

The Window Towards Jerusalem

Category: Holidays, Shavuos

Lessons from the world's first Jewish statesman.

Kissinger

Henry Kissinger is celebrating his 100th birthday today—a rare achievement. Kissinger is the most famous Jewish politician to have served in the American government. He served as the Secretary of State of the United States and, to his luck, was serving in that position during the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in 1973.

For years, there has been a public debate in the Jewish community about whether Kissinger used his power to benefit Israel or if he prioritized only the interests of the United States.

Kissinger himself recounted that on the third day of the war, when he saw the scope of the catastrophe, he assured Israel that they would receive all the assistance they needed, and he kept his word. He ensured the operation of an airlift that delivered American military supplies to Israel for over a month.

He later said that being a Jewish refugee who fled in 1938 from Nazi Germany was a major influence over his actions, and his support for Israel. He made sure that Israel would remain strong.

During those days, many Israelis had criticisms of Kissinger, but the Rebbe, in a meeting with Lieutenant Colonel Ron Peckar, told him: “It is worth remembering that Secretary of State Kissinger is the foreign minister of the United States, not of Israel” (B'Rega Ha'emet, p. 212).

Jewish Statesmen

This is a good opportunity to delve into the pages of Jewish history and explore the Jews who rose to greatness and served as ministers in non-Jewish governments.

The first was Joseph, who became the second-to-the-king of Egypt, the world superpower. But in truth, this was not in the context of a “Jewish people.” There was only a single Jewish family, and Joseph had actually been chased away by them (by his brothers), remaining alone in Egypt. He rose to greatness after twelve years in prison; it didn’t come about in the context of a Jewish background.

The first Jewish advisor who rose to greatness in the court of a mighty king was Daniel.

After the Israelites had nearly 850 years of independent rule in the land of Israel with their own kings, they were exiled to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, overran Israel with a large army, but at first, he did not destroy the Temple. Instead, he captured King Jehoiachin, who had rebelled against him, along with the entire royal family, leaders, officials, and all the ruling class in Jerusalem, and took them to Babylon. This event took place 11 years before the destruction of the First Temple.

He ordered his men to search for young, talented individuals in Jerusalem and send them to Babylon for a comprehensive education. They would attend a school for three years where they would be taught Babylonian language and culture and be groomed to become true Babylonians. They would be provided with good and nourishing food, immersed within the Babylonian society, and eventually, they would serve as advisors to the Babylonian king.

When Daniel arrived in Babylon and was ‘enrolled’ into this institution, they immediately changed his name to Belteshazzar. It quickly became clear to him and his companions that they were being subjected to forced assimilation. He realized that the goal of the sumptuous meals was to assimilate them among their non-Jewish colleagues. Therefore, he decided not to partake of the food. “Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king’s bread, or with the wine that he drank.” (Daniel 1:8). He introduced the concept of “Pas Yisrael” — to only eat bread baked by Jews.

“Bread” is a staple in every meal until this day, and it is therefore a foundation for friendships and closeness — which are often formed over meals. Daniel understood that in order to preserve his Judaism in the palace of the world’s greatest empire, he had to distinguish himself. Not only did he refrain from touching non-kosher foods, he even went so far as to abstain from bread that was

perfectly kosher — just baked by a non-Jew; he made a personal commitment not to consume it.

He was the first one to observe this custom, and from this, it developed into the halacha we know today, enacted by our Sages to protect Jews from assimilation. The sages were concerned that eating bread baked by a non-Jew would create 'excessive' closeness, that could potentially lead to intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, and therefore, introduced this same custom.

The Window to Jerusalem

Regardless of his commitment, he was so successful there that he rose to become the chief advisor to King Nebuchadnezzar, and after he repeated and interpreted a dream that the king had forgotten, the king was so impressed and grateful that he actually wanted to bow down before Daniel in reverence.

As time went on, his status had its ups and downs, based on the local political situations. However, later on, he was appointed as an important advisor in the court of King Darius of Persia, serving as the chief of the ministers.

Those ministers became envious of him due to his high position, and they convinced the king to issue a decree stating that for thirty days, people were only allowed to pray to the king himself. In those days, kings considered themselves as deities, so it didn't take much to convince him. A decree was issued that every person was obligated to pray to the king alone, and that it was forbidden to pray to any other entity. Anyone who prayed to someone else would be thrown into the lion's den.

Those advisors were aware of Daniel's practice of ascending to the attic three times a day, where he had a window facing Jerusalem, and pray.

They obviously went to check what he would do, and they witnessed him follow his daily routine — he ascended to the attic and prayed facing Jerusalem. This was immediately reported to the king, and by the king's order, Daniel was thrown into the lion's den. But here, a tremendous miracle occurred—the lions did not harm him.

When the king summoned his advisors and asked them to explain this

phenomenon, they tried to excuse it by saying that the lions were not hungry. So the king immediately ordered his advisors to be thrown into the den, and it became clear that the lions were actually very hungry...

Open Your Window

Daniel paved the way for Jews in exile, emphasizing the importance of preserving their Jewish identity even in positions of power and influence. On one hand, he displayed unwavering loyalty to the king and the monarchy he served, while on the other hand, he maintained his Jewish way of life and behavior. The Rebbe notes that Chananiah, Mishael, and Azariah — as the Talmud states, “Had they been subjected to torture, they would not have been able to withstand it.” Daniel, however, the Rebbe noted, suffered for a prolonged time in exile, and nevertheless stood firm in his convictions and overcame the challenges” (Toras Menachem 5794, vol. 4, p. 169, fn. 47).

And in one aspect of the story, there is an important lesson for us:

The city of Jerusalem received its name — Yerushalayim — as a combination of two ancient names. Abraham our forefather called the mountain “*Har Hashem Yeira’eh*,” a place where G-d is revealed. Even before that, King Melchizedek referred to the city as “*Shalem*—whole.” The Almighty wanted to fulfill the will of both righteous individuals, so He combined both names, thus giving birth to the name Yerushalaim. Therefore, Jerusalem symbolizes a place of reverence for G-d in its completeness.

Chassidus explains that the physical Jerusalem is a reflection of Jerusalem within our hearts; the earthly Jerusalem is a reflection of the heavenly Jerusalem. In the heart of every Jew, there is a Jerusalem; a resource of “awe of Heaven.” There is a place in every person’s heart where he truly feels G-d’s presence.

We each have a Jerusalem, and we need to open a window in its direction. We need to ensure that the Jerusalem won’t only remain in our hearts, but also be expressed in our daily lives.

Even when we live far from the large Jewish concentrations, and even on regular weekdays, whether we are in Babylonia or America — our inner Jerusalem will ensure that we don’t lose focus.