

בס"ד

Shluchim Sermons



Bereishis

# Your Mission: Live with G-d Everywhere

*What did it take to save Syrian Jewry? And why?*

## **Saving Syrian Jewry**

Good Shabbos!

For all of recent memory, relations between Israel and Syria have been a mess. They participated in all the wars against Israel, and engaged in all sorts of anti-Israel activity. In recent years, it has become a hub of Iranian influence, and has earned the 'merit' of occasional bombings by Israel.

But the Jewish People's history with Syria goes back to ancient times—in fact, to the days of the Second Temple, when there was a Jewish community in Syria, and even before that. The community existed all the way until the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

In 1948, the situation for Syrian Jewry turned dire. Citizens' rights were stripped from them, and heavy economic penalties were placed upon them. Only one year later, Jews were prohibited from leaving Syria. Over the next few years, most Syrian Jews made their way to the land of Israel. However, thousands of Jews remained, and they did not live in an easy climate.

During the 1970s, they managed to smuggle some 3,000 Jews out of Syria using bribes. By the end of the 1980s, there were still about

4,500 Jews in Syria, with their situation only getting progressively worse. The Syrian exile community in the U.S. set up a special committee to do whatever it could to get the remaining Jews out.

During that time, a relationship was formed between the committee and a Jewish activist named Clement Soffer. Mr. Soffer had been born in Egypt and had arrived alone in New York as a refugee—eventually succeeding in building a successful business empire across the city. Besides that, he dedicated his life to helping his fellow Jews wherever they were, especially in Arab countries.

So Clement Soffer was only too happy to join forces with this committee and together, they approached the pro-Israel lobbying group AIPAC. Via AIPAC, they forged connections with every member of the U.S. Congress and Senate. They met with each Congress Member and Senator individually to tell them about the situation of Syrian Jewry. The majority were happy to be drafted into the effort to try to save the Jews of Syria from the persecution and humiliations of the Syrian government—imprisonments, executions and so on.

So these members of Congress sent a letter to the President at the time, George Bush, with a request to use his influence to help Syrian Jewry. And indeed, President Bush met once with Syrian dictator Bashar Assad in Geneva, Switzerland and spoke to him about the matter, but to no avail.

Later, a delegation of U.S. Senators led by Sen. Bob Dole actually traveled to Syria, where they met with Mr. Assad and demanded that Syria's remaining Jews be freed. U.S. Senator Howard Metzenbaum even went so far as to visit Syria's Jewish community, which at the time was concentrated mostly in the city of Aleppo. Sen. Metzenbaum's visit raised the stature of the Syrian Jewish community in the eyes of the Syrian government, but in practicality, nothing budged.

The delegation also met with America's ambassador to Syria, who was happy to help them but first needed clearance to do so from the U.S. State Dept.—which treated the entire matter with indifference and informed the ambassador that the future of Syrian Jewry depended completely on the Israel-Palestine conflict!

In those days, the Madrid peace summit also took place, and there, when the Israelis met with Syrian representatives, they brought up the subject of Syrian Jewry but were met with complete denial.

So Clement Soffer understood that the Syrian government's weakest points needed to be found, and that perhaps by exploiting those, they'd be able to "convince" Assad to free Syria's Jews.

Now, Syria's economy has been perpetually poor. For starters, they don't have their own oil wells, and during the period in question, Syria needed plenty of foreign assistance. So Syria's government approached the European Union and requested a loan of 850 million dollars.

When Clement Soffer and his partners heard about that, they formed relationships with key EU decision makers, updated them on Syria's human-rights violations, and succeeded in convincing them to not approve the loan.

The Syrian government then approached the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which deals primarily with facilitating long-term loans to struggling nation-states, asking them for a loan of 750 million dollars.

Again, the committee took action. They approached one of the IMF trustees, the famous international banker Edmond Safra whose banker family had originated in Aleppo. He immediately joined forces with the effort—and saw to it that the loan was killed.

But Assad didn't cave. He next approached the government of Italy for

a loan. Now, it turns out that the giant Italian auto company Fiat is owned by an Italian Jewish family named Agnelli, which has quite a major influence on Italian politics. So Edmond Safra approached the Agnellis, asking them to use their influence on Italy's government. Again, Assad was left without his money.

It's important to note that Assad knew good and well what he had to do to get the loans he wanted. But still, it was like the verse, "And G-d hardened the Pharaoh's heart."

In 1992, Clement Soffer was invited by the government of Spain to attend a special event in the city of Toledo which was to be attended by none other than the King of Spain himself, King Juan Carlos. King Juan Carlos had declared that he formally regretted what his country had done to the Jews during the Inquisition, and invited world Jewry to come back to Spain. He added that he wanted to be seen as someone who helps Jews throughout the world.

Several weeks later, the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity invited King Juan Carlos to receive an award in New York. Clement Soffer attended that event and tried to forge a relationship with the king, on the heels of intelligence he had received that Syria had approached Spain with a loan request. In a roundabout way, he stopped the king as he was walking out on the red carpet, handed him a written summary of the Syrian Jewish situation, and succeeded in stopping the loan.

But it still didn't help.

In those days, the famous (or infamous, depending on who you ask) British Jewish media mogul Robert Maxwell was a guest speaker at an important Jewish event in New York. In his speech, he shared his life story—how he was a young yeshivah student from Czechoslovakia who survived the Holocaust with a number tattooed on his arm, rising from rags to riches and becoming the owner of a massive British

media and publishing company. He added that the Soviet Union (at the time) had hired him to assist in establishing the media in the Soviet Union and that he was very close to Mikhail Gorbachev as a result.

So Clement Soffer now approached Robert Maxwell at that event and said as follows: There are 4,500 Jews in Syria who don't have numbers tattooed on their arms, but whose current suffering in Syria is all too similar to yours in Europe.

Well, Robert Maxwell asked him what he could do.

Soffer told him: Ask Gorbachev to wield his influence on Assad. And ultimately, it was Mikhail Gorbachev of all people who succeeded in influencing Assad to agree to free the Jews of Syria.

So when people ask Clement Soffer, "What drove you to fight so hard for the Jews of Syria?", he always responds: the Holocaust; the lesson from the Holocaust is that Jews cannot stand aside—that when we hear that there is even one single Jew in trouble, it is incumbent upon each one of us to do everything within our power to save him or her. He adds that if our parents had been more active before and during the Holocaust years, they would have saved more Jews.

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

## **The Great Dispersal**

In this week's Parshah (Bereishis, Chap. 11), we read about the Dor Haflagah, the Generation of the Dispersal. This was a society of people who had settled in what today is Iraq and who agreed with one another to build a city featuring a massive tower.

The Torah then tells us, "And G-d descended to see the city and the tower"—and He didn't like it. And the obvious question is: What exactly did they do wrong? What's so terrible about wanting to build

“a city and tower with its head in the heavens, and we shall make for ourselves a name”? One would think, to the contrary! Is people uniting to build a city not a positive thing?!

In Likutei Sichos (Vol. 25, pg. 45), the Rebbe quotes the commentators to the effect that the problem here was that they wanted all of humanity to live in one place. “That was against G-d’s intention in creating the universe, namely, to ‘fill the world and conquer it’—that wherever you went, it would be recognizable that the world ‘for settling was created.’”

G-d didn’t create the universe so that it could remain desolate, with human being confined to only one place. Rather, G-d created the human being so that he could “conquer” and settle the world—to make a dwelling place for G-d out of every place in the world.

And that’s why the Parshah goes on to say, “And G-d scattered them from the across the face of all the earth”—meaning, not just a standard punishment for their sin but also the completion of G-d’s will and directive going back to the beginning of Creation; namely, that humankind be spread to all corners of the world and not be concentrated in one place as was intended by the Dor Haflagah.

The Rebbe adds in another sichah (Likutei Sichos Vol. III, pg. 750 et al) that it was specifically the people of the Dor Haflagah, who lived after the Mabul (the great Flood), who needed to understand that they had the moral obligation to dedicate their lives to helping the entire world and not be concerned just about themselves and their good lives in one place. And it is that fact that was not pleasing to G-d.

## **Our Role**

This great debate goes on to this day.

You see, the overwhelming majority of Torah-observant Jews today tend to isolate themselves within their own “daled amos” (“four

cubits”), their own religious enclaves and communities. But the Rebbe demanded and insisted that no one be secluded in their own comfortable spaces—but to the contrary, to quote the Midrash Rabbah, that “one of you exile yourself to Barbaria and one of you to Samatria,” and that that is the purpose behind the creation of the world.

The saga of the Dor Haflagah teaches us that our mission is not to live in one place but rather, to “fill the world and conquer it.” The mission of every Jew is to bring G-d’s Word to every far-flung corner of the world—to teach the people of the world to call out in G-d’s Name.

And then, we will merit the fulfillment of the ancient promise, “And the Lord shall be king over the whole world.”

Good Shabbos!