

One Of Your Own

How can we see eye to eye with those on the other end of the political spectrum?

The Big News

This week, everyone is asking about Israel; what exactly is going on, and what is the drama all about. Surprisingly, the American media barely covered the topic until this week, when it suddenly hit the headlines and remained ever since; there hasn't been a single day this week when the crisis hasn't appeared in the news.

My friends, what is happening in Israel can be defined in one word: "Tragedy." When Jews are fighting with other Jews, it's a tragedy. This is true about any country, how much more in Israel.

As for the reasons and causes behind the conflict, I'll leave that for each individual to explore on their own. The question is - what should be the response of a Jew who doesn't live in Israel and doesn't want to get involved in the dispute? How can we help?

The Circle-Maker

I would like to share with you a story about a conflict, or more precisely, a civil war during the Second Temple period, which ultimately led to the downfall of the Hasmonean rule (the "Maccabees"). This occurred about eighty years after the

miracle of Chanukah, when the Maccabees drove the Greeks out of the land of Israel.

After the passing of Queen Shlomzion, two brothers, Hyrcanus and Aristobulus, battled each other for the crown. Each had their supporters, with one stationed within Jerusalem and the other outside its walls. The brother outside Jerusalem recruited a foreign king to help him set up a siege and fight against his Jewish brother; imagine—a Jew sought the assistance of a non-Jewish king to combat his fellow Jews!

Jerusalem of those days was home to a righteous man named Choni HaMa'agal (Choni the Circle Maker). Why was he called Choni HaMa'agal? There was once a severe drought, and Choni's disciples asked him to pray for rain. Choni prayed to G-d, but no rain fell. Frustrated, he drew a circle, stood inside it, and proclaimed, "Master of the Universe... I swear that I will not move from here until You have mercy on Your children." Suddenly, raindrops began to fall, but Choni turned to the heavens again and said, "This is not what I asked for; I asked for a rain that could fill up the cisterns!" The rain became so torrential that it threatened to become a disastrous flood. Choni then prayed again and said, "This is not what I asked for; I asked for rain of blessing—it should fall like regular rain." His prayer was answered, and Israel received the rain it needed. (Taanis 23a).

This Choni HaMa'agal was living in Jerusalem during the siege. The people of Jerusalem, knowing that his prayers were accepted in heaven, asked him to pray that their side would prevail in the war between the brothers. Choni, a righteous

person who loved all Jews dearly, made a plea to the Almighty: “Master of the Universe: Those who surround us are your people, and those who are trapped are your Kohanim. Please do not heed the prayers of one against the other, and do not fulfill what they endeavor against one another.” (*Chagei Yisrael Umo’adav*)

He didn’t take sides; he loved the Jewish people so much that he remained above the fray.

Menashe’s Prayer

Now, that’s a story about a civil war. Thank G-d, that isn’t the case right now, and hopefully that will never become the reality.

In Israel today, each side firmly believes that they hold the truth and that they act in Israel’s best interests, while the other side is going to bring Israel to the brink of collapse. How can we create a space in which we can accommodate and respect differing perspectives, even if we firmly believe we are right?

Allow me to share another story, this one about a Jewish king from the end of the First Temple period, King Menashe. He held the longest reign in the Israelite kingdoms, ruling for 55 years.

He was a gifted ruler who brought prosperity to the Kingdom of Judah; the “stock market” flourished and business thrived. However, he also caused a terrible spiritual decline. He introduced Assyrian culture and brought the worship of foreign deities, including the idol Baal, into Israelite society. He even placed statues, including the Asherah idol, within the Temple.

Jerusalem became inundated with various forms of foreign worship, and he went so far as to murder Jews who opposed his idolatrous practices. In fact, the Tanach attributes the ultimate destruction of the First Temple to the sins committed during Menashe's reign.

The Book of Kings relates that at one point, his behavior led to divine punishment, and he was captured and taken to Babylon by the Assyrian king's army where he faced a death sentence by burning. He began to pray to all of his deities for salvation, but that got him nowhere. In desperation, Menashe recalled a verse taught to him by his righteous father, King Hezekiah, from this week's Torah portion: "When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you... you will return to the L-rd your G-d and obey Him. For the L-rd your G-d is a merciful G-d; He will not abandon or destroy you" (Devarim 4:30-31).

Menashe thought about it, and decided to pray to G-d. He thought to himself, "If He answers me, good. If not, He is just like the rest of them."

The Talmud relates that the angels closed all the "windows to heaven" to prevent Menashe's prayer from ascending to G-d. They argued, "A person who worshipped idols and desecrated the Temple deserved repentance?" But G-d responded, "If I do not accept him, I will close the door before all who repent."

The Talmud concludes with a very interesting statement: "The Almighty dug a tunnel under his royal throne and heard his plea," ultimately reinstating him as king in Jerusalem (Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 10:2).

What does it mean when it says that G-d “dug a tunnel under his royal throne”? Menashe committed very severe transgressions, and the usual paths of repentance seemed closed to him. Despite that, out of G-d’s love for every Jew, He created a “tunnel” of sorts; He created a new opening that did not exist before.

My friends, this is exactly what we need to try—to learn from the Almighty and dig within ourselves a new opening, a new path of love for people with whom we disagree.

How can this be achieved?

What If It Was One Of Your Own?

In 1972, my father-in-law, Shliach Rabbi Leibel Alevsky took a group of college students on a trip to Israel. In those days, there were not many kosher hotels available, so he ended up at Malon Vizhnitz in Bnei Brak for Shabbos.

On Shabbos afternoon, he took them for a stroll on the streets of Bnei Brak. You can imagine that they stood out in the local scene. In those days, ultra-Orthodox Jews were not familiar with the concept of outreach; in Bnei Brak, nobody traveled by car on Shabbos, and everyone walked the streets in traditional dress, including streimels and kapotas, while his groups were hippies, with long hair, nose rings, and so on.

As they walked, Rabbi Alevsky overheard someone behind him saying to his friend, “If the Chabadniks want to deal with those people, they should do it in Kfar Chabad. Why are they bringing these people here to Bnei Brak?”

Rabbi Alevsky didn't bother turning his head to see who had spoken; he just continued on his way.

A year later, he received a call from Israel. It was the person from Bnei Brak who regretted his remarks and wanted to apologize. The reason for the phone call, he revealed, was that he had a sister who used to live in Bnei Brak but had since left Judaism and moved to the United States. Now, she was involved with a non-Jewish guy, and this Bnei Brak resident asked Rabbi Alevsky for help to find her and try to bring her back to Judaism.

Rabbi Alevsky got involved in the case, and provided the assistance they needed.

What is the point of this story? A person was unwilling to accept his fellow Jews, but when it was his own sister—suddenly, he saw the situation differently.

I think we need to approach this recent dispute in the same fashion. If my own child were on the other side of the argument, I would find a way to prevent differences of opinion from ruining the relationship. I would do everything in my power to maintain the peace in my family. So, next time we encounter a Jew who strongly disagrees with us, we should ask ourselves: "And what if it were my own son or daughter?"