



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FATHERS GRAPPLING WITH OUR OWN GOLUS

Avos Perek 3 Mishna 14

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In ancient times, the Yieden were living in Mitzrayim. Before we were enslaved, what sort of life did we live? According to many, we had a pretty easy time of it. We were even accepted and seen in venues like the local circus, a sure sign of being assimilated with the predominant culture and its pastimes.

Then, says the Torah, a new king came, one who did not know Yosef. From that time our standing deteriorated. Yosef represented many things to the world he inhabited. His name indicates "extra," more. He was never satisfied with the status quo but always strived to do more. This was seen by his ability in running an entire nation, and more to the point, his ability to remain a Kodosh, even when tempted by his master's wife. When people began to forget him, they were forgetting the enormous work and effort Yosef expended in all his undertakings.

The King chose to forget this hardworking leader simply because the people of Mitzrayim were basically a lazy nation who sought lives of excess and leisure. Chazal tell us that even the farmers were slothful. Usually, workers on the land are the most industrious of individuals, rising with the sun and labouring till nightfall. Because the Nile flooded its surrounding banks every year, the growing of crops was comparatively easy.

So, into this atmosphere of a laid-back, fun-seeking nation came Bnei Yisroel. In time they too forgot Yosef, becoming lazy like the Egyptians and visiting, as Chazal tell us, their places of entertainment, seeking to be accepted.

It had been decreed that we as a people would live in a foreign land for four centuries, but Hashem saw we were losing our vitality, our focus. He thus manipulated events so we would be enslaved. We had to serve our predetermined time in Golus, but Hashem created a situation that made us learn what it is to work hard and measure our days. That means getting up early in the morning, and although it was excruciating, we knew what it was to value our time and lives. Tzaddikim explain that Hashem set up this trial for our benefit, so we would be able to obtain a reduced sentence allowing us to leave

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sooner than determined and, more importantly, accept the Torah after our departure from that dark land. We now knew the value of working towards a goal in life, especially in the realm of spirituality.

Our Mishnah tells us:

Rebbi Dosa ben Harkinas says: Late morning sleep, children's chatter, and sitting in the assemblies of the ignorant remove a person from the world.

The Lev Simcha ztl explains that this Mishnah refers to a particular sequence of events. An individual who sleeps late will be inclined to imbibe wine in the afternoon, chat in a childlike manner all day, and even when he gets to shul at night he will stand in the back, schmoozing with ignorant folk like himself. One who lives in this way simply isn't living in the world Hashem willed for us.

In terms of our current society, we can see the entire Golus of Mitzrayim being played out before our eyes. Western society has become lazy. Everything is there on a plate. Even in the realm of a Torah lifestyle, we really don't need to work for our Yiddishkeit. Schools take care of the young; technology makes for easy distraction. We seem to be sliding into a wasteland of fuzzy thought and unclear goals. We attend glatt kosher entertainment extravaganzas that have all the trappings of secular concerts. The music, the lights, the loud cheering; 'bring on the lions and let's get going!' Attend any shul and see how many mispallelim just mumble the words in the siddur, gulping down the tefillos so they can quickly revert to their inane conversations. This is our Golus, with many of us just shuffling through life without any spark.

The Mishnah tells us that we need a work ethic that encompasses our service to Hashem. Indulging in infantile foolishness, drinking the intoxicating wine of instant gratification, reading the rantings of sad and foolish people on our screens; all of this is what the Golus has given us. Everything is kosher, but it's not life!

Real living is about striving to grow, seeking to connect with the Divine, turning away from the emptiness of a sleepy mind, and awakening our inner selves to a higher calling.

I have had the honour to teach young and not so young on several continents. I have witnessed the flicker of a flame that is the innate kedusha in every Jewish heart. It is there for us to ignite. The mornings need not be wasted because we have no real will to get up. Our children must be made aware that they are holy and have a role that is meaningful and full of joy.

Extricating our folk from their superficial existence filled with so-called "entertainment" will never be easy. We are now in the weeks of sfirah, a time when much of the crass crashing thunder of what passes for enjoyment is halachacly forbidden. Perhaps we should see these weeks before Kabolus Hatorah as a time for detoxing. Separating our neshomahs from all the loud distractions that have become the hallmark of a society that is crumbling apart under the weight of its own detritus. This may be as hard as Yetzias Mitzrayim. Yet it is a prerequisite to achieving the Redemption for which we all yearn.

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