



Refuses to be Consoled

Who, in Jewish history, never gave up on the Jewish people?

The Jewish Muslim

Good Shabbos!

Muntaz Halawa was born in Kuwait in 1978 to an upstanding family. His father, an engineer by trade, sent him and his four brothers to prestigious schools in town.

When Saddam Hussein invaded and annexed Kuwait, the Halawa family moved to Jordan. In Amman, young Muntaz studied at the American school in town.

When he finished high school, he decided to go to college in Iraq. But after two years of that, he decided to upgrade his future and bought a one-way ticket to Canada.

His father was fiercely opposed to that, and cut all ties with him. But Mrs. Halawa kept her connection with her son alive, and even financially supported him.

Once in Canada, Muntaz changed his name to Mark and enrolled in college to study psychology and computers. Two pleasant years thus went by.

One fine day, his cell phone battery died, and he went downstairs to look for a public phone. Next to the college library, while he was waiting on line for the pay phone (this was in the days when they still

had them), he noticed a Jew wearing a big kipah and full beard.

He approached the man and asked him, “Hey, are you Jewish?” The man answered with a smile. “No, I just like dressing this way!” But in the same breath, the man admitted that he was in fact a Jew, and a conversation started between the two.

Muntaz (Mark) told the man that in Kuwait, his birth country, you always hear harsh things about the Jews. In every school lesson, whether in English or Arabic, they always found a way to speak ill of Jews. “And here,” Muntaz continued, “I found that Jews are good people and I want to build bridges between Jews and Arabs.”

But while they were talking, Muntaz casually mentioned that, by the way, his grandmother had been Jewish, “and she was a good woman.” The Jewish man, Prof. Yitzchok Block, immediately perked up. “Was that your grandmother from your father’s side or mother’s side?”

“From my mother’s side!” Mark replied, without discerning the gravity of what he was saying.

Prof. Block got to the point. “By Muslim law,” he said, fixing his gaze on Mark, “You are Muslim, but you should know that by Jewish law, you are a Jew!”

“That doesn’t make sense!” Mark said, wanting to correct his new Jewish friend on his “mistake.” “I’m a Muslim, my father’s a Muslim and my entire family is Muslim! Even my grandmother converted to Islam!”

Prof. Block patiently replied that according to halachah, a Jew who renounces his or her religion still remains a Jew, since Jewishness is passed on from the mother—and since Mark’s mother was Jewish, having been born to a woman who was Jewish, therefore he, too, was Jewish...

Muntaz Mark Halawa was shocked.

In an instant, he had become his own worst enemy—the “Jew” of whom they all spoke evilly in Kuwait. The discovery was too big for him to handle. “This old rabbi... He’s surely talking nonsense! I’m not going to listen to him.”

Later, though, he found himself talking with his mother about that strange conversation. She, too, encouraged him to not listen to the Jewish rabbi’s words. “He’s a Zionist and he’s trying to brainwash you!” she said.

The next morning, Muntaz got up—but could not shake the notion that he actually might be Jewish. He forged a connection with Prof. Block’s son-in-law, a Chabad shliach in Montreal, and started clarifying with just what a “Jew” is and what “Judaism” is.

He read a lot of material and studied a lot about Judaism—until one day, while riding his Rollerblades, he fell and injured himself.

That next Saturday morning, he found himself with nothing to do. An inner voice told him, “Go check out what a synagogue is.” So he looked up his nearest synagogue, made his way over there, and was greeted with smiling faces and courtesy. One person gave him a kippah, another one gave him a siddur, and he even managed to make out several words in the prayers since Hebrew and Arabic are similar languages.

But then he heard the words, “It is a sign between Me and Israel,” which means that the Sabbath is a covenant between G-d and the Jewish Nation. Muntaz Halawa burst out in tears. He suddenly felt Jewish. He felt that he had found his place.

Amidst that storm of emotion, he lowered his gaze to the siddur in his hands. He then remembered that his grandmother had had a book

that was very precious to her, filled with words he could not read. From time to time, he remembered, she would go into a room in the back of the house and lock the door, and then read and cry, read and cry. He now realized that her book must have been a siddur.

One memory came quickly after another, as if someone had pulled back the curtain on years of lost childhood photos. Muntaz remembered how he once had snuck up into his grandmother's attic, where he had found a document written in three languages. One had been English, the second Arabic, and the third he could not identify. The document stated that his grandmother had been born in "Palestine," and that her family name was Mizrachi.

Muntaz told all of this to Prof. Block, which only encouraged him further to verify his grandmother's Jewish status. Muntaz decided to take that step.

He called his grandmother and said, "My rabbi wants to know if you are really Jewish!"

His grandmother was offended and said, "Tell your rabbi to check if he's Jewish! Of course I'm Jewish! But do not speak loudly about this, because it's dangerous."

At that time, he was offered the opportunity to work in international trade, forging business relationships between New York-based companies and Arab companies. His command of English and Arabic, and his familiarity with the nuances of Arab business culture, served him in good stead. He took up the offer and did quite well.

Several years went by.

Muntaz Halawa found himself traveling for the first time to Israel. Once there, he was hooked. He walked around the Old City of Jerusalem, where his grandmother had long ago met an Arab from Shechem who

became her husband, and he felt the closing of a circle—the Mizrachi family was coming back to its roots as Jews.

He enrolled in a yeshivah, changed his name to Mordechai, and before long, he found himself married under the ancient law of Moses and Israel.

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

Refusing to Give Up

In the parshah of Vayeishev, we read the depressing story of the sale of Yosef—how his own brothers banded together so as to sell him off into slavery and how his brother Reuven, when he comes back to the pit into which they had dumped him, discovers that Yosef has disappeared. So Reuven turns to his brothers and says, “The lad is gone and I, to where shall I come?”

So then, the brothers thought of another idea. They dipped Yosef's multi-colored coat in goat blood, which is similar to human blood, and sent it off to their own father, Yaakov. Yaakov immediately identified it as the coat of his beloved son, and declared in melancholy, “Yosef has been torn to pieces!”

The Torah continues to describe Yaakov's rough reaction: “And Yaakov tore his clothes and put sackcloth in his loins, and mourned for his son for many days. And all his sons and daughters rose to console him, but he refused to be consoled.” (Vayimaen Lihisnachem.) Yaakov simply rejected all overtures of comfort. As much as they tried to console him, he continued mourning over Yosef for “many days.”

Rashi (Bereishis 37:34) that Yaakov mourned for Yosef throughout the 22 years he was gone, until he met him again.

Why indeed did Yaakov refuse to be consoled? Rashi says something very interesting: “No person accepts consolation over the living who is

thought to be dead, for it is on the dead that the decree was decreed that they be forgotten from the heart—and not on the living” (Rashi, 37:35).

What that means is that G-d made human nature such that when a loved one dies, at first one is in great pain over the loss. However, as time goes on, the deceased is less thought about—and the more time goes by, the more the loved one is not in the survivors’ hearts.

For a person who is actually still alive, however, you can’t accept consolation.

Yaakov, who sensed that Yosef was somehow really still alive, could not accept any condolences for his “death.”

But we find the concept of a person rejecting condolences and “refusing to be consoled” in another place in Tanach.

Refusing to Give Up #2

We’ve all heard of the “Ten Lost Tribes.” Now why indeed were they lost? Let’s go into a bit of history.

Immediately after the death of Shlomo Hamelech, the kingdom was split into two. One was the Kingdom of Judah, which was headquartered in Jerusalem and encompassed the area around Jerusalem. The Kingdom of Judah consisted of two Tribes: Yehudah and Binyomin.

The other kingdom was the Kingdom of Israel, which consisted of the remaining ten Tribes, meaning, the bulk of the Jewish Nation. The kings of the Kingdom of Israel were from the Tribe of Ephraim.

Unfortunately, the Kingdom of Israel was marked by excessive idol worship. Its first king, Yeravam ben Nevot, blocked off the roads to Jerusalem and set up two idol-worship centers, each featuring a

golden calf statue—all while forcing everyone to worship idols.

About 300 years later, the Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Kingdom of Ashur, and its members were exiled from the Land. Since they were now similar in their behavior to the other nations of the world, they assimilated into the societies into which they had been exiled.

In the Holy Land, however, there remained only the Kingdom of Judah and some remnants of the Kingdom of Israel, in the form of “one from the city, two from the family.”

The Prophet Yirmiyahu set out on a journey to strengthen what was left of the Kingdom of Israel. He sought out Jews, tried to bring them back to their roots and encouraged them to join the Kingdom of Judah.

Among the things he said to them to convince them to come home was the very famous prophecy said in the name of the mother of the Tribe of Ephraim, Rachel Imainu: “Thus says Hashem, ‘A voice on high is heard... Rachel weeps for her sons.’ ” And then comes an unusual expression: “She refuses to be consoled, for they are gone. (May-ana Lihinachem)”

The Prophet is saying in the Name of G-d that Rochel Imeinu refuses to accept condolences over her sons. Receiving condolences implies that the mourner has come to terms with what is happening and is going on with life. Refusal to accept condolences, conversely, would mean that the mourner refuses to accept the loss and is not ready to compromise on anything.

And then, as a response to Rachel’s refusal to be consoled, G-d promises her that “There is reward for your actions”—that her children will return from the land of their enemies. And not only that, but, “And sons shall return to their borders” (Yirmiyahu 31:14). The day will

come when all those “lost” Jews shall return home. In the merit of what? In the merit of the fact that Rachel “refused to be consoled,” that she didn’t agree to give up on even one single Jew.

It’s amazing that the same words said about Yaakov Avinu were repeated 1,000 years later about his wife, Rachel Imeinu.

The Lesson

We recently celebrated Yud-Tes Kislev, the 19th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev, and the “Rosh Hashanah” for Chasidus. If you want to define the mission of the Chasidic movement, and more so, you want to define what the Rebbe symbolized, it’s “refusal to be consoled.”

The Rebbe refused to give up on any Jew in the world, no matter how “lost” he or she was. The Rebbe always believed that “there is hope for your end”—that ultimately, every Jew would come home to the Jewish Nation.

Good Shabbos!