

Celebration

120

CHOF MARCHESHVAN, 5741 (1980)

Tehillim 121: Joy in Alarming Times

1. The book of Tehillim (Psalms) is divided into 150 Psalms. It is customary to recite every day that psalm which corresponds to one's age (e.g.: when one turns thirteen — i.e. enters one's fourteenth year — one begins to say Psalm fourteen). The Rebbe Rashab, whose birthday is today, the twentieth of Marcheshvan (Chof-Marcheshvan), would customarily deliver a Chassidic discourse on his birthday, some of which were based upon a verse from the Psalm which corresponded to his age.

This applied, not only when the Rebbe Rashab was alive, but even now, for when one's soul is in the other world, there is also an increase in age corresponding to time in this world. This is illustrated by my father-in-law, the Rebbe's account that his father (the Rebbe Rashab), appeared to him in a dream on Chof Cheshvan [5705], and told him: "In these 24 hours which mark 84 years from the time my soul descended into the lower (i.e.

this) world... each of the Rebbeim, our fathers, will deliver a discourse on a verse from chapter 84.”

This year marks the 120th birthday of the Rebbe Rashab, and thus the corresponding psalm is Psalm 121. This Psalm which begins with the words: “*Shir lama’alos, esa einay el heharim...*” helps answer a difficult question. In this day and age, our conduct must always be with joy, not only the joy of doing a Mitzvah, or even the greater joy of learning Torah, but also the joy of our mundane deeds (“all your deeds should be for the sake of heaven”) and in our personal ways (“in all your ways you shall know Him”). As emphasized in recent weeks, one of the factors necessitating this joy is the frightening and alarming state of the world — a statement which may appear self-contradictory. On the one hand, we say that the world is in an alarming state, when “darkness will cover the earth” and “gross darkness the peoples.” And on the other hand, we simultaneously demand that everyone not be bothered by this, and instead be in a true state of joy! How is this possible?

Psalm 121 of Tehillim, said by King Dovid, the “sweet singer of Yisroel,” who said the Psalms in the name of every Jew, provides the answer. The opening verse is: “A Song of Ascents. I lift my eyes to the mountains — my help will come from *ayin*.” A Jew’s help comes from one of the highest levels of G-d — that which is called “*ayin*.”¹ As we read on Simchas Torah: “Yisrael dwells in safety alone,” we have nothing to fear. And, as the verse continues, Jews receive further happiness — “Fortunate are you, Yisroel,” because they are a “people delivered by the L-rd, your helping shield.” These verses and their concept apply not only on Simchas Torah when they are read, but throughout the entire year as well.² Thus, we can recognize that the alarming state of

1. “*Ayin*” can be translated literally as “nothing.” For the level of “*ayin*” is so high, that “it cannot be expressed by a name, or alluded to in any letter or point whatsoever.” It is thus only referred to as “nothing” — an incomprehensibly high level.

2. In fact, the true application of this concept occurs throughout the course of the year and not in the month of Tishrei (in which Simchas Torah is found). For one of the main purposes of Tishrei, with its multitude of festivals, is to gather “merchandise,” the purpose of which is to be used during the other months of the year. This theme is especially highlighted in this month of Cheshvan which follows immediately after Simchas Torah

the world is a time when we will experience G-d's ultimate protection and assistance.

G-d's Tangible Protection

2. The level of "*ayin*" is very lofty, and thus the help which comes to a Jew from there will affect only the upper levels of the soul. In order for the help to become a real tangible matter, visible to all, it must be drawn down from the level of "*ayin*." And this is the meaning of the following verse: "My help will come from the L-rd, Maker of heaven and earth." Help for a Jew, stemming from the incomprehensible heights of "*ayin*," is brought down in tangible form through (and within) the lower level of "L-rd, Maker of heaven and earth" — a level which embraces this corporeal world.

In addition to G-d's help, we also need special protection and safe-guards. As the Psalm continues: "Indeed, the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps." This protection derives from the level of "the ever vigilant eye," the same level as "*ayin*," and thus Israel is assured of G-d's unceasing watchfulness and protection.³

This then is the answer to our question as to how a Jew can be truly joyful when "darkness covers the earth." A Jew is indeed aware of the alarming state of the world, and does not close his eyes to the frightening situation.⁴ Yet the Jew is aware that from the level of "*ayin*," G-d's help descends into this world, and manifests itself so strongly that "the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps." Hence, in the midst of "the darkness which covers the earth, and the gross darkness which covers the peoples," he can be, and is, in a state of true and boundless joy.

We find the same two opposite factors within Torah. Although Torah is beyond limits — "its measure is longer than the earth

3. The concept of "the Guardian of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers" is such that it is always present, similar to the concept of "I (the L-rd) do not change." Thus, even when Jews err, they are still assured of the promise of G-d's protection.

4. Similar to the idea of humility. True humility does not mean that a person is unaware of his virtues. True humility is when one is aware of his virtues, but is still humble.

and broader than the sea” and it is “hidden from the eyes of all living,” it is “not in heaven;” and we must fulfill the Mitzvos of the Torah within the limits defined by Torah — Tefillin is made from physical parchment, Tzitzis from physical wool etc. The same thing applies to learning Torah. Torah, the limitless, must be studied and understood with each person’s intellect. One must not rely on another’s research to know the Halachah; each must individually study and understand. Thereby the intellect grasps the concept and comprehends it, and the concept is in turn grasped and comprehended within the intellect, resulting in a union between the person and the Torah “Like which there is none other, and which has no parallel anywhere, etc.”

Although the world is covered by darkness, the Jew knows that it is his task to rectify the situation.⁵ Strangely enough, although Jews have collectively tried all other means of doing so, only individuals have attempted to accomplish this through the medium of joy. We must however storm the world, and take it out of its exile through taking ourselves out of our personal exile. And the way to do so is through joy which breaks all barriers, including those of the exile. G-d gives us the strength and the promise, that through true joy all punishments which come because of service without joy, will be turned into good — instead of “you shall serve your enemies,” the reverse will be true — “your enemies shall submit themselves before you.” This is analogous to that stated in today’s portion of Chumash (the fifth day of Parshas Chayei Sarah). Lavan the Aramite, (a person more evil than Pharaoh,) who wished to wipe out not only the males but all Jews, blessed Rivkah that “your seed shall possess the gate of those which hate them.” This expresses the concept of the “superiority of light which comes only from (previous) darkness;” and in a person’s personal life, it expresses the concept of “his sins are turned into merits.”

5. A Jew’s task includes the duty to ensure that non-Jews keep those commandments relevant to them. Their obligation comes because “G-d commanded them concerning those commandments, and let us know so through Moshe Rabbeinu” at the time of the giving of the Torah.

Personal Liberation – Being Truly Present

3. As mentioned above, one must liberate oneself from one's personal exile – one of the greatest tests and difficulties of our times, as we can see. Tonight is an ordinary Thursday night in New York, a metropolis of millions of people. A Jew has just come from work, and is preparing for and thinking of tomorrow's work. It is extremely difficult to persuade him to simultaneously realize that since tonight is the birthday of a great person, born 120 years ago in a small village overseas, it behooves him to be affected by this, here and now. He knows that the Rebbe Rashab was an illustrious person, a leader of Jewry, an all-encompassing soul – yet he does not see how this affects his everyday mundane deeds in year 5741 in Brooklyn, N.Y.! True, he comes for whatever reason (out of guilt or honor etc.), to the farbrengen held in honor of the occasion. Yet only his body is present, whereas his mind is who-knows-where? He thinks about yesterday's business deals, tomorrow's business deals etc., etc.

We demand of him something, that to him, is a self-contradiction. He is in Brooklyn on Thursday night, Parshas Chayei Sarah 5741. Simultaneously, in those minutes or hours in which he finds himself in a holy place, where my father-in-law, the Rebbe learned and prayed, blessed Jews, received requests, and shared in Jewry's troubles and sorrows – at this time he should succeed in persuading himself that "Torah is your whole and only profession." For now he is a chassid of the Rebbe, the successor to the Rebbe Rashab; and as a chassid it is incumbent upon him to endeavor to divest himself of his own present existence! True he is indeed in Brooklyn, in the year 5741. But his work should not be his blood, his life, his pleasure and his enthusiasm. Therefore, during this farbrengen he must divest himself of his existence; and during these hours he ceases to be that person in Brooklyn in 5741. He is nothing but a chassid of the Rebbe!

Another self-contradictory situation: It is now 120 years since the birthday of the Rebbe Rashab, who was born in a small village in Russia. Yet because "these days should be remembered and kept," we demand that the concept of this birthday should

not be considered by him to be something in the past, but a completely fresh and new event. And since “deed is the essential thing,” this should steer him towards the proper actions, and thereby influence his speech, thought and soul.⁶

Stated bluntly, we demand that every Jew do something which, to him, seems self-contradictory. One must tear himself from, and divest himself of, his surroundings, and place himself in the situation of being together with the Rebbe Rashab. As the Rebbe Rashab said: “I am going to heaven, and (my) writings I leave for you.” Through learning his Torah, one binds himself to, and finds himself together with the Rebbe Rashab. For “I have given my soul in writing” — the Rebbe Rashab placed his soul in his writings, and has given it to everyone who chooses to accept it.

When so doing, one should not set a time limit, but instead should forget both time and oneself. Even though 120 years have passed since the Rebbe Rashab’s birthday, nevertheless, right now, during these few moments and hours, one should feel that it is a completely new occurrence. Such a “commemoration” ensures that the concept is “kept,” not only in thought, but in deed as well. Then the world will be transformed, and the darkness covering the earth and peoples will be abolished.⁷

This concept of learning the Rebbe Rashab’s discourses, and thus being together with him, is not limited to the day of the Rebbe’s birthday. Every day, or at least once a week, one should lock himself in a room, close one’s eyes, and feel that right now he is at Mt. Sinai receiving the Torah. Although he is in Brooklyn, he is simultaneously at Mt. Sinai; and when he reads the Torah, “G-d is reading opposite him;” and when he learns the Torah “G-d is learning opposite him.” One does this with such complete dedication that, just as at the receiving of the Torah, he is in a state of “awe and fear, trembling and sweating” — he

6. The Previous Rebbe noted that when a person has an Aliyah (“called up”) to the Torah in this corporeal world, then all the five levels of his soul also receive an aliyah to the Torah.

7. The Rambam renders the Halachic decision that: “one good deed... tilts the entire world to the meritorious side, bringing both himself and the world salvation.”

actually begins to perspire.⁸ Every Jew was given the Torah individually at Mt. Sinai; and every day he receives the Torah anew.

This must not however, interfere with a Jew's orderly service, in which Mitzvos are in a specified, physical fashion (as mentioned before). Ma'ariv must be davened with a Minyan, Amen answered, Shema said at night. Torah, although it is limitless, must be learned and comprehended by the intellect, effecting the "wondrous union" between his intellect and Torah.

This service of successfully transporting oneself to Mt. Sinai is an example of the co-existence of two contradictory concepts: A Jew while in the world, is simultaneously higher than the world. On the one hand, he is sitting in a room with wall to wall carpeting, and with imported furniture (for of course, nothing else but an imported book-case will suffice to hold his Tanya, even though the Alter Rebbe himself kept the Tanya on a plain unpainted board!). Simultaneously, he has his eyes closed and cannot see the carpeting and furniture, thus making it easier to place himself in the same situation as when he received the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

These two things are really not contradictory, as shown by the following story. The Tzemach Tzedek did not wish to waste money on painting his furniture, so his tables, chairs, etc. were made of plain unpainted boards. A rich chassid, who had been helped by the Tzemach Tzedek, brought him a gift of painted furniture. The Tzemach Tzedek told him that although he himself did not need it, he (the rich man) should give it to his son, the Rebbe Maharash. This appears to be self-contradictory. If such furniture is a mere luxury, then the Tzemach Tzedek should not have told the wealthy chassid to give it to the Rebbe Maharash. And if it is not only a luxury, then the Tzemach Tzedek should himself have taken it?! His response however shows that both concepts are true and yet not contradictory. The Tzemach Tzedek's service was such that he did not need painted furniture. The Rebbe Maharash's service however was different, and hence although the

8. This is a service meant for everyone, not just special people. For at the giving of the Torah, all Jews were made into a "special people," with every Jew given the Torah as an individual.

Tzemach Tzedek could refuse for himself he could still instruct that it be given to the Rebbe Maharash. So too, we may have wall-to-wall carpeting and imported furniture, and still shut our eyes and be at the giving of the Torah.

There is a similar story told about Rabbi Yisrael of Ruzshin. Everything of his was of the best — a service of kingship. An example of this was the fact that his shoes were made of gold (or silver). Of course, no one dared ask him how he could waste money that could otherwise go to Tzedakah. Afterwards, it was discovered that the golden shoes had no bottoms — and thus when walking, the Ruzshiner would feel all the pain of going without shoes (from thorns, stones, etc.). So again we see two opposites: He wore golden shoes, and simultaneously experienced all the pain of going without shoes.

All Jews must have both these things. He should indeed have all good things, including the best of physical possessions. Yet simultaneously, a Jew should not put his blood, his pleasure, or enthusiasm into such things. From time to time, a Jew should shut himself up in a room and transport himself to Mt. Sinai. Or in different words, place himself in the situation of his grandfather or great-grandfather. They had no interest in the inanities of their time. Their entire interest and enthusiasm lay in Torah and Mitzvos; they did not know of any other existence! A Jew should meditate on this to the extent that he is exactly as his great-grandfather (or how he heard his great-grandfather was). And to do so with joy and happiness.

To return to the original point: It is true, as we can see, that “darkness covers the earth, and dense darkness the peoples.” But simultaneously, a Jew knows clearly that “my help comes from *ayin*,” and “my help will come from the L-rd, Maker of heaven and earth;” and “indeed, the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps.” All this leads him to speak and act with joy.

May it be G-d’s will that all these things should be carried out fully and joyously, beginning with the Mitzvah campaigns. And “as in the days of your going out from the land of Egypt,” when “the armies of the L-rd went out from Egypt” “with an upraised hand,” so too may it be with us in our own time.

A Timely Call to Action

4. The portion of Chumash for today, the fifth portion of Parshas Chayei Sarah, is associated with the Mitzvah campaigns, especially those three given to women – Shabbos candles, Kashrus, and Family Purity. In chapter 25, verse 67, it states: “And Yitzchok brought her [Rivkah] into the tent of his mother Sarah...” Rashi comments on these words, stating: “He brought her into the tent and behold she was Sarah his mother; that is to say, she became like Sarah his mother. For as long as Sarah lived there was a light burning from one Shabbos eve to the other, and there was blessing in the dough, and a cloud was hanging over (her) tent; and when she died, (these) ceased; but when Rivkah entered (the tent), they returned.”

The three things enumerated by Rashi are the three Mitzvahs (campaigns) given especially to women:

“a light burning one Shabbos eve to the other” – the Mitzvah of lighting Shabbos candles;

“blessing in the dough” – the Mitzvah of kosher food, which brings blessing into the dough;

“a cloud hanging over the tent” – the Mitzvah of modesty – “a garden enclosed is my sister, my bride” – that is, family purity.⁹

This demonstrates the importance of these three campaigns which apply particularly to Jewish women. A Jewish woman is called the “foundation (or mainstay) of the house,” referring both to every individual home and the general House of Israel, similar to the Bais Hamikdash, the “House for You to dwell in, a settled place for You to abide in forever.” About that House, G-d said “I will dwell within them,” referring not only to the Bais Hamikdash, but to “them” as well – for G-d dwells within the home and heart of every Jew.

These three campaigns (especially Shabbos lights) have special importance for young girls. For when Rivkah entered Sar-

9. Family purity was one of the things stressed by Sarah, and therefore when the angels came to visit Avraham, he gave them “curd, milk and a calf,” and not bread, “because Sarah became menstruous, for there returned to her the manner of women on that day, and the dough became unclean.”

ah's tent, she was only three years old, and yet still caused the three things (lights burning from Shabbos eve to Shabbos eve, blessing in the dough, and a cloud over the tent) to return!¹⁰ This teaches us an eternal lesson, that we should not wait until girls are married, but should be trained to kindle the Shabbos and Yom Tov lights even while very young (from three years on, or even younger if they are mature enough to understand the concept). And so too with the other two campaigns.

Since it is Thursday night, when Shabbos is approaching, it is appropriate to now concentrate particularly on the campaign to get all Jewish girls, including very young ones, to kindle Shabbos lights. When we do so, we are assured that just as Sarah's and Rivkah's Shabbos lights physically burned throughout the entire week, so too will the Shabbos lights of every Jewish girl. For every Jewish girl is called a daughter of Sarah, Rivkah, Rochel and Leah; although we do not physically see it, nevertheless, spiritually her lights last "from one Shabbos eve to the other."¹¹

The kindling of the Shabbos lights, not only helps keep away evil, but also increases light and joy. Similarly, joy is brought through family purity, as can be seen in the matter of circumcision. Our Sages explain that the circumcision is performed on the eighth day because only after family purity is kept, and the seven days of purity have passed, are the child's father and mother joyous. Kashrus in food and drink also brings about joy, for "there is no joy without wine or meat," and a Torah-true joy can only exist when the wine and meat are kosher.

All the other campaigns also bring about joy, for each of them brings the joy of performing a Mitzvah. This applies especially to the campaign of love for a fellow Jew, for "it is the entire To-

10. In fact, Avraham, who kept the whole Torah, must have lit the Shabbos candles after Sarah had passed away (in accordance with the law that if the woman does not light for whatever reason, the man must). And yet, it was Rivkah, at the age of three, and not Avraham, who was able to cause the lights to burn from one Shabbos eve to the other!

11. The fact that the Shabbos lights only last from one Shabbos eve to the next, does not mean G-d forbid that afterwards the darkness that is upon the earth has dominion therein. The reason why it lasts only to the next Shabbos eve is because every Shabbos eve a new light is kindled, such that the new one gives out even more light than the previous one, since "one ascends in sanctity."

rah, and the rest is interpretation; go and learn.” Indeed, joy and love of a fellow Jew are interdependent. For the proper love of a Jew brings joy, and joy leads us to increase that love.¹²

May it be G-d’s will that from all that is spoken about in Parshas Chayei Sarah, we will come to the time when we shall say about Yitzchok, “you are our father,” through the redemption by our righteous Mashiach speedily in our time.

Tehillim 121 and Mashiach

5. Psalm 121 begins with the words “*Shir Lama’alos*,” (A song of Ascents) and not, as with the other fourteen Songs of Ascents, “*Shir Hama’alos*.” The reason for this, as stated in Yalkut Shimoni, is because this psalm refers to Mashiach. The Midrash Tehillim interprets the “*Shir Lama’alos*” to mean that: “David said *Shir Lama’alos* [with the meaning that] when You gave us this [highest] ascent, we will not descend from it; when you will redeem us from the dominion of Esav, we will never again descend into any other dominion...” The Midrash Tehillim is saying that after every other ascent, or redemption, there was a descent, another exile. But the ascent referred to in the psalm “*Shir Lama’alos*,” is that of the redemption by our righteous Mashiach, an ascent which will not be followed by any descent; that redemption will never be followed by another exile. The Chidah explains that the “lamed” in *Shir Lama’alos*, which in Hebrew numerology is equivalent to the number 30, alludes to the “30 distinctions (ascents) which the King Mashiach, who will be from the tribe of Yehudah, will possess.”¹³ For “royalty is acquired [together] with

12. The very concept of joy is being with others, and not by oneself. “You shall rejoice (in your festival)” is only when there is “you, your son, your daughter, your manservant, your maidservant, and the Levi... and the stranger...”

13. Trans. Note: The word “Lama’alos” can be interpreted in two ways. “Ma’alos” can mean either ascents, or distinctions, qualities [obviously, the two are related]. Thus “*Shir Lama’alos*,” in its simple interpretation, means a “song of ascents,” with the “La” serving as the conjunction “of.” In its second interpretation, the “La” is simply the letter “Lamed,” which is equal to the number 30. [In Hebrew, each letter has a numerical value: thus “Aleph” = 1, “Beis” = 2, etc., and “Lamed” = 30]. Thus *Lama’alos* would mean “thirty distinctions,” and *Shir Lama’alos* means a “Song of Thirty Distinctions,” which refers to Moshiach who will possess 30 distinctions.

thirty distinctions,” and the true fulfillment of royalty is the King Mashiach.

This serves as a further answer to our previous question as to how one can be joyous when “darkness covers the earth.” For now, the very reverse is true. The very fact that all the signs given in the Talmud foretelling the advent of Mashiach [e.g. “insolence will increase, honor dwindle etc.”] are present now, indicates that “Indeed, he stands behind the wall, he looks in at the windows, he peers through the lattice” — that Mashiach’s coming is imminent, and only moments away. Therefore, one should indeed be joyous.

Indeed, the actual recital of the fifteen “Songs of Ascents” themselves is associated with joy. Dovid HaMelech said them with joy, as is seen from their opening word “Shir” — “Song,” which is associated with joy, as stated in Gemara Berachos: “A Song [of praise] is sung only over wine... which makes joyous G-d and man.” Even more so did the Leviim sing them with joy, when they chanted the Songs of Ascents at the time of Simchas Bais Hashoevah, whilst standing on the fifteen steps in the Bais Hamikdosh.

Joy is something which our time demands, for through it we burn the remnants of the exile, thus preparing for the future redemption when “as in the days of your going out of the land of Egypt I will show wonders.” Similar to the King Mashiach was the King in the year of Hakhel, when he read portions of the Torah to all Jews. Then, at the time of reading, “it was as if... it was heard from the mouth of G-d, for the king is the envoy to convey the words of G-d.”

A Time for Life - Channeling the Inspiration

6. This year, as mentioned previously, marks the 120th birthday of the Rebbe Rashab. On the verse “and his days shall be a hundred and twenty years” [referring to mankind], the Zohar states: “This is an allusion to Moshe Rabbeinu, through whose agency the Law was given and who thus bestows life on all Jews from the

tree of life.”¹⁴ The Zohar states further that “Moshe did not die,” and thus, since the concept of death did not apply to him, he is able to bestow life on all Jews.

The “tree of life” from which Moshe bestowed life is a reference to the Torah. This is connected with the campaign for Torah study, and since today is the birthday of the Rebbe Rashab, special emphasis should be laid on the study of his Torah — his Chassidic discourses. Even one of his discourses contains a wealth of knowledge; how much vaster is this wealth when there are a multitude of his discourses available in print. We need but “search” and then we will surely “find.”¹⁵

There is another campaign which is alluded to in the last verse of Psalm 121, which is: “The L-rd will guard your going and your coming from now and for all time.” The Zohar sees in this verse an allusion to the Mezuzah. When one has a Mezuzah on the door, not only does G-d guard you in your actual entrance into, or exit from the house — “your going and your coming,” but all the time and forever — “from now and for all time.” Similarly, as mentioned earlier, all other Mitzvah campaigns are also alluded to in the Torah.

One does not, however, need allusions to justify the campaigns, for in the Shulchan Aruch [Code of Law], the law is stated that “you shall love your fellow as yourself” and “you shall certainly rebuke your neighbor.” There are however, those who say that it is wrong to engage in Mitzvah campaigns, since the Jew whom is being influenced to do a Mitzvah does so only because he is being asked, and not for the sake of the Mitzvah itself. The answer to this is found in the Talmud which states: “A person should always occupy himself in Torah and Mitzvos even if not for their

14. The prior words to this verse are: “And the L-rd said: My spirit shall not abide in man forever, for that he is also flesh, therefore his days shall be a hundred and twenty years.” The Talmud notes that the words “for that he is also,” have, in Hebrew, the numerical values equivalent to the name Moshe (345). Moreover, “his days shall be 120 years” were the years of the life of Moshe.

15. The word “find” is used, to draw a parallel to a “find” in the normal physical sense. When one finds something, the “find” is worth much more in comparison to the effort invested in the searching. So too with learning. The Torah promises us that if we but learn (search), the results (“find”) will be infinitely greater than could have been expected from the efforts invested in the learning (“searching”).

own sake, for from doing them not for their own sake, he will come to do them for their own sake.” And every Jew, no matter what his standing, and contrary to his protests, does in reality wish to fulfill the Mitzvos of G-d. Therefore, it is our responsibility to endeavor to influence for the good even those Jews who would appear to fulfill Mitzvos not for their own sakes; especially since we have the clear, unequivocal directives of the Rebbeim, who have directed us, and given us the strength, to spread Judaism and Chassidus.

May it be G-d’s will that we do all of the above with a great and true joyousness, with a joy which breaks the bounds of the exile. Then we will go to greet our righteous Mashiach “with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters.”