom, to strike some innocent bystander; and sometimes they return like a boomerang to pursue their originator. By whatever route they travel, hateful words inevitably lead to hateful actions, possibly years or even generations after they are uttered. Human nature is such that thoughts strive to find expression in spoken words, and spoken words seek realization in deeds—often by circuitous paths that the original utterer of those words neither desired nor anticipated.

But the power of the word runs deeper than its potential to translate into action. Even if this potential is never realized, even if the spoken words never materialize in the "world of action," they still

exist in the higher, more spiritual "world of speech." For man is not only a body, but also a soul; he is not only a physical being, but also a spiritual creature. On the physical plane, spoken words may be significant only as potential actions; in the soul's reality, they *are* actual.

This is what the Baal Shem Tov wished to show his disciples by granting them a glimpse into the world of words inhabited by the souls of the two verbal combatants. He wanted them to understand that every word we utter is *real*, whether or not it comes to fruition in the "world of action" in which our physical self resides. On a higher, more spiritual plane of reality—a reality as real to our soul as the physical reality is to our physical self—our every word is as good (and as bad) as done.

The same is true, of course, in the positive sense: a word of praise, a word of encouragement is as good (and as *good*) as done in the spiritual reality of the soul. Even before a good word has yielded a good deed, it has already had a profound and lasting effect upon the inner state of ourselves and our world. ■

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A Tale from the Past

The Fire Fighter

A story about the Alter Rebbe, the founder of Chabad.

By Nissan Mindel

Once, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, known as the Alter Rebbe, came to a small town. During his short stay in that town, a fire broke out in one of the wooden houses. The local firemen had a hard time keeping the fire under control, and soldiers from a garrison stationed nearby came to help extinguish it. But a strong wind fanned the flames and sparks were flying in the air, threatening to set the whole town ablaze.

Several worried townspeople came to the saintly Rebbe and told him of the danger. Rabbi Schneur Zalman asked to be shown where the fire was, and he was led to the blazing house. He stood there for a few moments, leaning on his walking cane, and gazing intensely at the blaze. Suddenly, the wind stopped and the fire began to subside. Within a few moments the fire was brought under control, and everybody breathed a sigh of relief. The town was saved! Everybody talked excitedly about the wonderful miracle which was brought about by the saintly Rebbe.

The soldiers returning to their barracks told their general of the miracle that the saintly Rabbi performed before their very eyes. The general sent his orderly to ask the Rabbi to appear before him.

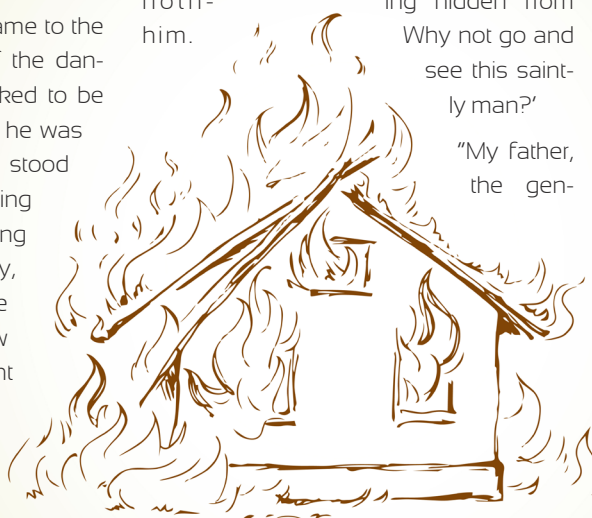
The general greeted Rabbi Schneur Zalman with respect and reverence. "Are you, perhaps, a son or a grandson of the saintly Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov?" the general asked him.

"I am indeed his "grandson," but in a spiritual sense, for I am a disciple of his disciple," the Alter Rebbe replied.

"Well, then I was not wrong in my conclusion, and I am not at all surprised that you should have supernatural power." Saying this, the general brought out a leather-bound volume, and pointing to it, he continued:

"Let me tell you a wonderful thing that hap-

pened to my late father, which he recorded here in his diary. It happened when my father was stationed with his troops near the town of Mezhibozh. He had received no word from his wife for a long time, and he was very worried. Seeing how troubled the general was, some of his friends said to him: 'There lives in this town a saintly Rabbi, who is known as the Master of the Good Name. People tell wonderful things about him, and say that there is nothing hidden from him. Why not go and see this saintly man?'



"My father, the gen-

eral, decided that there was nothing he could lose by seeing that saintly man, and he sent his orderly to the Baal Shem Tov to arrange a time to visit him.

"The orderly returned and told my father that the Baal Shem Tov said he was too busy. This infuriated my father. He sent the orderly back again to the Baal Shem Tov to tell him that if he refused to see him, he (my father) would billet his soldiers in the Jewish houses, and there would not be a single Jewish home which would not have to provide food and lodging for one or more soldiers.

"This threat was very serious, for not only were the Jews of the town poor and unable to afford the burden, but it was also close to the Jewish festival of Passover, and the soldiers would bring chometz into the Jewish homes! But when the orderly returned, he brought the answer that although the

saintly Rabbi is too busy, a time had nevertheless been fixed for my father's visit!

"Promptly at the appointed time, my father and his orderly came to the house of the Baal Shem Tov. Through an open door leading from the living room, they saw the saintly Baal Shem Tov sitting in his study, his head bent over a book. By force of habit, my father went up to a small mirror hanging on the wall to smooth his hair. As he looked into the mirror, a strange sight unfolded before his eyes. Instead of seeing a reflection of his own face, he saw a familiar road, the road leading to his own home town. Not believing his eyes, and thinking that his imagination was playing tricks on him, he called his orderly to the mirror. The orderly was no less amazed.

Presently, the road seemed to pass by them, and they found themselves on the familiar street where the general lived. The door of the house opened and my father saw his wife sitting at her desk writing a letter. As if looking over her shoulder, they saw that she was writing a letter to him! In it she begged him to excuse her for not writing for so long, for she was occupied with the pregnancy and birth of his new child—a boy! Both she and the baby are fine, and she longed for him to come home and see his son!

"You can imagine how excited my father became. Forgetting where he was, he rushed back to his quarters, and there, on his desk, was a letter for him from his wife. He opened it and read it over again and again. It was exactly what he had seen in the mirror in the Baal Shem Tov's house!

"I am that baby about whom my mother wrote to my father in that letter! You can see the whole story recorded by my father in his diary."

Concluding his amazing story, the general asked the saintly Rebbe to bless him.

"Be good to the Jews, and the Almighty will bless you," the Rebbe replied, "for so it is written in the Torah: 'They that bless you [Abraham] shall be blessed.'" ■

Question of the Week

I'll Let You In on a Secret

By Aron Moss

My kids get very excited about the Seder, but I find that the thing they are most excited about is the Afikoman. As soon as I break the middle matzah they start begging me to hide the larger part so they can find it. I know this is designed to keep their attention to the end of the Seder, but is there something more to hiding the Afikoman? I'd love to be able to tell my kids what the lesson is.

Here's a great topic to discuss with your children: Should we keep our virtues secret, or should we be public about the good we do? Is it better to hide our righteousness, or be open about it?

The answer is: Afikoman.

At the beginning of the Seder, we take a matzah and break it in two. The smaller part is left exposed on the table, while the larger part we call the Afikoman and hide it away for the kids to find later on.

The Hebrew word 'matzah' is connected to the word 'mitzvah'. Matzah represents our good deeds. So the two parts of the matzah, the smaller part on the table and the bigger part hidden away, symbolise two types of good deeds, our public mitzvahs and our private mitzvahs.

There is the good you do that everyone knows about, and then there are the good deeds you do away from the public eye. Whenever possible, it is better to do a mitzvah quietly.



Our good deeds need not be flaunted. We should do good without seeking attention, without needing to be recognised and without asking for anything in return. The greatest acts of charity are anonymous, and the most altruistic kindness is one that no one will ever know about.

Not that it's bad to do good in public. Often we need to. But the mitzvahs that you do in the open should be only a fraction of the good you do when no one sees. That is a secret between you and G-d.

And yet, there are some people who should be let in on your secret. Your own children. They need to learn from you, so they must be made aware of what you do when no one is looking. It is not showing off to tell your children about your private good deeds. It is educating them. If we hide our mitzvahs from our children they will not learn to be discreet about their mitzvahs.

So the big piece of matzah is hidden away, but the kids need to find it. It's great to be modest, but we can't expect children to learn if we don't show them who we really are. Let them in on your secret mitzvahs, take them along on your undercover missions of kindness. Let them find your hidden Afikoman, so one day they too will do good, even when no one is looking. ■

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