

Finding Answers from our Faith

In his novel “The Plague,” Albert Camus, the 20th century French philosopher, creates a metaphor for the German occupation of France during World War II. His story describes a terrible plague that strikes a town, terrorizing its victims and bringing death to multitudes of the inhabitants. The Plague is carried by infected rats that spread the plague’s poison among the human population. In the face of death, each person is forced into making a decision that will ultimately define his character. Some people resort to profiteering. Others find consolation in senseless hedonism. Still others make efforts to heal the sick. Eventually though, “The Plague” ends and the survivors rejoice.

But the town doctor, watching the townspeople celebrate, understands what the masses did not. He knows that this particular Plague never dies. It lies dormant for years and bide its time. And eventually the rats that carry and transmit “The Plague” will rise up again and terrorize the city once more.

On this New Year of 5769, we stand with our fellow Jews who wonder what the future will bring, as we face the reemergence of the plague that seeks to destroy us. In this bizarre post 9-11, post-2nd Intifada and Lebanon War, with all its fears and apprehensions, the world’s climate has acquired a feel that many of us have never quite known. Ever since 9/11 seven years ago, it seems the world we live in has been turned upside down. In our country, the economy seems like it is near collapse and many of us are feeling the effects. Our position among the nations seems to be weakening every day. We face the realization that our days as the world’s only superpower may come to an end. Externally, when we watch the nightly news we hear the drumbeat of world’s woes and travails. Unending conflict, corruption and turmoil are still raging in Israel, and even though Israel enjoys relative peace today, existensial threats continue to solidify. We are still embroiled in Iraq and Afghanistan with no real hope in sight for a just conclusion. Osama bin Laden is still on the loose and his band of murderers remain hidden in a murky, impenetrable world that we do not seem to understand. Terrorist threats continue to haunt us at home. Anti-Semitism is on the rise in many different parts of the world; in France, in

South America, in the former Soviet Union, in the Arab world, and on and on. And for all the problems we face, we are not sure if there are genuine leaders who have the intellectual capacity or moral certitude to deal with these complex and intricate situations. It is in these times that throughout our history, we have turned to our faith to find answers and direction.

Towards the very end of the Torah there is a statement that G-d will hide his presence from the people when they transgress His ways. But immediately after this warning is the commandment incumbent upon each Jew to help write or commission the writing of a Torah scroll at some point in his life. According to the famous rabbi, the Chofetz Chaim, the reason this commandment follows such a warning is to remind us that even in times of darkness and destruction, we should look towards our tradition to find light and a way out of the abyss.

Only ten years ago in a small, ground floor storage room in Terezin, Czech Republic, where the Nazis had interred 150,000 Jews during the Holocaust into a ghetto, a secret synagogue was unearthed by local villagers. The small 15 by 15 room was accessible only by a small courtyard door and was never discovered during the war by the Nazis. Inside, somewhat elaborate designs and decorations were found on the walls and the ceilings including biblical verses that implied hope, redemption, and one that implored G-d to remove His anger and rescue His people. For the congregants of this tiny synagogue who risked their lives each time they entered this shul 65 years ago, their sanctuary represented an oasis of hope and spirituality in a world of misery and death. The inmates of the Terezin ghetto knew that they probably would not survive the war, and most of them didn't. But one of the ways they found the strength to persevere from day to day was to look to their faith for tenderness and consolation. Today their synagogue stands as a memorial not only to the victims who died there, but to the faith that supported them in their darkest hours.

What these unbelievably brave inmates of Terezin did should be an involuntary motion for every Jew. When times of distress emerge we should immediately seek shelter in our faith tradition. I remember how we were reminded of this the Friday after 9/11 when many people came to synagogue seeking consolation and compassion. You might have thought it was the High Holy Days, there were so many people in the sanctuary – but this time people weren't coming to be judged, they were coming because they had reached a point in their lives where they did not know where else to turn. They wanted answers, but they also wanted to be comforted –

both physically and spiritually. They mourned for those who were murdered, but they also wanted to know why and how some people could be so cavalier in taking the lives of innocent people in mass numbers, and in our own backyard. In the synagogue that night we offered answers, not in words but in prayer, in meditation and contemplation. And Jews around the country and the world left their synagogues that night perhaps not having all the answers and still feeling a numb pain, but sensing at least that they had gone to the right place to deal with the emotions raging inside of them.

During that terrible week we wanted to be together so we came to synagogue. We wanted to be assured that even though our world seemed to be in complete chaos, somewhere there was a force that brought order to the world – and in that force is the strength to deal with the problems that assail us.

This was a lesson that was learned in his early years by Dr. Henry Kissinger. Kissinger was born in Weimar Germany, a Germany that was rich in culture, science, exploration and intellect. But although it was an advanced in these areas, politically its democracy was weak, and was easily overtaken by the forces of Hitler's evil fascism. When Kissinger later grew into a statesman in this country, one very important lesson burned clear in his mind – in order for the world to be safe, the forces of morality, the democratic powers of the world, needed to be strong enough to deal with any evil dictator or corrupt leader that would seek to gain power and compromise liberty.

Kissinger contended that just as countries like the United States and Israel serve as an *Or l'goyim*, a light to the nations, a moral beacon to the world, they are powerless to spread morality without the power to assert themselves politically, economically and militarily. Today even though we are struggling, we are a very strong and rich country, and hopefully that will always be the case. But regardless of our strength, it will only be worthwhile if we continue to maintain our moral clarity. It is hard being the conscience of the world – it forces us to deal with issues in far off places because no one else is willing to do it – and then we have to listen to criticism from others who do not have the fortitude to do what gets left to us. The ability to see evil and act out against it is what makes our country great; it is what Kissinger always preached, and as long as that moral focus stands firm, then our country's future will be secure and worth fighting for. But should we let tough economic times, or a military that is stretched too thin, or leaders that we do not agree with compromise our moral

principles, then we will be weakened and our futures will be seriously damaged. We are now enduring a difficult period in the history of our nation. Let us remember though from our past where our strength comes from so that we can invest our efforts into maintaining the values that make us great.

What Kissinger taught us was that if good is going to defeat evil, it must constantly stand at the ready and be willing to fight for what is right. As Americans, and as faithful Jews, this should be our hallmark. Whether our problems stem from our personal lives, our American allegiance, or our Jewish identities, if we are to deal with them properly, we must be resolute in our faith and our moral sensibilities. If we are not, when trouble arises, we will be left scrambling chaotically in all the wrong directions.

And this is true not only from a national standpoint, but also from a personal one. Often challenges arise in our lives that cause us to question our faith, to wonder if G-d has it in for us. We get sick, deal with financial crises, and watch loved ones and friends pass on from this world. These occurrences can seem too difficult to bear, but those of us secure in our faith will likely have a better time knowing where to look for comfort and consolation.

I remember very clearly a time when my faith was tested, and I needed spiritual strength to overcome a daunting hurdle. Several months before I moved to Ft. Myers I noticed that I was having tremendous pain in my back and I had no idea why. When I went to the doctor he told me that I likely had a disc problem or was having muscle spasms. After taking some x rays the doctor ascertained that in fact I had a broken bone in my neck, and he was very concerned why it broke considering I had not been in an accident or sustained any type of trauma. More tests were ordered and my doctor, who was a nationally recognized orthopedic surgeon, eventually concluded with 95% certainty, that I had lymphoma – cancer.

At the time that the diagnoses was rendered I was in Ohio attending the funeral of Jodi's grandfather, who had just passed away. My father, after having talked to my doctor, called me to let me know the horrible news. As you can imagine I was devastated – I was going to have to have chemotherapy, I was not sure if I was

going to get better, my ability to move here was compromised, and a trip that I had planned to Israel that I had looked forward to for two years was going to be cancelled.

One of the first calls I made after speaking to my family was to Judy Schindler, the senior rabbi where I was working in Charlotte. After consoling me with kind words, she said to me a line I may never forget – she said, “it is times like this when our faith is truly tested.”

It seemed like a very appropriate thing for her to say, but the truth was after all of the contemplating I had done before I spoke to her, I had never once questioned my faith. In retrospect, I was so proud that that was the case. After going through several more tests it ultimately turned out two weeks later that I in fact did not have cancer, but rather had a benign lesion called a granuloma that would not cause me any more harm. It was definitely a gut wrenching, soul searching worrisome period of my life. I wondered how I would get better, how my life would be affected and my future would be altered. But I never once questioned my faith.

Actually that night my wife and I went to rent a movie to try and take our minds off of the diagnosis. We wanted to get something funny that would take our minds off our predicament. For whatever reason, without thinking, we rented “Thank You For Smoking”, a funny movie, but a movie that focused on causes for cancer. What else could we do but laugh?

But funny movies only last a couple of hours. Eventually no matter how much we try to avoid them, our problems do not go away. And I had a major problem. But I was also a new father, and I had just witnessed ten months earlier the miracle of childbirth. I had and continue to have a glorious marriage. And after five years of service to the Jewish people as a rabbi, and ten years of intense Torah study, I simply was in a great position of faith – a position in which I was prepared to let the good in me fight any evil that came my way. My Jewish faith seemed to me to be immune to any threat, even the possibility of becoming seriously ill. Just as morally powerful countries resist the wicked, my faith was prepared to support me and lead me in the right direction. I think Kissinger was right – to defeat forces of evil, proponents of faith and justice must always be prepared. And then, when crisis does emerge, they will be ready.

At some point or another, in all of our lives, something occurs that questions our faith. We might get sick, or have family issues that seem overbearing. We might have failing businesses because of the current

economic crisis. Life is full of adversity - it can change on a dime. One minute you may be walking down the street without a care in the world, and the next minute your life can be forever changed by one occurrence. The question is, will we be prepared if and when our faith is tested?

There is a story of the great Chasidic master, the Baal Shem Tov, who used to live in the mountains of southern Russia. From time to time he would walk to the top of the mountain, and lose himself in thought. Lost to the world, lost to himself, but found to G-d. Deep in this “lostness” and this “foundness”, he once began to walk where there was no ground to walk on. As he put his foot down, he was stepping into an abyss. But before he could hurdle downward, a nearby mountain moved and closed the gap. The Baal Shem Tov, all unknowing, continued on firm ground: lost to the world, lost to himself, but found to G-d.

But we are not all the Baal Shem Tov. Not all of us see an abyss and automatically assume that G-d will fill the void by moving mountains for us. Faith may in fact be interpreted differently by all of us. But chances are we all envision the same result when we exhibit faith in the Divine. Abraham Joshua Heschel taught us, “It is faith from which we draw the sweetness of life, the taste of the sacred, the joy of the imperishably dear. It is faith that offers us a share in the eternity.”

And those who reject their faith are usually the ones who question G-d’s existence, who rail against Him whenever they are met with adversity. They are the ones who are ill-prepared to deal with spiritual challenge, and who get lost in their own worlds of self importance. Should we listen to these voices, the ones who are so committed when times are good, but immediately retract at the sight of any adversity? Or should we hear the words of King David, who proclaimed, “Happy is the man who is in awe of the Lord. He shall never be shaken, he is not afraid of evil tidings, his heart is firm. His trust is in the Lord.”

This year let us allow our faith guide us to moral clarity. Let our belief give us the strength to meet any challenge, and defeat any evil that confronts us.

Kein Yehi Ratzon., May this be G-d’s will.

Amen