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*With
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ב"ה

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Spiritual Rocket Fuel

Without question, the most frightening part of the entire Torah is the curses contained in this parshah, those horrible events that Hashem tells us will ensue if we abandon our faith in Him and adherence to His mitzvos. Those scary heavenly declarations of the misery that will rain down upon us. How our bodies will languish. How our enemies will dominate us. How wild beasts will bereave us of our children, roads and cities. How we will be met with sword, pestilence and sickness. How we will encounter forms of death unfathomably gruesome and ghastly. How we will eat the very flesh of our sons and daughters out of hunger. How we will be scattered amongst the nations of the world and our land will become desolate, our cities in ruin. How we will be rendered into a bunch of carcasses and heaped together into a pile to rot. Kind of scary.

But what's strange is that just as the parshah is ending, it throws in something that seems to be completely unrelated to this very daunting and prophetic Divine warning. Immediately after the tochachah, the Torah discusses the laws of erechin – the right each Jew has to donate his monetary value to the Bais Hamikdash.

Why does the Torah place it specifically there? Doesn't it take away from the import of this topic? Why would the Torah follow its thunderous and ominous admonition of serious catastrophes with something so technical and seemingly unrelated?

Perhaps the following idea can give us a clue.

The Secret to Our Endurance

Out of all the many character traits that the Jewish people exhibit, the one that is perhaps most impressive is our endurance. To be history's punching bag and live to tell the tale. To have suffered at the hands of virtually every one of history's villains, and still survive it all.

But more than merely surviving in the face of adversity, what sets us apart is our unique ability to actually use the pain and anguish as a springboard to catapult us forward. We don't merely stand up and limp to safety; we spring up with vigor, we jump up with tenacity, we regain our spirits and rebuild ourselves even better than before. Each tragedy is transformed into new creativity.

We are pummeled and terrorized, and yet we pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off and find a reservoir of strength to not only move on, but to do so with robustness. To thrive and grow and soar, using the animosity around us as fuel to power the spiritual rocket ship within us.

There are many examples in our history of how, following a tragedy, we rebuilt even stronger than before. Following King Shlomo's death and the division of the kingdom came the towering prophets Amos and Hoshea, Yeshayahu and Yirmiyahu. After the tragic destruction of the first Bais Hamikdash came the great renewal of Torah, beginning with Yechezkel and culminating with Ezra and Nechemia. From the destruction of the second Bais Hamikdash came the explosion of Torah in the form of the Mishnah, Midrash, and Gemara. From the Crusades came the Chassidei Ashkenaz. Following the horrific Spanish expulsion came the immense mystical circle of Tzfas led by the Arizal, leaving ripple effects that reverberated throughout the entire Torah world. From the unspeakable Eastern European persecution came the Chassidic movement, injecting Judaism with a seemingly endless flow of passion, story and song. From the Holocaust, the most horrid loss of Jewish life in our nation's history, came the miraculous resurrection of Torah Judaism in America and in Israel. There is such a proliferation of institutions supporting our lifestyle, that in Yerushalayim, virtually every fifteen feet is another shul, Bais Medrash and seminary.

Where did that inner reservoir of fortitude and strength come from? With what energy did our parents and grandparents, after persecution of the worst degree, rise from the ashes and rebuild our communities, bigger and better than before, brick by painstaking brick?

The end of this parshah, says Reb Mordechai Kamenetsky, holds the answer. Immediately following the list of horrors that will barrage the Jewish people upon straying from the Jewish faith, the Torah speaks of the ability of each and every person to donate his monetary worth to the Bais Hamikdash. The placement isn't random. Nothing in the Torah is. The juxtaposition in the Torah is telling us that the immense inner value of each and every Jew is unbreakable, and no matter how grim and gory the backdrop is, one's neshama is intrinsically holy, and no amount of persecution will ever convince us otherwise.

The Torah's specific placement of the mitzvah of erechin, which highlights the ability for each Jew to donate his worth to the Bais Hamikdash, is telling us that even as we get kicked and burned, stabbed and expelled, we must remember our ever-present, untouchable, glistening inner worth. We are to remember that it is not those barbaric hooligans who determine our value, it is God who determines it, and in His eyes we are all intrinsically holy. No matter how many layers of human corpses we may lay under, we must climb out and allow our holiness to shine. We are the torch of humanity, and no amount of ferocious persecution will ever dim it.

If we lose sight of the immense spiritual value embedded deep inside of us, then our enemies win the war. If we keep our eyes on the potential within, we are indestructible.

Moon Perspectives

Every month, Jews go outside to say kiddush levanah – the monthly sanctification of the new moon. We look at the moon and declare that the same way the moon renews itself, so must we. We take inspiration from the change of the moon to get up and change ourselves.

The question is glaring. Just about the only thing in the entire solar system that does not change is the moon. The earth has seasons. Stars come and go. The sun is forever burning itself with more and more energy. The moon just sits there. No wind. No water. No gravity. No life. Neil Armstrong's footprints are still there, exactly where he left them. But that is precisely the point we are trying to make. Change is not about waiting for the season to pass or the climate to improve. Change is not about dreaming about different settings and scenarios more conducive to our success. Change is about changing our perspective. Change is taking the circumstances at hand and seeing them in a different light, with a different angle. Change is ridding the habit of blaming circumstances, and directing our sights on inner transformation.

Hence, the moon is the perfect paradigm. It sits there, never moving a muscle. And yet it waxes and wanes every month. How is this so? Our perspective of it changes. It screams out to us that in order to grow and climb and ride the wave of life, we need to be forever enhancing ourselves. To be forever improving the quality in ourselves. To stop blaming external persons, places and things and start focusing on ourselves. To be forever grabbing hold of that self-replenishing reservoir of value deep inside of us, and unleashing it.

The Hebrew word for eye is ayin. Rav Shamshon Rafael Hirsch points out that ayin also means spring. For having the right outlook in life can make us release a spiritual spring of potential, and gush forth energies that are strong enough to survive any adversary. We go out once a month, whether in the cold or the rain, the snow or the sleet, and we dance by the light of the moon. For our nation has a spring of spiritual energy contained within our souls, and we, with the right perspective, can always tap into it.

The Beating in Klausenberg

Rav Kamenetsky sums up this concept with the following story:

After the Nazis invaded the small village of Klausenberg, they began to celebrate in their usual sadistic fashion. Gathering the Jews into a circle in the center of town, the Nazis paraded the Rebbe, Rabbi Yekusiel Yehuda Halberstam, into the middle. Taunting and teasing him, pulling his beard and pushing him around, the vile soldiers trained their guns on Rabbi Halberstam as the commander began to speak.

"Tell us, Rabbi," the officer sneered, "Do you really believe that you are the Chosen People?"

The soldiers guarding the crowd howled in laughter.

In a serene voice, the Rebbe answered loudly and clearly, "Most certainly."

The officer became enraged, lifted his rifle above his head, and viciously beat the Rebbe. Swinging the rifle like a baseball bat, he repeatedly swung at the holy Rebbe's head. As the Rebbe fell to the ground bloodied and bruised, there was a rage in the officer's voice. "Do you still think you are the Chosen People?" he yelled.

Once again, the Rebbe nodded his head and said, "Yes, we are."

The officer became even more infuriated, kicked the Rebbe and repeated, "You stupid Jew, you lie here on the ground, beaten and humiliated. What makes you think you are part of the Chosen People?"

The Rebbe looked at his family and fellow townspeople watching in horror. He turned back to face the officer. From the depths of his humiliation, covered in dust, the Rebbe replied, "As long as we are the ones getting kicked and not the ones doing the kicking, we can call ourselves the Chosen People."

From the back alleyways of the destroyed city of Yerushalayim, to the ports of Spain in 1492, to the villages in Germany ransacked and torched by pogroms. From deep within forests in the middle of nowhere, to the northernmost parts of freezing Siberia. From the riots to the Crusades. From the cells to the dungeons. From the fires to the torture chambers. From the barracks to the ghettos. From the hidden caves to the concentration camps. From the bomb shelters to the prisons. No matter where we find ourselves at the beginning of every month, we Jews, in groups large and small, huddle together in the cold of the night and say kiddush levanah. We look up to the moon and proclaim, "Hashem, this month we will be better. This month we will start anew. This month, we will reenergize ourselves and bring a fresh perspective."

With tears in our eyes, we said, "Hashem, no amount of pain and bloodshed will ever place a damper on the value we place on our holy neshamos. We will keep dancing down history's road and allow our souls to flood forth, no matter the circumstances, shining ever brighter with each passing year."

We look down from the moon with tears streaming down our cheeks. We limp into a small circle, and we dance and we sing and we cry. We remind each other that though the exile has been long, and it's been dark and dreary, if we absorb the lesson of the moon and keep the fire in our souls growing ever stronger, we will without a doubt keep on forging on.