

"ONE NATION, ALL ALONE,
UNDER GOD"

In the portion of this week's reading which describes the blessings that will come upon Israel, we read one verse that is outstanding by its magnificence: *"וְכָל עַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ יִרְאוּ כִּי שְׁמִי נִקְרָא עָלֶיךָ וְיִירָאוּ מִי."* "And all the nations of the world will see that the name of the Lord is called upon you, and they will be afraid of you."

What does Moses mean when he says that "the name of the Lord will be called upon you?" The Talmud (Ber. 6a) quotes an answer by the one of the greatest of all sages, Rabbi Eliezer Hagadol (the Great). In a pithy comment of but three words, he says: *"שְׁמִי נִקְרָא עָלֵינוּ"*, the "name of the Lord" that is "called upon us" refers to the Teffilin that we wear upon the head.

How remarkable! Is that all it takes to frighten away the anti-Semite bent upon a pogrom? Is the Tefillin worn upon the head really sufficient to neutralize the venom of the anti-Jewish enemy, his plentiful arms and allies?

If we turn to the Talmudic passage from which this quotation is taken, and study it in context, we discover what I believe is the real meaning of the statement of Rabbi Eliezer the Great. Immediately after quoting his response, the Talmud asks:

*"כִּי תִפְסִיחַ בְּאֵימָתוֹ מִי כְּתִיב הַבֹּא? מִי כְּתִיב וְשָׂמָּה יִשְׁתָּא אִי אִתְּרָא בְּאֵרֶךְ
אִתְּרָא הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרִיךְ הוּא לִישְׁתָּא אִתְּרָא עֲשִׂיתִי חֲסִידִי אִתְּרָא בְּעוֹלָם
וְעַתָּה אִתְּרָא אֲרַבָּה חֲסִידִי אִתְּרָא בְּעוֹלָם."*

The Agadah often speaks of the Tefillin that are worn not only by man, but by God. Now the Talmud asks: we know that in the Tefillin of man is written the profession of unity, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." But what is written in the Tefillin that, so to speak, God himself wears? They answer that the Tefillin of God bear the message: "Who is like unto Thy people Israel, one nation upon the earth."

And the Rabbis explain: The Lord said to Israel, "You made of Me a unity in the world, so I too will reciprocate and make of you a unity in the world." Our espousal of God's oneness is reciprocated by God's affirming our uniqueness in the world.

Now, reading our original passage in context, we see that "the name of the Lord" refers not to man's but to God's Tefillin *עליו*! Hence, what the Sages really meant to say is this: What will win respect and inspire awe in others is the Jewish ability to stand alone, to be a *עם אחד*, to risk loneliness, to remain secure though friendless, to hold its own if necessary against the entire world. When Jews have sufficient faith in "the name of the Lord" to act on the basis of the confidence that we will remain *עם אחד*, one nation upon the earth, then we will survive and we will flourish.

That is true for us as individuals. If we are embarrassed by our Jewishness and fearful of being outsiders and aliens in a non-Jewish culture, if we will yield easily to the majority's pressures upon us to conform, then we will deserve no *חן* or respect for us, because we will have dishonored ourselves. Those pseudo-WASPs, those Jews who would have preferred to be re-born non-Jewish, who do not acknowledge their ethnic origins or religious traditions, are in truth not authentically human. The self-deniers have, as it were, ripped the Tefillin off the head of God and left themselves both headless and heartless.

What Rabbi Eliezer is telling us is that we must have the courage of our convictions and ignore the pressure of numbers. If you think you are right, if you are convinced that what you are doing is correct and moral, then do not be worried by the fact that most people are against you, that you may look silly, that people will gaze at you as though you came from another world. If you are right, proceed to do what is right in your eyes and do not be worried that you offend majority opinion.

Indeed, Rabbi Eliezer the Great himself beautifully exemplified this principle. He was born to a very wealthy father who, like most wealthy fathers, preferred that his son become a well-to-do businessman. But when Eliezer was 22 years old he decided that

he would rather become a scholar and so, at a relatively advanced age, he made his way to Yavneh and enrolled in the Academy of Rabbi Yohanan b. Zakkai. His father was furious at him for abandoning the family business and going into something as impractical as Talmudic scholarship. He made up his mind, after some time, that he would himself travel to Yavneh and there publicly disinherit his son. When he came to Yavneh, the great teacher Rabbi Yohanan b. Zakkai noticed him and called out to Eliezer, saying: "עֲלֵךְ וְדַבֵּר", Rise up and deliver the lecture. Eliezer was truly frightened, because he regarded himself as only a beginner disqualified and unprepared for such a task. But the teacher insisted, and Eliezer delivered himself of a brilliant and scintillating Talmudic lecture.

So impressive were his words that the audience gasped, and the teacher kissed the student upon the forehead. When Eliezer's father Hyrkanos saw this, he arose and declared that although he had come to disinherit Eliezer, he now wished to announce that he is so overwhelmed that he is going to leave all his money and estate to his son.

All through his life, R. Eliezer continued to demonstrate this single-minded stubbornness of following what is right no matter who is in the opposition. At one crucial point of his life, when he was already a world-famous teacher and had distinguished students -- counting among them no less a figure than Rabbi Akiva -- R. Eliezer clashed with his colleagues on a point of law. They declared a certain oven as טָמֵא, ritually unclean and, he pronounced it טָהוֹר, ritually clean. When the matter was taken to a vote and the opposition won, R. Eliezer refused to go along. The matter led to a confrontation, and as a result of R. Eliezer's persistence and his refusal to accede to majority rule, he was placed in excommunication -- and remained in this ban for many years, until his death. He was beloved by his colleagues and students, revered universally, and yet in order for the Halakhah to survive they felt it necessary to take this extreme action against him. But he refused to be budged. The principle he found in the divine *עֲלֵךְ וְדַבֵּר* was something he implemented in his own life.

If this is true for us as individuals, it is certainly true for Israel as a people today. We must be prepared for what is coming upon us. We must recognize that the State of Israel is in for some difficult times in the diplomatic and political world, and possibly even militarily. Israel is more and more facing isolation. It has earned the enmity of the Soviet Union. It is isolated from the Third World who in their recent assembly repeated the ritualistic condemnation of and hatred for Israel. The UN continues treating Israel like a pariah, and the Civil Airlines Organization, which always procrastinates and dawdles when hijackings are carried out against Israeli aircraft, springs into a sudden burst of zealous efficiency when Israel takes action and try to prevent hijacking, without any loss of life or property. Arab oil is now being used, perhaps for the first time, in a deliberate attempt to isolate Israel diplomatically. The Energy Crisis in the US is exaggerated in order to fall in line with this pressure. Russian-American detente promises no great help for Israel. A weakened Presidency leaves Israel in a most difficult position. And, if we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that pleased as we are at having the first Jewish Secretary of State in American History, we are also worried lest he will bend over backwards in an attempt to prove that he is not prejudiced in favor of Israel.

So we must be prepared to remain alone, friendless, isolated.

At times of crisis, it has been our experience for this past quarter century, that Israelis usually rally, whereas Diaspora Jews usually cave in. To the dismay of most Israelis, we Jews of the Diaspora panic rather quickly.

So, Israel must certainly continue to seek friends where it can, and we American Jews must use our political influence and clout discretely and wisely. But we must not panic. We must remember that our normal condition is *אדם בודד*, a people that dwells alone. We must draw strength and not weakness from the knowledge that we are *עם נבדל*, often alone and different in the world. It is during these times of loneliness -- when we are *אין אנו*, one nation upon the earth, as the statement in God's Tefillin declares -- that we will draw the admiration and respect of others who will appreciate our strength and courage

during these periods of solitude, who will recognize "that the name of the Lord is called upon you," and then we shall prevail.

I do not mean to say that American Jews must offer blind support for every Israeli policy, whether foreign or certainly internal. But if the decision of the Israelis should be to go it alone, let us not try to move them on the basis of our own inner panic. At such times we must give them strength, and not infect them with our weakness.

It is at times of this sort that we must be aware of the principle enunciated in the Divine Tefillin. We have been, we are, and will probably always will remain "בְּיָדָא דְּמַלְכוּתָא"
בְּיָדָא דְּמַלְכוּתָא .

This is our burden and glory, as the Name of the Lord is called upon us. We shall remain one nation, all alone, under God.