

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PART OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

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## THE RESILIENCE AND GRIT IN ACCEPTING THE TORAH

In our era, we use the words “resilience” and “grit” to describe those who have persevered despite challenging circumstances, something that was especially true this past year. And if there is any nation that exemplifies these words, it’s Bnei Yisroel. From Avraham Avinu discovering Hashem, despite growing up in a house of idol worshippers, to Yaakov’s experience in Lavan’s house, we were born to deal with and persevere through challenging situations. But how have we as a nation managed to survive when so many other larger and more sophisticated nations have fallen by

the wayside of history? And more important, how have we as a people maintained our faith in God and commitment to Torah and mitzvot despite the incredibly challenging situations we have faced?

Our connection to Hashem and our ability to survive as a nation are intertwined. Initially, in the Midbar, we connected to Hashem in the most basic of ways, namely through Moshe Rabbeinu. We needed water, Moshe reached out to Hashem and asked Him for water. Every day, the manna came down to provide us with sustenance. We were in our adolescence, still developing as a

nation and while we made mistakes, rebelled, and at times defied God, Moshe was always there to bring us back to Him and to reconcile our relationship with Hashem. And after forty years in the Midbar, we reached a critical step in our relationship with God by entering the Land of Israel.

As we matured as a nation, we needed a different leader. Although we were a ragtag nation, we succeeded in defeating some of the strongest armies in the world, achieving our goal of *kivush haaretz*, conquering the land. While there were times that as a nation we made mistakes, we had a strong leader in Yehoshua, who

kept us unified and focused on our ultimate goal. We maintained a strong relationship with and commitment to Hashem.

But then, with Yehoshua's death, things changed. A new type of leader arose, the judge who reflected a new type of relationship we enjoyed with Hashem. When the people followed the shoftim, there was a spiritual awakening, a connection to Hashem, and Bnei Yisroel achieved military victories. However, Sefer Shoftim describes nearly 400 years of difficult history, with Bnei Yisroel turning away from Hashem's Torah, and falling prey to the cardinal sins of idolatry, murder, and sexual immorality. *Mida k'neged mida*, God often allowed Israel's enemies to oppress them, and Klal Yisroel suffered at the hands of Moabites, Canaanites, Midianites, Ammonites and Philistines. All too often throughout this period, though they were living in their own land, the children of Israel were not actually free people.

There was a need at the end of the shoftim period for new leadership to save the people. While we were surviving, our commitment to Hashem was flailing. With the ascent of Shaul and Dovid, a new leadership model arose, that of the monarchy. What did the monarchy do? It established separate and distinct roles of leaders — there were kings, prophets, kohanim, and army generals. There were challenges and Bnei Yisroel struggled first under the leadership of Shaul and then under the leadership of David. But when Shlomo was crowned king, Bnei Yisroel entered a golden era. David had recaptured the Aron, preparing the way for Shlomo to build the Beit Hamikdash. And as a nation we were at our pinnacle, with a strong sense

of avodas Hashem. We could connect to Hashem in the most intimate of fashions, in the place where His Shechina dwelled.

Once again, we see this symbiotic relationship between Bnei Yisroel's relationship with Hashem and the leadership of the generation. Our leadership once again had a tremendous influence on our connection to Hashem and commitment to Torah. Sefer Melachim Alef and Bet describe the constant cycle of corruption and sin and then repentance and salvation after Shlomo Hamelech dies. His sons fight over the kingdom and our nation splits into Malchut Yehuda and Malchut Yisroel, never to be unified again. There are periods during which both kingdoms show commitment to Hashem. But ultimately, both kingdoms fall prey to corruption. They are kicked out of Israel and the Beit Hamikdash is destroyed. This failure in leadership was all too reflective of Bnei Yisroel's own failures in their service to Hashem.

As a nation, we had fallen from the pinnacle to the nadir, with our nation torn in half. And how did we move forward? We continued as a mere shadow of our former selves, with the loss of the ten tribes. Yet, even with all these trials and tribulations, we persevered.

As we were sent into exile, we somehow persevered, enduring trials and tribulations as exemplified by the story of Haman and Achashverosh. We were a people lost, trying to reclaim our identity as a God-fearing and God-serving people. Yet, throughout all this, there was hope. We read in Yirmiyahu (Chapter 31 verse 16):

וַיֵּשׁ תִּקְוָה לְאַחֲרֵיתָךְ נְאֻם ה' וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים  
לְגִבּוֹלָם.

*And there is hope for your future —  
declares the Lord: Your children shall  
return to their country.*

Somehow, we maintained a connection to Hashem holding fast to our Jewish identity.

Eventually, a group returned to Israel with Ezra and Nechemia. The Beit Hamikdash was rebuilt and the Jewish nation reestablished its connection to Hashem and reclaimed its identity as God's people. With the Kohanim and Sanhedrin assuming an increased public role in Jewish life, there was a stronger commitment to Torah and mitzvot. Leadership was important, but it did not play the same vital role it did in previous times in history. We were committed to the Beit Hamikdash and the sacrifices and rituals. But we were not committed to each other. Judaism had splintered into different factions. And this ultimately severed our relationship with Hashem. Our precious Beit Hamikdash was destroyed, and we were once again exiled.

We were faced with a challenge — how would we regroup? How would we survive as a people and what would our connection be with Hashem? We would no longer have a king or a prophet who could communicate with Hashem on our behalf, nor would we have a central place for the dwelling of the Shechina where we could connect directly with Hashem. We needed to rebuild everything.

As a resilient people we found a way. We turned to a focus on scholarship and commitment to halacha. The relationship with Hashem would be less direct but it would still be strong, and we could unify as a

people around our communities and our commitment to Torah and Torah values. We began a period of “Rabbinic Judaism.” This was the time of the flourishing of the Talmud, the schools in Surah and Pumbeditah, between the 2nd and 6th centuries.

But our challenges as a people did not end there. We remained committed to Torah and to Hashem, but this commitment was constantly challenged throughout the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and pogroms in Europe. How did we maintain our faith? Strong community ties were built, and the Jews turned to prayer as a way to connect to Hashem. Most of the *slichot* and *kinnot* we say today originated in those eras. These lamentations were uttered by the great men of Israel, the few who survived.<sup>1</sup> There wasn’t one way of connecting to Hashem though, which allowed for flexibility and growth when faced with challenges. Some were committed to Hashem through their strong Jewish identity, others through Torah study, with others through prayer and others through communal service.

And then we experienced the most horrific episode in our history, the Holocaust. Once again, we were faced with the question: How do we recover? Our Torah centers were destroyed. The communities in Europe were in tatters. And many were left with questions of faith. This was the worst devastation of the modern era and some said we would never recover. Our faith and connection to Hashem seemed broken.<sup>2</sup> Yet, we once again found a way to reconnect to Hashem and recover as a nation — through the State of Israel<sup>3</sup> (for many) and through an unprecedented expansion of Jewish education<sup>4</sup>. We became a people steeped in

commitment to community and shul life in a different way than in the past. Today, Jewish life is physically situated near shuls, schools and kosher establishments, while many of us send our children to Jewish camps.<sup>5</sup>

This is the story of the Jewish people. We have faced numerous challenges — challenges to our commitment to Hashem and challenges to our very existence. Despite these challenges we have found ways to survive. And after each challenge, we have regrouped and reconnected to Hashem. In each period of history, our relationship and our connection to Hashem has looked different. We are a resilient people — we experience tragedy and yet we find a way each time to recover and reconnect to Hashem and remain committed to the Torah.

During the pandemic, we have seen the incredible ways in which we have, as a community, connected to Hashem — through mikveh practice, shuls and general communal support. Our community was led by Rav Hershel Schachter, Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva University, through his *teshuvot*. Other rabbinic leaders, including Rav Asher Weiss, also answered many questions during this challenging time.<sup>6</sup> Our lives were disrupted and yet we persevered.

As we head toward Shavuot and the giving of the Torah, imagining life post-pandemic, it is our responsibility as a community to continue to find ways to connect to each other and to Hashem and the Torah. We need to re-engage our community. This can take shape in different ways. There may be people who felt very strongly about community support — for those people we need to empower them to get more involved. For those who were strongly committed to minyan,

we should help them get more engaged in shul life and find ways to make it more meaningful. For others, the Torah opportunities available because of COVID opened up a new world for them. We should continue to encourage and support this Torah learning. Our community has been battered and we have persevered, and now we can and must do it again.

## Endnotes

1. <https://yhb.org.il/S152/>.
2. Berkowitz, Eliezer, Faith After the Holocaust.
3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aftermath\\_of\\_the\\_Holocaust](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aftermath_of_the_Holocaust).
4. <https://traditiononline.org/rupture-and-reconstruction/>.
5. [https://steinhardt.foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/contact\\_summer\\_2002.pdf](https://steinhardt.foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/contact_summer_2002.pdf), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/summer-camps-as-super-glue-for-binding-jewish-identity-to-the-next-generation/>.
6. <https://forward.com/news/453573/jewish-law-for-the-coronavirus/>, and <https://jewishaction.com/religion/jewish-law/speaking-with-rav-hershel-schachter/>