

## **Va'eschanan 5733**

### **Rabbi Aharon Ziegler**

The headline of the Israeli Newspaper, dated 15 Av, 2448, stated in bold glaring letters: **“JEWS STOPPED DYING”**. When Jews stop dying – that’s a day of great Simcha. That’s why Monday, July 22, of this year, the 15<sup>th</sup> of Av is a celebrated holiday on our calendar. We commemorate tragic events that occurred many years ago, by the same token we celebrate with joy the happy events of the past.

Who were these Jews, how were they dying, and what happened that they stopped? Gemara Ta’anit (30b) teaches us the joy of this day, and the importance of Teshuvah.

Prior to entering the Land of Israel, Moshe Rabbeinu sent 12 spies to scout the land. The spies returned with a negative report saying, “We cannot conquer them; the land consumes its inhabitants” (Bamidbar 13:32).

Our ancestors, upon hearing this, believed the spies and began to cry. They lost their hope in G-d, and despaired of ever entering the Land.

HaShem then swore and decreed “in this desert shall you die” (14:29). And over the next 38 years, all men between ages of 20-60 began to perish, except Kalev and Yehoshua.

Tosafot, citing the Midrash on Eicha, described this process. Every year, on the night of the ninth of Av, the anniversary of the spies’ return, Moshe commanded all the men to dig their own graves and lie down in them for the night. The following morning, Moshe called out: “Living ones, separate yourselves from the dead”. This happened every year, and an average of 15,000 men died on this one day.

On the 40<sup>th</sup> year, something unusual occurred. They dug their graves as usual, and lay down in them. Yet, the next morning, all the men got up. None died; they were all alive. They thought a mistake had been made about the date. Perhaps last night was not the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av after all? So back they all went into their graves for the next five consecutive nights, and this procedure was repeated until the 15<sup>th</sup> of Av, when the full moon shined brightly. The people then realized that G-d had forgiven their generation for the sin of the spies. The 15,000 still-living would enter the Land of Israel together with Kalev and Yehoshua, the younger generation, and the Jewish women who never lost faith in HaShem.

The question asked is, if only 15,000 would die every year why was it necessary for each man of the 600,000 to dig their own graves? They should have been commanded to dig only 15,000 graves and those who died that night would be buried in those graves. Having each man sleep the night in a grave is a morbid thought. I doubt if any of the men actually slept that night; wondering if they would be alive in the morning to ever again see their wives, children and family. But this is precisely the answer.

A negative decree of G-d can be changed, for nothing stands in the way of Teshuvah (Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:14). HaShem hopefully reasoned that by commanding them to ‘Dig your graves’; this was giving the men the motivation and impetus to do Teshuvah. Lying in the grave they cried and pleaded with G-d, “Please let me live, I love my wife; I love my children who need me desperately. Please G-d, forgive me. I am sorry for doubting You; I will never lose trust in You again”.

This worked well for 38 years, and now they were down to the last 15,000. Moshe tells them to “Go back into the pit; a more intense Teshuvah is needed”. Finally, five days later, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Av, their Teshuvah was accepted. They were now given clearance to enter the Holy Land. G-d forgave the sin of the spies, the Jews ceased to die, and the 15<sup>th</sup> of Av became a joyous holiday on the Jewish calendar.

From this we learn the power of genuine Teshuvah; together with Tefillah and Tzeddaka t can overturn the Heavenly decree of death, as we say on Rosh HaShana, “U’TESHUVA, U’TEFILLA, U’TZEDAKA, MA’AVIRIN ET RO’AH HA’GEZEIRA”.

We also learn that the 15<sup>th</sup> of Av is not only a day of joy but also a day of required Teshuvah. Chazal say, “Any generation that does not see the Beit HaMikdash rebuilt is as if we destroyed it” (Yerushalmi Yoma 1:1). That is what the Gemara Ta’anit (30b) means by comparing Yom Kippur with 15<sup>th</sup> of Av-- Both are days of happiness; both are days of Teshuvah. Hopefully, we will get our act together to eradicate the Sinat Chinam in our midst.