I ❤ ISRAEL: The Western Wall and Aladdin's Lamp Syndrome

JERUSALEM, BEFORE SUNSET

For the past week, I have been in Bak'a, a beautiful neighborhood in Jerusalem. Last Shabbat, my wife and I decided to go to the Kotel, the Western Wall. It's a long walk, a little over 45 minutes. Jerusalem can be very hot in the summer, but at that time, around 6:15 PM, it's not as hot anymore. Moreover, as the sun sets, you can feel the cool breeze that immortalized the famous song "Yerushalayim shel Zahab," the freshness of *"the air of the mountains of Yehuda, with the scent of pure wine mixed with the fragrance of the pines, brought by the evening wind"* of this magical city. I arrived at the Kotel and found a Minyan that had just started Mincha. I joined them, and once we finished, I took a white plastic chair and approached the Wall a little closer. There was no space. So I waited a few minutes, and as soon as a small corner became available, I hurried toward the stones. I touched them. I closed my eyes and surrendered to that intense moment of connection with our people, where the long Jewish history passes through the mind, from King David and his son King Solomon, who built the Bet Hamiqdash with these stones, to our heroic soldiers of Israel who recently regained back this Wall. But these stones mainly represent the Shekhina, the Divine Presence, which never left this Wall. And thus, inspired by the conviction of being as literally as possible "in front of God's presence," I began my prayer. Needless to say, prayers are very intimate. But today, I want to share the non-private part of my experience, which may be useful to someone else.

A STORY OF A GLASS

Until a few years ago, when I visited the Kotel, the first

thing I used to do was ask God for my parents, z”l, for my wife, my children, for my grandchildren, my health, etc. Being in front of the Kotel is to encounter the Creator, “firsthand”. And instinctively, the first impulse, which drives the thousands of people who pray here every day, is to ask God for help, after all, He is able “to grant everything you need.” But some years ago –I believe it was after I understood that I survived cancer– I changed my plans. Sometimes, the difficulties we go through help us become more aware of the famous “half glass.” Like most of us, I realized my glass is much more full than empty… I became aware that instead of asking God for a million things I need, I should dedicate this first reunion to thanking Him for everything He has given me and continues to give me. This is also considered “praying.” In fact, and although I suspect that most notes placed in the Western Wall do not contain just the words “Thank You,” praising God and expressing gratitude is the true essence of Jewish prayer. Remember that the word “Jew” in Hebrew is “Yehudi,” derived from “Yehuda,” which comes from the word “todá” = thanks. That is to say, in Hebrew, “Jew” literally means “grateful,” the individual who remembers God primarily to give thanks!

It’s simply realizing “who owes whom.” And that’s when I started thinking about Aladdin’s Lamp Syndrome.

HASHEM AND THE GENIE

The most famous scene in the story of Aladdin is when the thief of Baghdad rubs the mysterious lamp and suddenly finds himself “firsthand” with a genie coming out from inside the lamp. In the beginning, Aladdin is afraid of this supernatural being that seems so powerful. But to his surprise –and fortune– the genie not only has no intention of harming Aladdin, but he offers to fulfill three of his wishes, “and he can grant you anything you want”! Now Aladdin has to decide “what” to ask the genie not to waste any of his wishes. I started thinking about this story, and it seemed to me that

sometimes, without realizing it, we act before God, just as Aladdin acts with the genie. Especially when we come to the Kotel and meet God firsthand in our minds and heart, selfishly, we might focus just on our wishes. I realized that in The One Thousand Nights story, Aladdin rescued the genie from his horrible captivity, where he was trapped for centuries. The genie owes his freedom to Alaaddin. But unlike the genie, HaShem, our Creator, doesn't owe us anything, absolutely nothing (when He listens to our Tefila, He does it out of love or Hesed, not out of duty or obligation). As we say mention in our prayers so many times every day, He liberated us from centuries of living in captivity and fast-forwarding 3500 years of history; it was He who helped us regain our State of Israel in 1948 and who delivered Jerusalem to us in 1967. **It is we who owe Him!**

WHO OWES WHOM?

That's why I decided that when I return to Kotel, at least the first time around, I should forget about my particular needs and concentrate on everything I have that I'm grateful for. I recite then Nishmat Kol Hay. By the way, Jewish prayer fulfills its mission when we allow it to inspire us. And the prayer Nishmat Kol Hay is precisely formulated for this purpose: to open our eyes and help us become aware of everything we constantly receive from the Creator and usually take for granted. This Tefila has no expression of requests or pleas to God. It exclusively focuses on one theme: the infinite gratitude we owe to our Creator and our appreciation for everything He has done and continues to do for us constantly. When I finished Nishmat Kol Hai and while still *possessed* by its poetic influence, I began my prayer. First, I thanked HaShem for being alive and reaching this present "now and here" (Shehecheyanu). Then, I thanked HaShem for my wife and revisited the names of our children, their spouses, and our beloved grandchildren. And as I whispered their names, visualizing their faces, I said, "Thank God," or in the

improved Hebrew version: “BARUKH HASHEM.”

A part of the beautiful Tefila: Nishmat Kol Hay:

“… and even if our mouth were as full as the sea with songs, and our tongue was filled with music like the multitude of its waves, and our lips multiplied in praises like the expanse of the heavens, and our eyes shone with devotion like the sun and the moon, and our hands extended toward You like eagles opening their wings in the sky, and our feet were swift [to move toward You] like the deer, still, we could not thank You enough, HaShem our God and the God of our ancestors, and it would not be sufficient to properly acknowledge You for the thousands upon thousands and tens of thousands of miracles, favors, and wonders that You did for our ancestors and for us… You rescued us from Egypt, HaShem our God, and You liberated us from the house of captivity. In times of hunger, You fed us, and in abundance, You sustained us. You saved us from the sword of our enemies, You protected us from plagues, and You healed us from serious illnesses… Therefore, every organ that You bestowed upon us in our body and the soul that You breathed into us, and the tongue that You placed in our mouth, will thank You, bless You, praise You, glorify You, exalt You, honor You, and proclaim praises to Your Name: our King, our Creator…”

Leiluy Nishmat Ziva Tzvia Bat Evyatar z”l