

עדת אש קודש Adass Aish Kodesh

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FATHERS

Avos Perek 3 Mishna 7

TRAVELING WITH HASHEM

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"Dear Rabbi, We are here in sunny Peru, and went to visit the local shul ..." So started any number of post cards I used to receive every year whilst serving as a Rav in a community that had no small number of sweet Yieden not yet frum. You see, Jews wander, and I am constantly amazed that no matter where their wanderlust takes them, they will always seek out a shul.

Jews who hardly know where the local synagogue is at home will proudly visit some old and ancient place of worship when on holiday. I used to go crazy with it all. Here at home this fellow would never deign to visit a shul, he wouldn't know who the rabbi was, nor even when the next Yom Tov came around. Give him a passport and some exotic far off place and the first piece of business will be a trip to the local shul. It may be closed and boarded up, it could be the place hasn't been used in over a century, no matter; our intrepid traveller will want to see it.

What causes Jews with little Jewish connection to attach themselves to their Jewishness so far away from home? Perhaps it is because inside every Jewish heart there is a need to find Hashem. The further one travels from the safety of his own environment the more he subconsciously needs to bring Hashem into his heart.

When I was a youngster living in Suburban New York City, I remember a unique battle that took place in our local shul. In those far away days the battle between Orthodoxy and the non-Torah true wings of Judaism was at its fiercest. At every opportunity the forces that sought to destroy our Torah allegiance sought ways to close proper shuls or make them over into their own vision of what was acceptable.

This shul had been built directly after the war and considered itself a bastion of "modern" orthodoxy in a community that was decidedly not. All of a sudden a group of "new" members moved to abolish the mechitza in the shul. Everyone was aghast, the

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newcomers had quietly been working and thought they would win in any open vote on the matter.

Finally, there was a showdown, where the issue was brought to the fore and decided. The night of the vote saw a full shul; everyone had come to see how the issue would be decided. A long debate pursued, with those for and against speaking their peace. The poor Rabbi was startled by the venom some of the members spewed forth against our holy traditions. Everyone wondered how the vote would go. Just as the moment of truth was at hand, one lone hand was raised. Leon Stein wanted to speak. Everyone was taken aback. Leon never went to shul, never! He was a member only because his mother wanted him to be. He had a small family that never attended any shul activities, and he was well known to be a rich and decidedly secularised Jew. We all thought, "Here it goes, this guy is really going to speak against our mechitza."

Leon rose to his full six-foot height, cleared his voice and then made a passionate defence for the maintenance of the mechitza. We all were astounded; he spoke of how he felt that a shul must be a shul in all respects, and that even if he chose not to come as often as he should, the shul must remain holy and pure. Everyone stood and applauded his speech, and he became the hero of the night. There is no doubt that he saved the day, and today that same shul is the center of a thriving kollel.

Years later I asked that now old hero what made him do as he had. He told me that he felt that Hashem had called him to stand up that night and speak for the connection he had with our Torah. He knew his connection was tenuous, and he knew it would survive only if shuls would be allowed to prosper as Torah places.

Our Mishna goes some way to explain this. "When ten people sit together and occupy themselves with Torah, the Divine Presence dwells among them ..." Further on it tells us, "How do we know this even of five?" and still more, "How do we know even three ... etc." The Karmana Rebbe zy" a asks why in the case of a group of ten, the Mishna does not ask, "How do we know?" The Rebbe answers that when ten Yidden come together to form a group focused on doing Hashem's Will, they inherently feel for themselves Hashem's energy. The Divine radiance envelops them automatically.

It is this essence, even if latent, that we feel when we visit shuls that are far from home and perhaps even disused. The Jewish soul feels automatically the kinship of such togetherness, and it seeks to be bonded to its heavenly source.

The Mishna goes further; it tells us that with five, three, two and even alone, Hashem gives of His strength if we focus on His Will.

If Hashem is with us when we are alone, then why does the Mishna go into detail regarding the numbers five, three, and two? Perhaps to teach us that yes, Hashem rests with us even when we are alone. However, when we gather with others and speak of Torah, our own understanding of Hashem's greatness grows, and this makes such a coming together even more unique. Nothing happens without Hashem; however, when we share with others we have two dynamics in play. One is our own participation and the other is the kiddush Hashem that results from being together with others.

So, Leon Stein rose up to defend that shul's Torah integrity. Why? Because somewhere in his inner being he felt the truth; he felt the presence of all the tens of Jews who had davened there over the years. It turns out that old Leon had a grandfather who was a Rav in Poland, so I guess there was the merit of a few thousand minyanim there as well. His soul felt the need automatically, because Jews travel but they are never without the will to be holy.

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