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THE ORIGINS OF OUR FAITH, TODAY

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Behaaloscha

THE ORIGINS OF OUR FAITH, TODAY

Good Shabbos!

Most of us Jews here in this room are Ashkenazim—some of us, of course, are Sephardim—meaning, we are of Sephardic heritage.

“Ashkenazic,” means, Jews whose ancestors lived in ancient Germany and whose children spread across Europe and Russia. (“Sephardic” means Jews whose ancestors lived in ancient Spain and the Middle East.)

But where did the first Ashkenazi Jews come from?

Avraham Avinu, our Patriarch Abraham, originated in Bavel, which is modern-day Iraq. He certainly wasn't an Ashkenazi. His son and grandson, Yitzchak and Yaakov, lived in the Land of Israel and in Egypt—also not exactly places known for Ashkenazim.

So where and when exactly did such a huge chunk of the Jewish Nation become Ashkenazi?

Now, there are just about as many answers to that question as there are Ashkenazim. Still, I'd like to share with you a story that perhaps can answer this big question.

In the 1100s there lived a Jew in Spain named Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi. Besides being a great Jewish leader and scholar, he was also a great minstrel and singer, a philosopher and an authority of repute.

In the Spain of those days, fierce debates would take place from time to time between representatives of the powers that were, meaning, the Christians and the Muslims. However, they would try to drag Jewish representatives into the fray, too.

What's interesting is that both the Christians and the Muslims saw the Jewish Tanach as a holy book—but that fact didn't stop them from interpreting that book to meet their needs and according to the pillars of their faith.

There were many books written during that era whose authors tried to prove the “truth” of their beliefs. It was very important to these new and young belief systems to “prove” that they were right and to convince, “intellectually,” that they are above Judaism, the oldest religion in the world—despite the fact that their entire spiritual case was based on Judaism.

So in order to defend the ancient Jewish faith against Christian and Muslim attack, Rabbi Yehuda wrote a book called *The Kuzari*. In it, he explains the fundamental foundations of the

Jewish faith and shines light on the secret of survival of the Jewish Nation and its place in world history.

The book is written in the form of a debate between the king of the Kuzarim, an ancient nation that doesn't exist anymore, and a Jewish scholar. For purposes of putting together the book in a digestible way, Rabbi Yehuda used the amazing true story that had happened many centuries before his time, when the king of the Kuzarim converted to Judaism along with his entire country, and together embraced and upheld the Jewish faith.

The Kuzarim, or the Khazars, were a fierce and nomadic people who lived along the Volga River in the south of Russia. Around the year 740, King Bulan of the Khazars dreamt that an angel came to him and told him that his intentions were good but that his actions were not. As a result, King Bulan decided to destroy all the pagan idol worship from his country and to accept one of the essential religions of the world upon himself and his entire nation.

So King Bulan summoned a representative of the Christian faith and of the Muslim faith, and grilled on them on the foundations of their faith. Each one claimed that while his faith is rooted in the Jewish faith, and that the Jewish faith is the original.

As such they verified, each in his own way, that between the two religions, Judaism is the correct one and the foundational one, because they disproved one another—but in doing so, unintentionally verified the supremacy of Judaism.

When King Bulan heard this, he decided to summon a Jewish representative, with whom he held a long and wide-ranging debate—until he was convinced in a way above and beyond any doubt that the Jewish faith was the correct and true faith. When he arrived at that conclusion, he converted along with the entire royal family—and on the heels of that, the entire Khazar nation converted.

But with that, they met the Jewish fate—all the countries around them, the Persians, Arabs and others, fell upon them and tried to destroy them, but they failed.

This Jewish kingdom on the banks of the Volga lasted for hundreds of years. They were completely isolated from the countries surrounding them, with only faint echoes of the existence of the Jewish Khazars reaching the Western world. One fine day, however, the Jewish senior advisor to the King of Cordoba, Spain, Chasdai Ibn Shaprut, received a letter from Josef, the King of the Khazars, who wrote how his great-great-grandfather King Bulan had converted along with the entire country. (And some hold that the Khazars are the origin of the Ashkenazi Jews.)

This episode in history was used by Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi as a background for his philosophical book *The Kuzari*, in which Rabbi Yehuda—through the voices of the Kuzari king and the Jewish scholar—expresses the foundations of the Jewish faith.

Right at the start of the book, when the Kuzari asks the scholar about the essentials of his faith, the scholar replies that he believes in Hashem, the G-d of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov; the G-d Who took the Jewish Nation out of Egypt and fed them the Man, showed them signs and wonders and gave them the Land of Canaan, the Land of G-d's Choice—and that G-d gave the Torah to Moshe Rabbeinu and the Prophets after him.

The King of the Kuzarim was startled by what his ears heard. He had been expecting a philosophical explanation about G-d, the Creator of the Universe, and “rational” proofs demonstrating the unity of the Creator—but instead, what did he hear from the scholar? A declaration based on historical events! And events which he heard about from representatives of the other religions!

In including this anecdote, Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi tried to emphasize that it is specifically through the historical bond between the Jewish Nation and G-d, a bond that began with the Patriarchs and continued in an unbroken chain to this day, that contains the secret of Jewish faith.

These historical facts don’t need any proof, because they have been verified by all inhabitants of the world—even the Christians and Muslims concede the historical events of the Exodus from Egypt, the Giving of the Torah, etc. And that which all of humanity knows, believes and verifies doesn’t need “philosophical” proofs. Jewish faith leans on and is supported by genuine facts that have been handed down from father to son, from generation to generation, going all the way back to Moshe Rabbeinu who got the Torah at Mt. Sinai along with that entire generation that stood at the foot of that mountain.

So right at the beginning, Rabbi Yehuda establishes that one of the foundations of Jewish faith is action in place of excessive philosophical investigations, which have no reason or purpose. (Sichos LaNoar Vol. 9, pg. 374.)

In the second chapter of the book, the scholar tells the king at length about the Land of Israel and its wealth of qualities. And then the Kuzari king asks him: “Why don’t you go up to the Land of Israel? You say in your prayers, ‘Have mercy on Zion for she is the house of our life,’ and you believe that the Divine Presence which dwells upon it should rightfully gather in the souls which are precious to it and merit it... for it is the gateway to Heaven, and all the nations have already agreed to this! The Christians say that souls are gathered to it and from it they are elevated to Heaven, and the Muslims say that is the place the prophets go up to Heaven.”

But the king doesn’t stop there. He goes on with his question: “And not only that, but your Patriarchs had already chosen to live there more than any of their birthplaces, and chose to reside there more than remaining citizens of their places. And with all that, they only desired to stand by the Land and not leave her at times of famine except at the command of G-d, and they sought to have their bones carried there!” And so, he concluded, why don’t you go up to the Land?

So the scholar replied: “Your Majesty, you have embarrassed me! And it is this sin that has hindered us from completing what G-d testified about us in the time of the Second Temple, as the verse states, ‘Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion!’”

The scholar continued to explain: “For the spiritual matter was ready to happen as in the beginning, if they had only all agreed to return with a willing soul. But only some of them returned and most of them and their leaders remained in Babylon—they wanted exile and work, that they not be separated from their abodes and their matters.”

“And our words, ‘Let us bow upon His Holy Mountain,’ and ‘Let us bow to the Abode of His Feet’ and ‘Who returns His Presence to Zion,’” sadly concluded the scholar, “are like nothing but a chirping bird!”

Now, what was the scholar saying here?

The Haftarah of this week's Torah portion, Behaaloscha, is from the Book of Zechariah, the Prophet. Zechariah lived during the Second Temple Era, and in that time, the King of Persia declared that the Jewish Nation was permitted to go back to Zion and rebuild the Beis Hamikdash.

Not only that, but the King of Persia himself donated money towards the building of the Beis Hamikdash. But the Jewish Nation, which had already gotten used to living in Bavel (Babylon), had built homes and planted vineyards (at the instruction of the Prophet Yirmiyahu, actually) in Bavel—and as such, resisted leaving it all behind and going back up to the Holy Land.

So the Haftarah of this week begins with Zechariah's prophecy in which he tries to motivate the Jewish Nation to return to its land. The Haftarah begins with the words, "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for, behold! I will come and dwell in your midst, says the L-rd."

Now, Zion is another name for Jerusalem—and here, the Prophet is prophesizing about the City of Zion that behold, very soon the Jewish Nation will come up and build the Holy Temple, and then G-d will come "and dwell in your midst."

But, as the scholar replied to the King of Khazaria, the Jewish Nation ultimately did not answer the call and did not go up en masse to the Holy Land. Researchers estimate that out of a half-million Jews who lived in Bavel at that time, only about 42,000 went up to the Land.

So Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi concedes the king's point: There was indeed an opportunity to go back as an entire nation to the Land, and we squandered it! "For the spiritual matter was ready to happen as in the beginning, if they had only all agreed to return with a willing soul. But only some of them returned and most of them and their leaders remained in Bablyon," as the scholar said.

And so, the scholar replied to the king, "Your Majesty, you have embarrassed me!" I am embarrassed that the Jewish Nation missed the opportunity.

But the Rebbe interprets those very verses in a beautiful way. Where Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi saw a missed chance, the Rebbe sees hope.

The Rebbe points out (Shabbos Parshas Vayeishev, Sichos Kodesh 5740 Vol. I, pg. 601) that the word "Tziyon" (Zion) in Hebrew also means "symbol" or "sign"—to mark or designate a specific area or location.

So the Rebbe says that the word Tziyon isn't just another name for Jerusalem but also a title for every Jewish soul, because every Jew is a sign or designator for G-d. (As Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai said, "Ana sinma ba'alma"—I am just an ordinary sign.) When we see a Jew, we need to remember G-d, and so a Jew is called Tziyon.

In this week's Haftarah, though, we don't read about "Tziyon" but rather, about "Bas Tziyon"—the daughter of Zion.

Now, Bas Tziyon is a lower level than Tziyon, just like a Bas Kol—a "daughter of a Voice," which refers in the Talmud and elsewhere to a message from Heaven—is a lower level than a Kol, a Heavenly Voice. In other words, sometimes you hear a person's voice itself, and

sometimes you only hear the “echo” of the voice, the “offspring” of the voice, which is much weaker and softer.

And it’s the same thing with regards to the Jewish Nation: while the Temple stood, we were a clear “sign” of G-d—anyone who saw a Jew was reminded of G-d.

But during our exile, however, when we are on a much lower spiritual level, we are in the category of “Bas Tziyon,” a “daughter of Zion,” a mere echo or byproduct of Zion—we are something that invokes Tziyon but not Tziyon itself. And this is a much lower level.

So along comes the Prophet Zecharya and says that even when the Jewish Nation finds itself in a “Bas Tziyon state,” it needs to “sing and rejoice” even then. A Jew must sing and be happy. Why? Because by doing so, then “I will come and dwell in your midst, says the L-rd”—then, even during exile, G-d is found with every Jew.

As a matter of fact, how do you get G-d to rest among us? Specifically by being happy—specifically through the “singing and rejoicing.” And that is the spiritual work of the Jew during our exile, regardless of his or her spiritual state—whether he or she is at the level of “Tziyon,” “Bas Tziyon” or even less than that. All that matters is that if he or she upholds the command, “sing and rejoice,” then it is guaranteed that “I will come and dwell in your midst.”

So the next time you see dancing Chasidim, don’t stand off to the side. Instead, join them!

Good Shabbos!