

The Jewish Weekly

The Greeks vs. The Jews Again

By Rabbi Yerachmiel Tilles

A few years ago Greece was not a good place to be. Angry, violent mobs with grievances to the government set to the streets, destroyed property, set fires, rioted and battled the police and bedlam reigned.

Vacationers shunned the place and trips, hotel reservations and plane tickets were cancelled, but for Rabbi Yoel Kaplan, the Chabad representative in Salonika, it was just another major challenge.

Rabbi Kaplan thrived on the unusual. His home, like nearly all the hundreds of Chabad Houses throughout the world, was open to the public 24/7 with the goal of helping Jews and Judaism, and thereby the entire world. And that required expecting the unexpected.

In the days of the rioting there was nothing to do; it was life-threatening to leave his house. And even weeks after the rioting ceased, signs of vandalism were everywhere and tension filled the air. Still, the dedicated Chabad rabbi was determined to resume his normal activities.

It wasn't easy. There were no tourists, Jews or otherwise, and after all the violence it seemed wise to just stay indoors for a few more weeks. But he had a job to do. Maybe there was even one Jew out there. Anyway, there were other matters that were pressing, like going to the post office to get his mail, a daily necessity. But even such a seemingly simple task was fraught with danger. The post office was located in a part of downtown that was a youth hangout and had been hit the hardest by violence. There were days that he took side roads to get there and used the back entrance, which meant a serious detour and time loss, just to avoid trouble.

However, one day he was running late and forgot to worry about trouble. He took the direct route to the post office. But as he neared his goal he began to regret it. A group of about ten mean-looking young men, some of them with tattooed arms, punk hairdos and other bizarre and frightening adornments, were staring at him with hatred in their eyes. His full beard, black hat, long black coat and entire Jewish demeanor were like a red flag before a maddened bull, so he was an ideal target for their frustrations.

He should have turned back, taken an alternate route and avoided them, but something told him to just keep walking. From afar he heard the anti-Semitic curses they directed at him - first in Greek and then in English, which they knew he spoke.

He had experienced Greek anti-Semitism before. Usually he just ignored it but for

some reason this time he glanced up, and as he got closer, raised one hand in greeting and said in as friendly a tone as possible, "Hello! Good morning."

"Someone talking to you?" the biggest of them replied sarcastically while the others got ready for some action.

Suddenly the Rabbi realized something. Just like Abraham, the first Jew some 4,000 years earlier, who was alone in his quest to bring meaning into a hostile world, trusted G-d to protect him, so this same G-d of Abraham would protect him now.

He smiled and said, "Maybe you weren't talking to me specifically, but you certainly are talking about my people."

"That's right, Jew!" The young man replied with burning venom laced with terms not fit to print. "About your cursed nation of thieves, liars and cheaters we certainly were talking. And we'll keep talking until you are exterminated," etc.

The smile did not depart from Rabbi Kaplan's face as he calmly replied, "You look like intelligent people. You have no reason to hate me or any other Jew. In fact, if you knew the truth I'm sure you wouldn't treat any of us badly."

This was too much for the leader. He was livid with anger as he made a fist and held it before the Rabbi's face. "I'm an experienced boxer," he snarled. "Unless you want to taste a few of these you'd better get away as fast and far as possible and don't come back!"

Rabbi Kaplan realized that things were about to get out of hand, so he calmly turned to the others, blessed them warmly with a good day and good news and continued on to the post office.

After he finished his business there and left the building, again something told him not to take the detour back home, but rather to return the same way he came, by the gang. After all, he was only here in Greece to do good; the same G-d of Abraham that protected him on his way here would protect him on his way back.

But this time when he passed the group they were quiet, although still emanating hostility. He again blessed them with a good day and when he came abreast of the leader, the one that had threatened him previously, he approached him and offered him his calling card, saying, "If you ever want to talk over a cup of coffee, call me or come to my house."

The boxer accepted the card sullenly, and whatever doubts Yoel Kaplan had about talking to these people in the first place began to melt away. Perhaps he would yet have a chance to dispel some of the hatred in the streets and maybe convince some of those fellows to live better lives.

It Once Happened...

A few days later, Erev Shavuot 5710 (May 2010), he got a phone call. "Hey Rabbi, This is Alexandros calling. Remember me? I'm the fellow you gave your card to the other day. You know, the boxer. Were you serious about that cup of coffee? If so, I'm right outside your house."

Rabbi Kaplan was pleasantly surprised. He warmly invited Alexandros to come in, and in just moments he was introducing him to his wife and children.

Then they sat down and the conversation began. His visitor had good questions and was a great listener. Eventually, at the third or fourth cup of coffee, when the topic of 'Who is a Jew' came up and the Rabbi explained that only someone born to a Jewish mother, or who genuinely converts to Judaism, is considered a Jew, Alexandros' demeanor became serious. He began to rapid-fire questions. "Mother? What about father? What about grandmother? What about grandfather's mother? What about grandmother's mother?"

He paused for a few seconds, but before the Rabbi could respond, he announced that his maternal grandmother once told him that she had been born Jewish.

Indeed, she had even been observant. However, in the war, after her husband and children were arrested and murdered by the invading Germans, she ran and hid in the mountains for several years. She figured that all the Jews had been killed and she would be too if anyone found out, so when she returned to civilization, she married a gentile and began going to church.

Shortly thereafter she gave birth to a baby girl who grew up and married a religious Greek Orthodox man. Their first child was Alexandros. Alex was Jewish!

All of a sudden Alex was transformed from one who knew nothing about Jews to being a Jew himself. He took the Rabbi to visit his aged grandmother, who verified the story and even agreed to put a mezuzah on her home. Alex then agreed to put on tefilin for the first time in his life and every day thereafter.

Rabbi Kaplan soon met the rest of Alex's siblings and had some influence over them too. A half a year later Alexandros made a pilgrimage to Israel. There he met several religious Jews of Greek origin and they influenced him to study Torah for a while at Yeshiva Ohr Samayach. Subsequently he also studied in a Yeshiva in the USA.

Nowadays he has returned to live in Greece, and still is in contact with his first rabbi, R. Yoel Kaplan.

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Y-GRAPHICS

Shabbat Times - Noach

	Candle Lighting	Motzei Shabbat	Motzei Shabbat ר"ת
Jerusalem	5:22	6:34	7:14
Tel Aviv	5:37	6:36	
Haifa	5:27	6:34	
Be'er Sheva	5:40	6:37	



The Advice of the Baba Sali By Rabbi Dovid Hoffman



R' Yisrael Abuchatzzeira, the holy Baba Sali zt"l

“Rabbi Elazar said: The light that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, made on the first day of Creation was not that of the sun, but a different kind of light, through which Adam could observe from one end of the world to the other. But when Hashem looked upon the generations of the Flood and the Dispersion and saw that their ways were corrupt and that they might misuse this light for evil, He arose and concealed it from them, as it is stated: “And from the wicked their light is withheld.” And for whom did He conceal it? For the righteous people in the future, as it is stated: “And Hashem saw the light, that it was good” - and “good” is referring to none other than the righteous people.” (Chagiga 12a)

The uniqueness and greatness of the holy Baba Sali, R' Yisrael Abuchatzzeira zt"l, was not limited to those times that he revealed his strength by performing open miracles, for his entire demeanor was beyond the comprehension of ordinary men.

All were amazed by the simplicity with which he spoke about the secrets of creation and the hidden ways in which Hashem guides His world. Even as we know that the pathways in heaven are as familiar to Tzaddikim as the entryways to their own homes, the matter-of-fact manner in which the Baba Sali spoke about heavenly concepts was astounding.

Stories heard from reliable witnesses abound. One of the most remarkable stories about the holy light and vision of the Baba Sali took place over forty-six years ago. A terrible incident occurred in 1972 when a daughter of one of the most prominent Jewish families in Mexico was kidnapped by a group of Mexican gangsters who had been tracking the girl in the hopes of holding her for a large ransom.

Unfortunately, this was not wholly uncommon. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, the Mexican Jewish community lived in relative stability. The economic boom that followed World War II lasted for nearly thirty years and continued to allow Mexican Jews to greatly prosper.

However, the country began to experience economic difficulties, which affected them in numerous ways. Abductions, theft and gang-related crime became all too commonplace and no one was safe, least of all the wealthy Jews of Mexico and its environs. The kidnapers demanded \$60 million for the safe return of the

young girl. If their demands were not met, they threatened, the girl would be executed. There were to be no further negotiations.

The family was in a state of panic. They could not possibly come up with that much money and the Mexican police could not be relied upon to find the girl alone.

An uncle of the kidnapped girl was dispatched to Netivot, in Southern Israel, to seek the blessing and advice of the holy Baba Sali. The man rushed to the Tzaddik's home and explained what had occurred to his niece in Mexico. He informed the Baba Sali that the kidnapers had said they would not negotiate. They wanted their money or the consequences were dire.

The Chacham sat in his chair motionless. He seemed to have immersed himself inward although his face was almost entirely covered by the veil he wore over his face.

Suddenly, he called for a pen and paper. His attendant ran to bring the items and the Baba Sali began to talk as he traced the shape of a building on the paper. This is what he said: “In order to rescue the girl, this is what you must do. Go to so and so (he named a specific place) and there you will find two of the kidnapers. One is short and stout like a barrel and the other is tall and thin like a tree. Bring with you twenty policemen and overwhelm the two kidnapers who are acting as lookouts.

“Then, take these two men and have them lead you to the spot where the girl is being kept. Be careful. There are another six kidnapers who are hiding out there. Let the first two open the doors and then the police can storm in and rescue the girl. Do this and you will be successful.”

The uncle rushed out and relayed the information, just as the Baba Sali had drawn it on paper. Baruch Hashem, the raid was successful and the girl was rescued, the entire plan carried out exactly how the Baba Sali had outlined it from his home in Netivot, over 6,000 miles away!

The Chacham had never stepped foot in Mexico. He had never seen the buildings he diagrammed or how the kidnapers looked. And yet, he could see them, he could see it all! Undoubtedly, it was the special light - the “Ohr Haganuz” - which allowed him to see from one end of the world to the other

In Parshat Noach we are told ‘ותשחת הארץ לפני האלהים’ - the earth became corrupted before Hashem’. The Kotsker Rebbe brilliantly divides these words into two statements: ‘ותשחת’ - the earth became ‘corrupted’, and why was that the case? ‘לפני האלהים’ - the slogan of the people at that time was: ‘Earth before G-d’. That generation prioritized the physical and invested all their efforts into materialism, which for them was far more important than any form of spirituality or any acknowledgment of the role of G-d in their lives.

The antidote for this can be found in the Gemara in Masechet Brachot. There, our sages bring to our attention two verses, both of which are very familiar to us and which seem to contradict each other. In Psalm 24 we read ‘לה הארץ ומלואה’ - the earth and everything in it, is the Lord's. But then in Psalm 115 which we chant in Hallel, we say ‘השמים שמים השמים שמים’ - לה והארץ נתן לבני אדם - the heavens are the heavens of the Lord and the earth He has given to the people’. So this earth - is it Hashem's or is it ours?

The Gemara says both statements are correct. Hashem has given this earth to us so that through our actions, we will appreciate the presence of Hashem in it. The primary way we do this is through the brachot that we recite. When I take something which has grown out of the ground, before I eat it, I say a blessing over it and in that way, I transform a mere physical activity into an action that brings spiritual gratification. We find, for example, at the Shabbat table, we take an ordinary bottle of wine but by reciting Kiddush we sanctify it and all who hear the blessing. We place so much emphasis on what we eat over Shabbat and Chag, not because there is something extra special in the food itself but rather through our eating, our table becomes an altar. We elevate the physical and the material in order to appreciate the presence of Hashem in our lives on those special days.

Therefore, unlike that generation of the flood, our way of life is ‘אלוקים לפני הארץ’ - Hashem comes before everything that is physical and material in this world and as a result, our lives are filled with so much happiness and meaning. So let's thank Hashem for what He has given us and let's join together and pray with all our hearts, for the recovery of all the sick from this crazy pandemic, as well as praying for our soldiers and healthcare professionals, and Chevra Kadisha members worldwide, and for those who need healing, shidduchim, children and parnassah and may we be blessed to have the most awesome, gorgeous, beautiful, peaceful, healthy, amazing, relaxed and spiritual Shabbat.

Yossi

פרשת נח

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HAFTORA:

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