JERUSALEM falls, and then rises (687-609 BCE)

KING MENASHE

Previously, we learned that in the time of King Hizqiyahu the city of Yerushalayim was miraculously saved from destruction. When Hizqiyahu dies, he is succeeded by his son, Menashe, who reigned in Yerushalayim for 55 years; more than any other king before or after him. The kingdom of Menashe (687-642 BCE) was devastating for the Jewish people. His father, Hizqiyahu was saved from Assyria with the help of HaS hem, but Menashe decided it was convenient to voluntarily (!) submit to the powerful Assyrian empire. Menashe then converted Yehuda into an Assyrian province and the Bet HaMiqdash into a sanctuary dedicated to the pagan gods: the sun, the moon, the stars and the constellations. He dedicated altars to theba'al, the god who demanded human sacrifices, and introduced into the Temple's Sanctuary an image of the ashera, the Assyrian goddess who was worshiped through acts of prostitution. He sacrificed his own son to the ba'al, practiced magic and witchcraft, and consulted with necromancers and idolatrous sorcerers. Determined to replace Judaism with the Assyrian religion, Menashe eliminated the Cohanim (priests) and all the Sages who taught the Tora. Menashe was also responsible for the persecution and murder of several prophets including his own grandfather, the prophet Yesha'ayahu. The Tora was virtually eradicated from Yerushalayim for two generations. Only some prophets and Sages, who were able to escape to the desert, continued to study and observe the Tora secretly. This is what the book of Melakhim says about the atrocities of Menashe: (21:7) [Menashe] took the image of the goddess ashera, which he himself had commanded to made, and placed it in the [Shrine of] the Temple, in the same place that HaShem had told David and his son Solomon: "In this Temple of Jerusalem, the city that I have chosen from among all the tribes of Israel, I have decided to live forever."

KING YOSHIYAHU

When Menashe died he was succeeded by his son, Ammon, who followed his evil ways. After two years Ammon was killed, and

his son, Yoshiyahu, the grandson of Menashe, was crowned king in Yerushalayim. Yoshiyahu was one of the best monarchs of Yehuda. He reigned in Jerusalem between 641 and 609 BCE. In his days, while repairs were made in the Temple of Jerusalem, a Sefer Tora that had been hidden in the time of Menashe was found. Reading the Tora, which was virtually forgotten, king Yoshiyahu decided to return to HaShem with all his heart, and for the first time in two generations Jews again observed and practiced the Tora and its Mitsvot. Yoshiyahu eradicated all idolatry and restored religious service in the Bet haMiqdash. The king and the people of Yehuda renewed their covenant of loyalty with HaShem to keeping His commandments. Yoshiyahu eliminated all the pagan cults that were introduced by Menashe into the city, and that Passover, the first to be celebrated in decades, the streets of Yerushalayim were filled again with Yehudim coming from all the towns and villages of Israel, like in the times of King David.

One of the lessons we learned from this period is that the Jewish people would always return to HaShem and His Tora, sometimes after several generations. This has happened more than once in the history of our people. The Tora, because of persecutions or anti-Semitism –and sometimes, unfortunately, by our own desire to be like other nations– might disappear for a generation or two. But then, miraculously, Jews return to HaShem and His Tora.

More than 20 years ago, when I was a rabbi in Uruguay, I published the following text. I copy it to now to show that what happened with Menashe and Yoshiyahu was also repeated also in our days.

Jewish life is like tea. Our ancestors knew this very well. Each generation crafted its own tea bag and, with it, prepared the treasured infusion. Parents were proud of being able to teach their children how to brew their own tea. But it happened, not too long ago, that the great-grandfather was not able to teach his child how to make tea. Because he had to leave Europe, or Morocco, in search of peace and bread, that great-grandfather managed to only pass down to his son the tea bag he had himself crafted, and had already used. The grandfather, an immigrant, safeguarded his father’s tea bag and with it lived Judaism as best he could. The exigencies of the new country in which the mission was to survive made it

very difficult for this grandfather to teach his son how to craft his own tea bag. And so he had no choice but to pass down to his son the same tea bag he had received from his father. By now, the color and taste of this Jewish tea was already too diluted to appreciate any enjoyable and discernible taste, one that would seem worth preserving and transmitting.

Today, thanks God, we have peace and we have bread. For the first time in many centuries, we are able to once again craft our own tea bags. Our children can once again enjoy the tasty beverage of Judaism, and appreciate its flavor, its color and its exquisite essence.