

## A Community Dedicated to Heaven will Endure Forever

Dear Friends

It is very exciting to discover new treasure. I recently acquired two books which contain the newly published writings of one of the founding fathers of our South African Jewish Community, Rabbi Yitzchak Kossowsky ZTL. He came to South Africa from Lithuania in 1933 to take up the position of the head of the Johannesburg Beth Din, with all its affiliated congregations of the then Transvaal. He also impacted Jewish life in the Cape and the rest of the country through his interaction with the national South African Rabbinate.

He was a towering Rabbinic figure who was famous in Lithuania, a leader who was close to, among others, the Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik and Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky, all of blessed of memory.

Pesach 1938

The two books written in Hebrew were edited and the Yiddish portions translated into Hebrew by his great grandson Rabbi Yaakov Kossowsky Shachar who today lives in Israel. These books are a treasure trove of the vision, thoughts, challenges and ideas of a great Rabbinic leader concerning South African Jewry from 1933 to 1951, and in one I discovered the text of a message Rabbi Kossowsky delivered before Pesach in 1938 in Johannesburg. The dark shadow of the Nazi threat hangs heavily over his words at that time, although no-one could have imagined the impending horror of the Holocaust. Rabbi Kossowsky himself tragically lost his daughter, son-in-law and three grandchildren in the murderous brutality of the times. In his Pesach message in 1938 Rabbi Kossowsky explains what real freedom is about. Pesach is referred to as a time of our freedom. Rabbi Kossowsky notes that the word 'cheirut', which is used in our prayers over Yom Tov, connotes a much more transcendent freedom than the word 'chofesh' which also means freedom. 'Cheirut' refers, he says, to the destiny of the Jewish People rising above all adversity to achieve eternal greatness. It refers, he says, to the eternal nature of the Jewish People. Although individuals may perish, often murdered by enemies, the Jewish People have defied all the laws of history to survive and thrive, whilst no other ancient peoples exist today with the language and values of their ancestors. This divine miracle is what we celebrate on Pesach, the festival of our 'cheirut' - our transcendent eternal freedom, and enduring survival. Rabbi Kossowsky cites the Talmud which links the word 'cheirut', (freedom) to 'charut' (engraved), and this word, in its turn, alludes to the Ten Commandments engraved by G-d on the tablets of stone that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai.

Vertical Community

When we are connected to our Divine mission we rise above the here and now and become linked to the generations that come before us. Exactly 3,319 years ago, which equates to only about 125 generations ago, G-d revealed Himself and His law to the newly liberated twelve tribes of the children of Israel. Approximately 3 million men, women and children witnessed G-d's presence themselves, and with their own ears heard His voice at Mount Sinai. As Chief Rabbi, I have chosen as my guiding principle and motto for our community the following passage from the Talmud, from Ethics of the Fathers (4:14): 'Rabbi Yochanan Hasandlar said: 'Any community dedicated to Heaven will endure forever?'. Avot deRabbi Natan, the classic Talmudic commentary to Ethics of Our Fathers, says that the 'community' referred to in this passage is Knesset Yisrael, the community of Israel since the Sinai experience. Accordingly, the community dedicated to Heaven, that will endure forever, is one which spans more than 3,300 years, from Mount Sinai to the present. The Talmudic Sages are teaching us that we, the Jewish people, can only survive and indeed thrive, when we are in alignment with, in sync with, and committed to the values of the successive generations of Jews who themselves received and passed on the tradition from Sinai. Knesset Yisrael, the community of the children of Israel, is what we can term a vertical community, rooted in Sinai. All the generations from Sinai until now in fact form part of one community. Anyone who studies Torah is in constant dialogue with voices coming from that community voices that span thousands of years of our history.

The Rambam traces 40 generations of scholars from Moses, our teacher, to Rav Ashi, the editor of the Talmud. They include Joshua, the Prophets, the Men of the Great Assembly, the Rabbis of the Mishnah and the Rabbis of the Gemora. Through all of them the

great truths of the vision of Sinai were transmitted to the post-Talmud scholars, and then on to the Rabbis of the Middle Ages the Rambam, Rashi, and many others.

#### Proud Chapter

Our mission as the South African Jewish community is to be "a community dedicated to Heaven", which is: always to remain part of Knesset Yisrael, the multigenerational community of Sinai. Our moral vision starts with Mount Sinai and ends with the vision of the Prophets for the Final Redemption and a better world, for a time which the prophet Isaiah described in these memorable words: "for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the L-rd as the waters cover the sea ? Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.?" It is our task to build our community in South Africa with loyalty and dedication, and in so doing, to write a proud chapter in the history of the Jewish people, and of humankind ? a history with spiritual roots at Mount Sinai, culminating in the Final Redemption.

I speak of writing a chapter because, according to the Talmud, even today, the unfolding story of humankind continues to be written in Heaven in a Book, as we continue to journey from Mount Sinai to the Final Redemption. We have the opportunity and the calling to be part of that Book, which provides the link between Mount Sinai and the Final Redemption. If we remain loyal to the teachings of Sinai, we shall help to write an illustrious chapter in that Book, and if we do not, G-d forbid, we will be relegated to a footnote. We must write a chapter that would be a source of pride to our fathers and mothers who came before us. They fled from Eastern Europe where they had experienced hundreds of years of grinding poverty and worst of all, persecution and murder, culminating in the annihilation of six million Jews in the Holocaust of World War II. And no doubt with prayerful optimism, they made their homes here in Africa. Let one of us disappoint them by breaking the glorious chain that chain stretching over the centuries and millennia from here in South Africa all the way back to Sinai. Night of Truth and Destiny On the Seder Night and throughout Pesach we feel an even stronger connection to Knesset Yisrael. The Hagada says that every single Jew should feel as if he or she personally went out of Egypt. We are part of the very same community as our ancestors, who saw with their own eyes the ten plagues, the splitting of the Red Sea, and the greatest liberation of all times. It is not a night of fables, but of truth. As Jews we are only interested in the truth, and not in a vague and fuzzy cultural experience. For about 125 generations Jews have been remembering the Exodus from Egypt, and in fact have been making mention of it every day in our prayers, as the Torah instructs. But on the Seder night we are enjoined not only to remember but also to feel as if we ourselves were there, because that unique experience, which the Jewish people were privileged to witness, made us all part of the one great Jewish Community which goes back almost 4000 years to Abraham our father. The Seder concludes with the magnificent and inspiring prayer of "Nishmat Kol Chai" ("May the breath of every living thing bless Your name?") referring to the glorious future of the redemption of all humankind. On this Pesach let us sit with family and friends and think of the great Jews who came before us. Let us remember Rabbi Kossowsky and his Pesach message of 1938 which reminds of our destiny of true "cheirut"- transcendent freedom. Let us think about all the generations of Jews who have sat together on the Seder Night speaking about and giving thanks for G-d's wondrous miracles in Egypt, and for the most wondrous miracle of all: after thousands of years the Jewish People and its Divine Mission continue and survive and thrive.

My wife, Gina and I wish you a wonderful and inspiring Yom Tov filled with all of G-d's abundant blessings.

**Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein**