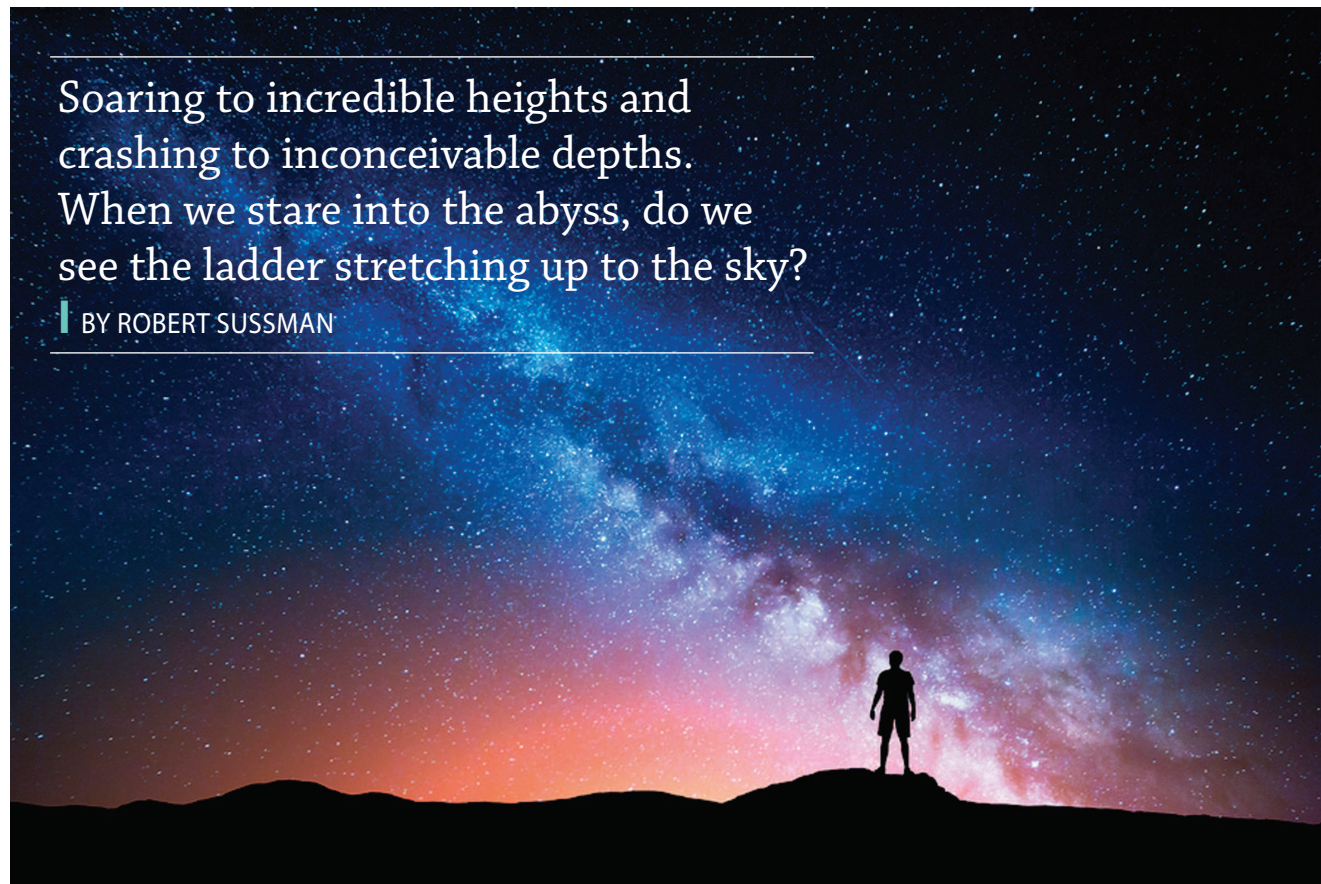


HIGHS and LOWS

Soaring to incredible heights and crashing to inconceivable depths. When we stare into the abyss, do we see the ladder stretching up to the sky?

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



AMONG THE MANY KINNOS (DIRGES OR ELEGIES) that we say on *Tisha B'av*, the day on which we commemorate the many tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people throughout our history, is one that compares and contrasts the miracles and wonders of the going out from Egypt at the time that we were redeemed with the mourning and persecution of the going out from Jerusalem at the time that it was destroyed and we were sent into exile; the point being that, as miraculous and amazing as our going out from Egypt was, so too was our going out from Jerusalem. The connection is, perhaps, alluded to in the fact that, according to the fixed Hebrew calendar as we know it, the day of the week on which the first day of *Pesach* falls out will always be the same day of the week on which *Tisha B'av* falls out.

Just as the Jewish people have seen and reached heights greater than any other nation – so too we have seen and plummeted to depths lower than any other nation. These are the two contrasts, opposites and extremes, entirely unique to the nation of Israel.

PENTHOUSE OR BASEMENT?

As our Sages teach¹, “[The Jewish people] are compared to the dust and to the stars. When they descend, they descend to the dust, and when they rise, they rise up to the stars.” As is evident from a quick perusal of a list of Nobel Prize winners

(22,5% of whom were Jews, while the total Jewish population comprises less than 0,2% of the world’s population), the Jewish people are anything but average. We do not know mediocrity. Our constant reality is one in which we are either soaring to the heights or falling to the depths – there is no in between for us – first or last, there is no middle ground.

The *midrash* teaches² on the well-known chapters in *Tehillim* (Psalms) that begin, “*Shir HaMa’alos* (a song of ascents)” – that it’s not a “song of ascent”, singular, but “ascents”, plural – when Israel goes up, we don’t go up just one step at a time, we go

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up many steps, and, likewise, when we go down, we don't go down just one step at a time, but we go down and down, step after step. And, so it says in *Eicha* (Lamentations), the *megilla* that's somberly read aloud on the evening of *Tisha B'av*, as we sit on the floor in the dimly lit shul, "He has cast down from heaven onto the earth the beauty of Israel" – a tremendous fall by any estimation.

FROM RICHES TO RAGS

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai lived during the era of the Roman siege and eventual destruction of Jerusalem and, along with it, the Second Temple. The *gemara*³ tells that it once happened that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai left Jerusalem riding on a donkey accompanied by his students. As he rode, he came across a girl who was so desperate for food that she was gathering barley from among the dung (ie. barley that had been previously consumed and then excreted) of animals that belonged to Arabs. When the girl saw him, she wrapped herself with her hair and stood before him. She said to him, "Rabbi, feed me." He said to her, "Whose daughter are you?" She said, "I am the daughter of Nakdimon ben Gurion." The *gemara*⁴ includes Nakdimon ben Gurion in a list of three men who had tremendous wealth and lived in Jerusalem at the time of the Roman siege.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai said to his students, "I remember when I signed this girl's *kesuva* (marriage contract). She was given one million golden *dinars* [coins] from the house of her father, in addition to what her father-in-law gave to her." To give you an idea of what a tremendous sum of money this was – consider that our Sages required that a woman be betrothed with an object (such as the plain, simple ring - without

stones or designs) that must have the value of the smallest known coin, a *perutah*, which was made from copper.⁵ They likewise required that a husband promise a minimum amount of 200 *zuz* (aka silver *dinars*) to be paid to the wife upon the dissolution of the marriage.⁶ A single gold dinar was equal to 4 800 *perutahs* or 192 *zuzim* (silver *dinars*), with each gold dinar coin having an approximate weight of over 100 grams.⁷

Continuing the incident recorded in the *gemara*, after explaining to his students who this girl was that was standing before them picking grains of barley out of dung and how fabulously wealthy she had once been, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai began crying and said, "Happy are you, Israel! At the time that you do the will of Hashem, there is no nation that can rule over you, and at the time that you are not doing the will of Hashem, you are given over into the hands of a lowly nation, and not even the hands of a lowly nation, but into the hand of the animals of a lowly nation!"

SEEING THE HEIGHTS IN THE DEPTHS

Our Sages ask an obvious question: how could Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai say such a thing – "Happy are you, Israel!" – at this incredibly difficult time in our history (the siege and destruction of Jerusalem) and upon seeing such a terrible sight of this once phenomenally wealthy woman having fallen so terribly low that she was so desperate from hunger that she was willing to pick through dung in the hopes of finding salvageable grains of barley that had not been properly digested? What on earth was there to be happy about?

From this incident, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai was able to see the special relationship that we, the Jewish people, have with

Hashem. As he witnessed the terrible sight of this once wealthy Jewish woman kneeling among the dung from the lowliest of animals, belonging to the lowliest of nations on earth, his immediate and initial reaction was to cry. But then, in that very same moment, he also said, "Happy are you Israel." In this enormous decline to this level of incredible humiliation and degradation – does it get any lower than sifting through dung to find something to eat? – Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai saw the special quality of the Jewish people, that there is no situation of mediocrity or averageness for us. When it's bad, it's very bad; when it's good, it's very good.

At the time that we fail to fulfil our purpose, we fall to the lowliest place possible, but within this utter devastation is also a hint, an indication of the tremendous heights to which we have the potential to ascend when we do fulfil our purpose – the true level of the Jewish people. At our spiritual height, we are able to rule over all of the nations on earth, but, when we deny our role and fall to the depths, Hashem instead puts us in their hands and leaves us at their mercy (or lack thereof to be more precise). Nobody falls lower – nobody else gets made into soap! – but, at the same time, nobody else can climb higher. In our degradation – in our utter devastation and state of disrespect and disrepute – there we see the very proof of the fact that no other nation can rise higher than us, of how special we truly are.

At our height, we experienced the going out from Egypt; we saw the revelation of the *shechina*, Hashem's Divine presence – and for the next 40 years as we wandered in the *midbar* (wilderness) we merited a special supervision from Hashem that was beyond the natural order of things: clouds that covered, protected, and guided us; manna that fell each day and sustained us; the well of water which accompanied us – and all of this was evident to everyone. And, at our lowest point, we experienced the going out from Jerusalem, where, instead of clouds for protection, there was a cloud of *hester panim*, of G-d hiding His face from us, so to speak, among the unspeakable horrors and devastation.

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WHAT WE CAN LEARN ABOUT HASHEM

Our Sages teach⁸ that Hashem is a King who suffers insults. There is not a single moment that a man exists and is not sustained from the power of Hashem. Even when a person sins – and even when he sins directly against Hashem! – at that precise moment that a person is doing such a thing, Hashem is causing his existence, making it possible for him to move and to act. Amazingly, Hashem will not stop such a person at all, but instead Hashem suffers insults like this while simultaneously providing that person the very power to do what he does!

A person's very existence and life are given to him at every moment anew, like a gift from Hashem, as our Sages teach⁹, "On each and every breath that a person breathes, he must praise Hashem." How can a man dare to use his life against the One who gave it to him? Instead of denying him the merit to live and exist, however, Hashem gives the person another breath and another breath, such that a person is even able to destroy Hashem's house (ie. The Temple), if he so chooses! This is Hashem's strength – that He forgives His own honour, giving power to the wicked to be wicked, while He suppresses the insults that occur to Him. On the one hand, a *Kohen Gadol* who was unfit to enter the *Kadosh Kedoshim* (Holy of Holies) on *Yom Kippur* would die – and yet, on the other hand, non-Jews were given the power not only to enter Hashem's house, but to destroy it.

At a time of *hester panim*, Hashem conquers His anger and is silent. But, from His silence, we learn His strength. Strength is not measured by the power to rule over others, but by the power to rule over oneself and to conquer one's anger – so, at the same time Hashem, so to speak, conquers His anger and is patient with those who choose to do evil, we see His strength.

AGAINST ALL ODDS

How is it possible that the nation of Israel manages to exist like a sheep among wolves? It is only by virtue of Hashem's power and His watching over us. Great

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nations that once stood at the centre of history – Rome, Persia, Babylonia, Assyria – all of them are no more, erased from the world, mere memories left to be studied in history books, and yet, the nation of Israel, the weakest among the nations, lives and exists forever.

Our Sages compare the nation of Israel to the dove, "All birds, when tired, rest on a rock, but the dove, it rests one wing at a time and continues flying." So too, at the time that one portion of the world does evil to us, the other part of the world is quiet and calm, enabling us to fly onwards. And, so we saw in the days of the terrible *Shoah*, while one nation sought to destroy us, the others did nothing, and even the schemes¹⁰ of the wicked one, *yemach shemo* (may his name be blotted out), to conquer the land of Israel were cancelled with the *chesed* of Hashem. We see Hashem's awesome power, one lamb scattered among seventy wolves – and not a single wolf is able to destroy it. In fact, the *gemara*¹¹ teaches that the fact that Hashem scattered us among the nations is, in fact, a great help, as they cannot destroy us because of this.

There is no nation who has been pursued like us, who has been scattered like us, and who has suffered for as long as us. But, no matter how great our suffering, our enemies still cannot destroy us. We cleave to Hashem and we are all alive today. Throughout this long *galus* (exile), we have not lost so much as a letter or even a vowel from our holy Torah – and the words of our Sages still stand as well. Did the hand of chance do all of this? Any person who considers our wondrous existence over thousands of years and our long exile – it is even greater than all of the miracles and wonders that Hashem



did for our forefathers in Egypt and in the *midbar* (the wilderness in which we wandered for 40 years). And, even non-Jews, if they are honest, can recognise this:

"The preservation of the Jews is really one of the most single and illustrious acts of divine Providence... and what but a Supernatural Power could have preserved them in such a manner as none other nation upon earth hath been preserved. Nor is the providence of G-d less remarkable in the destruction of their enemies, than in their preservation... We see that the great empires, which in their turn subdued and oppressed the people of G-d, are all come to ruin... And if such hath been the fatal end of the enemies and oppressors of the Jews, let it serve as a warning to all those, who at any time or upon any occasion are for raising a clamour and persecution against them." – **Thomas Newton, Bishop of Bristol (1704-1782)**

The existence of the Jew deviates from and contradicts the laws of history. It's impossible to label the course of existence of the nation of Israel in every generation as chance. It is only one long miracle that has accompanied us throughout thousands of years. The miraculous supervision of Hashem in the *churban* (destruction of Jerusalem) and the *galus* (exile) is greater than the miraculous supervision at the time of the going out from Egypt – it proves to all that the *chesed* (kindness) of Hashem protects Israel.

IT ALL WILL COME TRUE

This miracle that we call “*galus*” can inspire us with encouragement and comfort, as all of the prophecies of the *churban* have materialised – so too the prophecies of consolation will certainly materialise as well. The *gemara*¹² famously tells of an incident when Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Yehoshua, and Rabbi Akiva once went up to Jerusalem together. When they reached *Har HaBayis* (the Temple Mount), they saw a fox coming out from the *Kadosh Kedoshim* (the Holy of Holies). Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, and Rabbi Yehoshua began to cry, while Rabbi Akiva began to laugh.

They said to him, “Why are you laughing?” He answered them, “I’m laughing because of this: Uriah the Kohen [who lived during the times of the First Temple] prophesied¹³, ‘Because of you, *Tzion* will be ploughed like a field’, and the prophet Zechariya [who lived during the times of the Second Temple] said¹⁴, ‘There shall yet be elderly men and women sitting in the squares of Jerusalem.’” The two prophecies are considered linked together. “Before this prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, I was afraid that the prophecy of Zechariya wouldn’t be fulfilled. Now that this prophecy of Uriah has been fulfilled (ie. *Tzion*, the location of the *Kadosh Kedoshim*, was ploughed like a field and a fox ran through it), I know that this prophecy of Zechariya will also be fulfilled!” They said to him, “You have comforted us Akiva, you have comforted us!”

TISHA B'AV IS A MO'ED

Consider this: there does not exist another nation that celebrates a day of remembrance to recall its downfall – a special *avodah* (service) on the suffering and mourning of its destruction and tragedies every year! In fact, it’s just the opposite, all of the nations of the world mark only



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their triumphs, but the nation of Israel has an annual celebration to mark its destruction, *Tisha B'av* – and not just like any other day – but like a *mo'ed* (a festival).¹⁵ Why do we express this day as a *mo'ed*? Because in the future, Hashem will turn this day into a day of rejoicing!

But, even today, *Tisha B'av* is a *mo'ed* for us, to draw out from this day strength and encouragement from considering the miracles of the *galus*, how Hashem watches over us precisely within His hiddenness (*hester panim*) and how the nation of Israel continues to exist and to live against all odds. All of this should give us tremendous comfort and encouragement that, at the end of the *galus*, there will come an awesome and great day when, once again, we will be miraculously redeemed.

The essence of our mourning gives us already, now, the merit to inspire this rejoicing; this knowledge that we continue to live and to exist within the *galus*. It’s like Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai seeing that poor girl at

her absolute lowest point, moved to tears, yet knowing that within the awesome devastation of that very same moment could be seen the potential that we have to climb, just as far and just as high, to the opposite end of the scale. In other words, our mourning can cause joy and comfort right now, as a result of recognising the revelation of Hashem’s supervision over us that has taken place since the going out from Jerusalem – evident even more so than in all of the open miracles we experienced in the going out from Egypt. **TL**

Adapted from a sicha by the Sifsei Chaim, Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, ztz”l.

“IT’S IMPOSSIBLE TO LABEL THE COURSE OF EXISTENCE OF THE NATION OF ISRAEL IN EVERY GENERATION AS CHANCE. IT IS ONLY ONE LONG MIRACLE THAT HAS ACCOMPANIED US THROUGHOUT THOUSANDS OF YEARS.”

¹Megilla 16a

²Shocher Tov

³Kesuvos 66b

⁴Gittin 56a

⁵See Rambam Hilchos Ishus 3:1

⁶Kesuvos 10b

⁷See “The Practical Talmud Dictionary”, Yitzhak Frank, Appendix 4, Coins and Weights

⁸Tomer Devorah

⁹Yalkut Shemonei on Tehillim 147

¹⁰www.ushmm.org/research/publications/academic-publications/full-list-of-academic-publications/nazi-palestine-the-plans-for-the-extermination-of-the-jews-of-palestine

¹¹Pesachim 87b

¹²Makkos 24b

¹³Micah 3:12

¹⁴Zechariya 8:4

¹⁵See Shulchan Aruch OC 559:4