

# Taking Ownership

*When did Moses take ownership of the Jewish people? And why aren't the shluchim leaving Ukraine?*

## **The Shluchim in Ukraine**

Will Russia invade Ukraine or not? This question has kept the news very occupied for the past few weeks. The United States, Israel, and many other countries have told their citizens to evacuate Ukraine immediately and return to their home countries.

Israel, for example, sent special planes to evacuate their citizens, and indeed many Israelis did. However, the Rebbe's shluchim in Ukraine remain put. They are not leaving; for them, evacuation is not an option. The word "flee" does not exist in the lexicon of the Rebbe's Shluchim.

My brother-in-law is Rabbi Avraham Wolf, the Rebbe's Shliach to Odessa. He was interviewed by the media in the United States, and they asked him if he was thinking of leaving the country. In response, he pointed to the "Mishpacha" orphanage he established in Odessa which houses 83 children, from the age of one week to the age of 18. "What will happen to them if I leave?" He pointed to the nursing home for more than 40 elderly Holocaust survivors, most of whom cannot travel. "What will happen to them if I leave?"

## **Life in Odessa**

Our family's connection with Odessa began nearly 130 years ago. My great-grandfather, Rabbi Zusia Friedman o.b.m., served as the Chassidic rabbi of Odessa from 1897 to 1937. Before the Bolshevik Revolution, in the 1920s, the city boasted 53 synagogues. When the Communists came to power, they closed all the synagogues one after the other, including the "Malbish Arumim" synagogue where Rabbi Friedman served as rabbi. He continued to run a synagogue out of his home until he died of a broken heart in 1937.

In 1999, my brother-in-law and sister, Rabbi Avraham and Chaya Wolf, came to Odessa as the Rebbe's Shluchim. At the time, the authorities in Odessa decided to return two synagogues to the Jewish community which was slowly coming back to itself after seventy years of communism.

The synagogue that Chabad of Odessa received from the city was none-other-than the very same "Malbish Arumim" synagogue. Eighty years after the synagogue was forcibly taken from Rabbi Zusia Friedman, his great-granddaughter and her husband returned to serve the Jewish community from the very same place. We all know and believe that G-d runs the world and that everything takes place with Divine providence, but from time to time, G-d gives us a clear demonstration of His hand and reminds us that he really runs the world.

In the summer of 2001, an elderly woman entered the "Malbish Arumim" synagogue holding two grandchildren, an eight-year-old grandson and a six-year-old granddaughter. With tears in her eyes, she said, "Rabbi, I'm leaving my grandchildren with

you; I cannot raise them, so I entrust the children in your hands." She told them through her tears that her daughter had been murdered by drunks one night in the doorway of her home, and she did not have the financial means to raise her grandchildren. That very day, they decided to set up an orphanage. It started with two children, but very quickly, many more came.

One of the most difficult cases in the orphanage is a Jewish girl named Nadia. She gave birth to a child at age 17, while the baby's father was in prison. She had no place to live, so they put her up in the orphanage along with her nine-month-old daughter.

They tried to persuade her to study a profession so that she would be able to support herself in the future, but she refused... After two months, she informed them that she would be leaving. They tried to convince her to leave the baby at the orphanage until she found a place to live, but she took her daughter and disappeared.

Ten months later, they received a call from the local maternity ward. They had a woman named Nadia, a mother of a little girl, who was about to give birth to another baby. The government was going to take the children to a government-run orphanage, and they wanted to know if the Jewish orphanage would be interested in them.

The day after the telephone call, Nadia gave birth to a baby boy. They came and collected the mother, the girl and the newborn baby, held a bris for him, and, at the mother's request,

named him Avraham.

A few months later, Nadia informed them that she needed to arrange her children's documents in her hometown, where she had her registered address. She left the two children in the orphanage and disappeared. They did not hear from her for half a year, until she suddenly showed up for a short visit — and then disappeared again. A year later, they get a phone call from the same maternity ward — to come and pick up a third baby!

This is the responsibilities the Shluchim carry. What exactly are they to do? Leave eighty children and flee?!

## **When It Became His Nation**

This week's Torah portion deals mainly with the Sin of the Golden Calf. Right after the giving of the Torah, Moses ascends Mount Sinai for forty days to receive the two tablets. Then, on the last day, as he receives the tablets from G-d which state, "You shall have no other gods," G-d turns to him and says to him: "Go down, because your people have become corrupt...they have quickly strayed from the path... they have made themselves a calf." Therefore, G-d says, "leave Me and I will vent My wrath against them... and make you a great nation."

Moses does not agree whatsoever. He turns to G-d in supplications; "What will Egypt say?" What will the world say if this is what happens to Your own people? In the end, Moses courageously gives G-d an ultimatum: "If you bear their sin [good], but if not, erase me from Your book." In other words, "If You destroy the Jews, don't count on me to build You a big

nation..." (Chapter 32).

Where did Moses get the strength and the courage to give such an ultimatum to G-d?

The answer lies in the first words that G-d says to him: "Go down, because your people have become corrupt." Rashi dwells on these words and asks: Why does it say, "your people"? Are they not G-d's people? Earlier, when G-d revealed himself to Moses at the Burning Bush, G-d's first words were, "I have seen the suffering of *My* people who are in Egypt..." (Exodus 3:7). Likewise, in verse 11, "And now go, and I will send you to Pharaoh, that he may bring forth *My* people Israel out of Egypt." The same terminology is used in the famous slogan, "Let *My* people go!" Why does he suddenly call them "*your* people," the people of Moses?

Rashi says: "'Your people have become corrupt' — it does not say that the people have become corrupt, but rather, *your* people. The mixed multitude whom you accepted and converted without consulting with Me, of whom you said that it is good for converts to embrace the Shechinah — they have become corrupt and have corrupted others."

Rashi says that the words "*your* people" is an accusation. G-d says, so to speak, that it was not "*My* nation" who made the calf; it is "*your* people," it was the mixed multitude who had joined the people of Israel during the Exodus and were accepted by Moses — they corrupted the entire nation.

But the Rebbe suggested an entirely new interpretation:

“When G-d told Moses after the Sin of the Golden Calf, ‘Go down because your people have become corrupt,’ Moses was in heaven, on a very high spiritual level... while the people of Israel were on a low level on earth. Therefore, G-d told him, “Your people have messed up” — thereby connecting Moses to them and giving him the ability to defend them.” (Likkutei Sichos v. 2 pg 382, Toras Menachem v. 12 pg. 185).

By calling them “your people,” G-d empowered Moses, “These are your people; take responsibility for them.”

Until this moment, it was G-d’s nation, and Moses worked as G-d’s agent. Here, for the first time, G-d says, “Moses, you are up here, in heaven, but your people, your nation, have fallen down. It is your responsibility to save them.”

These words gave Moses the strength to fight for them with utter self-sacrifice — because they were his. Moses did not have the luxury of staying on Mount Sinai and ignoring everything that was happening down there; these were his people, and he was going to take responsibility for them.

## **Take Owership!**

This is a call to every Jew: G-d turns to each of us and says, “Go down, because it’s your people.”

There are so many Jews who complain about the state of the Jewish people. Some like to accuse Israel of being an apartheid state, “look what’s going on over there....” The criticism doesn’t stop there; Jews know how to criticize every community and every institution. “Why doesn’t the school do this, why doesn’t

the community do that?”

G-d calls to us from this week's Torah portion: “Do not criticize and do not run away. Take ownership, ‘go down,’ climb down from your ivory tower, roll up your sleeves and take responsibility — because it is ‘your people.’”

You have complaints? Be my guest! Join the ranks and do better!