

Herzog - the new President of Israel

Category: Bamidbar, Shlach

This week, Israel elected a new president. What special gesture did he receive from the Rebbe, and what can he take from the Parsha to solve Israel's challenges?

Good Shabbos!

A few years ago, Yitzchak “Bougie” Herzog burst onto the world stage after he became the head of Israel’s opposition party. He also served as the chairman of the Jewish Agency, and just this week, he was elected to be the eleventh President of the State of Israel. Needless to say, it was probably the least controversial news coming out of Israel in recent weeks.

Many people asked me, “Who is he? What is his story?”

The truth is, he didn’t appear from nowhere. His family story is a fascinating part of the Jewish story of the last century.

The First Chief Rabbi

Yitzchak’s grandfather and namesake was the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel. Besides being a giant of a Torah scholar, Rabbi Herzog also had an outstanding love for his fellow Jews. Because of his actions during and after the Holocaust, historians today agree that he saved thousands of Jews.

In 1940, shortly after the war broke out, Rabbi Herzog traveled abroad to meet with world leaders and move them to save Jews. The pope avoided meeting with him, but he later traveled to the United States, where he succeeded—after great effort—in meeting with President Roosevelt. He asked Roosevelt to bomb the railroads to the extermination camps, but he left the meeting depressed...

After the Holocaust, Rabbi Herzog returned to Europe, this time to rescue Jewish children who had been handed over for safekeeping in monasteries but whose

parents had been killed. Rabbi Herzog asked the pope to issue a decree that all Jewish children must be returned, but the pope refused. Still, Rabbi Herzog didn't give up, and personally traveled from place to place, collecting thousands of Jewish kids.

He also visited Germany. After the war, Berlin had been divided into four sectors governed by the United States, the Soviet Union, England and France. The American zone was commanded by General Isaac Davis White, who was no friend of the Jews; he treated the Jewish war refugees very coldly, and he tried to close the borders of the American occupation zone to Jewish refugees altogether. Rabbi Herzog met with him and described to him the frightful horrors of the Holocaust which he had seen with his own eyes. Shocked by what he heard, the general promised to do whatever he could to help the Jewish people, and thanks to Rabbi Herzog, he underwent a total transformation.

Say that Chevron is Yours

The Chief-Rabbi's son was named Chaim Herzog. He became world-famous as Israel's ambassador to the United Nations and later, Israel's sixth President. He became famous for his stalwart support of Israel and the Jewish people in the (hostile) United Nations.

He had a close connection to the Rebbe, in that merit, his son, the newly elected president, merited to see and speak to the Rebbe on one occasion as well.

It happened on Simchas Torah 1976. In his capacity as the ambassador, Chaim Herzog joined a delegation visiting the Rebbe for the Farbrengen and Hakafos. Yitzchak was only sixteen years old at the time, but his father took him along.

At the Farbrengen, the Rebbe spoke to Chaim Herzog at length about the political situation and about representing Israel in the United Nations. At the time, Chevron was a hot-button topic, and the Rebbe told him to declare from the United Nations podium that Chevron belonged to him, as a Levite, because Chevron was Levite territory.

Mr. Herzog took the Rebbe's advice and made a speech in the UN declaring the Chevron belonged to him. The speech made a significant impact; the Rebbe himself later retold that he received a lot of feedback from that declaration

(Sadigerer Yechidus, 5744).

The young Yitzchak had a moment with the Rebbe too. “My father was not an emotional man,” he recounted, “but I saw that it was very important to him that I receive the Rebbe’s blessing. He introduced me to the Rebbe, ‘This is Yitzchak Eizik,’ and the Rebbe gave me his blessing. For my father, it was extremely important that I have this experience.”

The Rebbe also had an eye for the young teenager:

After the Farbrengen, the Rebbe led the Hakafot. The Israeli delegation was honored to hold the large Torah scrolls for the first round of dancing, but Yitzchak was too small to hold one himself. But then, the Rebbe instructed that he be given a small Torah, the Rebbe’s personal one. That was a tremendous honor.

The Rebbe’s personal Torah scroll was a heirloom with tremendous sentimental value. It came from the famed “brother of Slavita,” devout Jews who famously underwent terrible persecution by the Czar’s government for their Judaism and smuggled this Torah into their prison cell to give them inspiration and solace. In 770, the Torah was for the Rebbe alone; nobody ever danced with it besides for the Rebbe himself.

“I was extremely excited to carry it,” Yitzchak said, “and I became very popular; all the people in the crowd wanted to kiss my little Sefer Torah...”

A Unique Set of Challenges

Herzog has been appointed president during a difficult time in Israel. We are mere days since the last round of fighting with Hamas which included very worrying omens. In our day, what worries Israelis most is not the thousands of rockets stockpiled by Hamas and Hezbollah and definitely not the Iranian threat — as serious as those issues are. What worries people most is the internal unrest.

During this last round of fighting, the violence spilled over into so-called mixed cities within Israel proper, where Jewish residents thought they had good relationships with their Arab neighbors. Suddenly, there were violent riots outside their homes, and many of their “peaceful” neighbors told the rioters which cars, homes and stores belonged to Jews. The fighting in Gaza might be over, but the

fear and worry in those cities will not pass for a very long time.

This is in addition to the extreme anti-Israel sentiment that is growing online; many people in Israel are in despair at what the future seems to hold.

But the response to these problems is found in this week's Torah portion:

When the spies finished scouting the land, they returned with very difficult conclusions. "The local populace is very powerful, they live in fortified cities and they are giants." They spoke only the truth; realistically, it will be impossible to conquer the land. Even in the event of success, they would be surrounded by enemies: Amalek in the south, the Emori on the hills, the Canaani on the coast and near the Jordan river. There was no chance of victory, they said. Why go on a suicidal mission?

The Midrash says that they were so convinced of the futility of going to war that they staged an entire drama. "They acted ill, and donned shrouds and sat in mourning. When the Israelites would come to visit them, they would ask, 'Why are you doing this?' and they would respond, 'If only all of Israel would have such a dignified death instead of dying in the desert — them, their wives, sons and daughters.' The people immediately went to complain to Moses that they wanted to remain in the desert."

The truth is that they were right, and we see that from Caleb's argument. He didn't accuse them of falsehood or demagoguery. He merely begged the people to believe in the power of miracles *despite* the massive strength of the enemy. "If G-d wants to bring us into the land...G-d is with us, do not fear!" He doesn't claim that the people are weak; his claim is that G-d will make miracles, just as He did when he took them out of Egypt and split the sea. If G-d cared to take them all the way into the desert, He would surely watch over them as they made their way into the land as well!

His message was: Why are you suddenly so afraid of physical limitations?

The Truth: Nothing Changed

This message resonates perfectly today.

True — the whole world seems against us, two terrorist entities threaten us from

the north and south, and within our borders, the unrest threatens the very delicate fabric of Israel's society. But since when is Jewish survival a natural phenomenon?

In 1948, did anyone dream of winning a war against all the Arab armies? Did they dream of doing so in 1967? Did anyone dream before the 1990s that one million Jews would immigrate from Russia and fundamentally change Israel's demographics, or that Israel would become a technological superpower?

This all was possible only because "the G-d of Israel does not slumber nor sleep." So why are we suddenly afraid? Israel has been through many difficult situations, and not only survived, but thrived!

There is no reason to get depressed. Just as G-d made miracles in the past, he will continue to do so in the future. As we just recited in the blessing of the new month, "He Who did miracles for our ancestors and redeemed them from slavery to freedom — He will redeem us very soon and gather our exiles from the four corners of the world..and let us say, Amen."