ACHOT QETANA: The First Prayer Of The Year

HARD TIMES

In just over a month we will celebrate Rosh HaShana, the new year 5782.

To officially inaugurate the Rosh HaShana prayer, on the evening of, we read a beautiful “piyut,” a liturgical poem, called Achot Qetana. Interestingly, this *piyut* does not allude to the Judgment Day or even to the Shofar; it instead focuses on our desire for a better year than the one we are coming out of.

At the end of each stanza, there is a special verse repeated; “tikhle shana veqileloteha,” may the year- and all of its curses- end.

It is at this very moment, right before the official tefilot of Rosh HaShana, during the final minutes of the year 5781, that we are opening up our hearts to HaShem and asking for better times.

Before delving into the piyut itself we should clarify that fortunately, as privileged Jews of the 21st century, it will be quite difficult to relate to the content of this poem, as it describes the terrible “curses” that the Jews of that time were experiencing. However, it is through this piyut, and through understanding the pain of our ancestors, that we will be able to recognize and appreciate all that HaShem has given us today.

The author of Achot Qetana is Rabbi Abraham Hazan from the city of Gerona, Spain. We know almost nothing about him, except that he was a contemporary of Nachmanides (Ramban, 1194-1270).

Fittingly, most of the text in the piyut focuses on the painful and tragic history of the Jews in 13th century Europe.

In its nine stanzas, the text describes- by a poetic and somewhat elusive form- the many persecutions and abuses that the people of Israel had suffered at the hands of the other nations with whom they had tried to find refuge and protection. It narrates the nightmare that had come to life for generations upon generations of Jews. In fact, for most of our history in exile our ancestors were defenseless refugees- unwelcome, demonized, abused.

A CINDERELLA STORY

אָחוֹת קְטַנָּה תְפִלּוֹתֶיהָ

The youngest sister directs her pleas to You, and sings [today] Your praises Oh God, please heal her from all her ailments, May this year conclude along with all of its curses!“

“Achot Qetana” literally means the “little sister,” the youngest of all siblings.
The nations of the world are the older siblings, coming from the same Father; the Creator of our world. Israel, always considered the smallest nation (Debarim 7:7) lives in exile, banished from her land, depending on the mercy of her older siblings. But far from defending and protecting their youngest sister, these siblings are jealous of her. She is the “chosen one,” the most loved.
The beautiful and adored
Cinderella has been abandoned by her Father, and left at the mercy of her evil stepsisters. But unfortunately, this was no Grimm-brothers tale; this was the very harsh, very real experience of our people for millennia.

רְעֵה אֶת צֹאנְךָ אֲרָיוֹת זָרוּ

[Please, Almighty,] tend back to your flock, which has been scattered by the wild lions, [and direct Your anger not towards us], but towards the enemies of Israel, those who shout “Destroy her!” who have uprooted the delicate branch of the vineyard that You planted, who have destroyed and uprooted it, and have not had compassion even for its little grapes.

Israel is the flock, and God the shepherd. But this flock has strayed from their protector, and now the sheep are scattered, more vulnerable than ever. They have run away to exile, to escape the claws of the cruel lions who took over their land. Israel is also compared to a delicate vine, planted by God. But the enemy has trespassed into the vineyard; not only to steal the grapes, but also to uproot the vine, to stop it from ever growing again. The enemies have destroyed the tender plant, and have not even allowed the "olelot" to survive. "Olelot" refers to the small baby grapes which have not yet ripened; a metaphor to the Jewish children, taken from their parents' into slavery, or forced conversion. Ripped away from their vine before they were allowed to grow.

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They dispossess her … they degrade her … and from the pit of her exile her soul is consumed … she has become the poorest of the poor … When will You pity her and when will You rescue Your little daughter from her dungeon?

The youngest daughter sought refuge in Europe. Yet she suffers constant persecution and expulsion; Europe has turned into a prison… but ironically it is the walls of this horrible dungeon that protect her from her enemies. What can possibly be worse than this prison? Being thrown out, having absolutely nowhere to go, no home to return to. Being humiliated and exposed to her enemies that seek her complete destruction. Israel has no army, no base, no power, no political influence. She is completely alone…

FINAL REFLECTION

Reading and singing ACHOT QETANA nowadays leaves me with a bittersweet taste. On the one hand, it is impossible to ignore all what our ancestors went through for 2,000 years… And on the other hand, remembering their suffering helps me to have a better perspective of our contemporary problems as diaspora Jews- which seem so insignificant after reading this poem.

Most importantly, Achot Qetana fills my soul with the enormous satisfaction and endless joy to see that after so much suffering, finally, the Youngest Sister is back home! And against all odds, she sees that the prophecies that announced a redemption which seemed impossible even to visualize, are finally realized in our privileged times!

שנזכה לגאולה שלמה , אמן

To be continued

Rabbi Yosef Bitton