

Rosh Hashanah 5784/2023 Rabbi Mark Wildes, MJE
Living for Tomorrow
(First Day, Rosh Hashanah)

Yechezkel Taub was born on October 7, 1895, in a small town in Poland. His father, Rabbi Yaakov Taub, a Chasidic Rebbe descended of other Chassidic rabbis, was the “Rebbe” of Yablona, a small town near Warsaw that was home to a vibrant religious Jewish community. When R. Yaakov died in 1920, his son Yechezkel just 24 at the time, found himself at the head of a prestigious and wealthy Hasidic sect. He was a brilliant young man who already had hundreds of followers. Reb Yaakov, or the Yablona rebbe, as he was referred was passionate about the holiness of the land of Israel and became convinced the future of the Jewish people lay there rather than in Eastern Europe. And so, in 1924, with the support of his wealthier Hasidim, he and a few hundred of his followers moved to Palestine. They and another group of Hasidim were welcomed by Jewish officials and ended up buying land in the north of the country, close to Haifa. Their settlement became known as Kfar Hasidim. The new arrivals were welcomed with open arms. Notables came to see the remarkable phenomenon of Hasidic farmers but very soon, things began to go bad. There were disputes with the local Arab population. The Kishon River overflowed, flooding the valley, turning it into a swamp. There was an outbreak of malaria and some of the settlers died. Bedouins caused further trouble. The farm failed. Despite the initial enthusiastic financial support from Yablone Hasidim in Poland, funding slowly dwindled and then dried up completely. In 1928, the Rebbe traveled to the United States to drum up support, but to no avail. In desperation, he turned to the Zionist organizations for help. Finally, he made a deal to transfer the land to the Jewish Agency. They would provide the settlers with a stipend, while the JNF would absorb all the debts he had accumulated. The settlement was restructured, and religious Zionists from Germany and Holland, who had agricultural training in Europe, eventually helped improve things. With the situation in Poland rapidly deteriorating though, Hasidim from Yablona began turning up in Palestine expecting to take possession of the plots of land they had paid for over a decade earlier. But the Yablone Rebbe was not able to give them their land nor could he give them their money back. He had nothing. They leveled all kinds of accusations against him, and so the Rebbe again travelled to the United States in 1938 to see if he could raise funds, but then the war broke out. The German army marched into Poland, and the Rebbe was now trapped in America. With no hope of getting back to Palestine or of supporting himself, he moved out West, where he found work in the California shipyards. News reached him that the Nazis had murdered the entire Yablona community near Warsaw, along with most of Polish Jewry. He had a crisis of faith. In 1944, the Yablone Rebbe removed his Hasidic dress, shaved off his beard and payos, changed his name, and filed immigration papers to become a naturalized citizen of the United States. He stopped keeping kosher; he stopped observing Shabbat; and eventually abandoned Yiddishkeit. The Yablone Rebbe was no longer a Chasidic Rebbe but an assimilated American immigrant called George Nagel.

The first time the Jewish people were exiled from Israel was close to 3000 years ago when the Babylonians destroyed our first Temple in 586 BCE. At the time our ancestors felt G-d had permanently divorced the Jewish people, and this was the end of Jewish history. But it wasn't. The great Kabbalistic work, the Zohar says that when the Jewish people were expelled from Israel, G-d called to all the angels and said: “what are doing here in the heavens? My beloved children are being exiled into Babylonia and you remain here in the heavens? Descend to Babylonia and I will go into exile with you”. And by the famous waters of Babylon the prophet Yechezkel received a vision from G-d which he proclaimed to the people “harei Adonchem Kan” – “behold, your Master is here” – G-d is here with us here in Babylonia. Yechezkel received this prophesy informing him that Hashem was still with His people that He descended into exile with the Jewish people.

This is all recorded at the beginning of the Book of Yechezkel, where the prophet says *Vanai betoch hagolah* – “and I in the midst of the exile”. But where exactly was this place of exile, where the prophet Yechezkel received this vision? The Zohar says Yechezkel was in a place called “Nehar Kvar”, by the River of Kvar. Rabbi Moshe Weinberger explained that the beginning of exile is always in *Nehar Kvar*. But what does this mean? The word *Nehar* of course means a river but what is “Kvar”? Kvar in Hebrew means “already” as in “Kvar Haya” - something already was. *Nehar Kvar* is therefore the river of already was. The beginning of exile, explained Rabbi Weinberger, is when we feel that whatever *was* in our life this past year defines who we are now, and who we will be going forward. That we cannot make the coming year into anything else than what already was. *Nehar Kvar* – is the feeling that I can’t change or fix anything from my past – that’s what Yechezkel meant when he said: “V’ani betoch Hagolah – “I am in the midst of exile “al nehar kvar” - in the river of what was. That feeling that I cannot heal or repair what was, or that I can’t get back to the good that once was. That way of thinking is called *Nehar Kvar* and that is the epitome of Galus (exile) - living in the River of Was.

Geulah or Redemption is just the opposite. The name G-d revealed to Moshe when He told Moshe to go before Pharo and demand the release of the Jewish people from Egypt, was “Aleph Hey Yud Heh” - Ekyeh Asher Ekyeh” which means “I will be as I will be”. The Zohar interprets this holy phrase to mean: “*amizamin l’mibehevei*” - I am prepared to become. I am prepared to change. I am ready for something new. Galus or exile is “Kvar” - was, with all the limitations of what was in the past, and how that paralyzes us. Redemption is just the opposite. Redemption is the feeling that I’m free, I’m free to change to be whoever I want to become. It’s all about the future.

Returning to our story of the Yablona Rebbe, who changed his name to George Nickel and became an assimilated Jew. George avoided contact with the Jewish community of Los Angeles and then San Diego, where he moved. The only link to his past was a niece back in Israel, in Kfar Hasidim, with whom he corresponded. Years later, her son, Ehud moved to California after his army service in Israel to become a journalist. He made contact with his great Uncle George, and they established a close relationship. After the War, George went into real estate. He had ups and downs but in his 1970s, he lost everything. He collapsed and ended up in the hospital. There, Ehud visited him and suggested he move back to Israel. But after decades of self-imposed exile, George just could not see himself returning to Kfar Hasidim, the source of so much pain, anguish and failure. He couldn’t relive that past. When he was released from the hospital, he decided to go back to school and earned a degree in psychology. In 1978, having started down the path of reinventing himself, he finally felt confident enough to pay a visit to Kfar Hasidim. He was met by Ehud at the airport in Israel and who drove him to a hall packed with people who had gathered to meet the man who had put Kfar Hasidim on the map. Old and young, religious and secular — everyone connected to the village was there. A seat at the front was left empty for George, and as a hush descended, he slowly made his way toward his seat and sat down under the large welcome sign that adorned the front wall. An elderly man stood up and turned to speak. “Rebbe, do you remember me?” he asked. George looked at him, trying to figure out who he was. “I’m not sure,” he said. “Wait, are you Chaimke? Chaimke Geldfarb?” Chaimke smiled. “Yes, Rebbe, it’s me.” His voice was hoarse with emotion. “On behalf of all the residents of our community, I want to welcome you back home. You were probably very nervous to come here. You probably think we are angry with you ... you think we are angry that it all went wrong. But Rebbe, if that’s what you think, you’re mistaken. Because Rebbe — you saved all of our lives — if it were not for you, we would have all stayed in Poland and been killed by the Nazis.” “Look over there ...” Chaimke pointed toward a group of people in the middle of the hall. “That’s my son with his wife and children, and next to him my two daughters with their husbands and children.” “My parents, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, and their children were all murdered by the Nazis. But we came with you, Rebbe. We built this place. We founded this village. We survived. And you were the one who saved our lives.

And for that we thank you. Thank you for our lives, and for the lives of our children and grandchildren.”

George was stunned. When he recovered his composure, he said it might be time for him to come back home, to Israel, to Kfar Hasidim. It didn't happen right away. He had to go back to Los Angeles to wrap up his affairs. In 1981, George returned to settle in Kfar Hasidim for good. At the age of 86, he not only returned to Israel, but he returned to Yiddishkeit, to Shabbat, Kashrut, he grew back his beard and payot. George Nagel once again became the Yabloner Rebbe. He thought G-d was finished with him, or that he was finished with G-d. He lived for so many years in *Nehar Kvar*, in the river of was, never forgiving himself, never able to shake his past, but he ultimately died a Tzadik, a righteous person again leading his flock of Chasidim until he passed from this world. On his tombstone in Israel, in Hebrew it reads: the Rebbe of Yanlona – that is who he was and that's who he came back to being.

We all have something from our past which haunts us, which keeps us from moving on. We all, I'm sure spend some time wallowing in *Nehar Kvar* - in the river of what was, but that's an exile mentality. Rosh Hashanah calls to us to live a life of redemption, of looking towards the future. Today we start a new year with new opportunities. Yes, we must look at what we did wrong this past year - if we don't do some of that, if we don't reflect on the past we can't improve for the future, but there's no moving forward if we live in *Nehar Kavar* - if we allow those past misdeeds and misfortunes paralyze us and keep us from being the people we were meant to be.

What is it that's holding you back that you can learn to let go of this Rosh Hashana? What failure did you suffer that perhaps made you feel like Hashem no longer cares? Or what misdeed did we perhaps commit which made us feel so badly about ourselves that we just stopped caring? In those moments it may feel like Hashem has abandoned us or that we left Him - like The Yabloner Rebbe felt when his whole settlement in Israel went bad, or like our ancestors felt after being sent into Babylonian exile but remember what the Prophet Yechezkel said: “Harei Adonchem Kan” – “behold, your Master is here”. G-d descended into the exile with our ancestors, and He remains with us in whatever situation we find ourselves.

Today on Rosh Hashanah we crown G-d as our King. We acknowledge Hashem not only as having created the world at one point in the distant past, but as an active force in our lives today. If we're still here, it means Hashem *wants* us to be here and like any parent, He wants to see us grow and develop. This is the deeper meaning of wishing each other *Shannah Tovah* - a good year because the word “shanah” is from “shinui” which means different. How will we be different in the New Year? When we say Shannah Tova, what we are doing is wishing each other the strength to change - to *not* stay the same, to *not* languish in *Nehar Kvar*, in the River of Was, but to muster the strength to put the past behind us and believe in ourselves than we can do better. That we can be more devoted to our Torah and its mitzvot - to Shabbat, to Tefilah (prayer) by coming here more often, studying with us on Wednesday nights and praying with us on Shabbat morning. We can do this. It doesn't matter what we did or what we didn't do last year. We can become a kinder and more sensitive person, even if last year we didn't live up to that. We can make these changes because we are free agents to become who we want. If we internalize this message and the story of the Raboliner Rebbe, we can bring great blessing into our lives and B'ezrat Hashem not just have a *good* year, but please God, a *different* year.

Shanah Tova my friends.