

## Pillars of Strength

Dear Friends

I would like to share with you a personal story. Although it's personal, it's one that many of you could also tell in one form or another. All my greatgrandparents came to South Africa from Lithuania more than a hundred years ago. Let me tell you the story of one of them. My greatgrandfather Kalman Meyer Goldstein escaped the persecution and hardship of Eastern Europe when he left his home shtetl Vorne. After a long journey, which took him through England, he arrived here in South Africa in June 1899 at the tender age of 17. He left behind his mother, father, six siblings, uncles and aunts, cousins and friends. Except for two siblings, who eventually followed him here, he never saw any of them again.

What was it like then?

At this time of year I can't help but wonder what it was like for him on Pesach all those years ago. He was away from his family with no means of easy communication: no phone calls, no emails, no sms's. After arriving in Cape Town he went on to Oudtshoorn. He got caught up in the Anglo-Boer War, after which he operated a horse-drawn cab business in East London, before coming to Johannesburg, where he got married and then went to farm in Bethal. What was Pesach like during the Anglo-Boer War? What was it like in Johannesburg in those years? And then on a farm in Bethal?

You can be sure that there were no prominent displays of 'Kosher for Pesach' food products of local and international origin. There was no Beth Din Guide with full details of every product that one can imagine, with its stamp of certification recognised across the length and breadth of this country, and indeed internationally. In my mind's eye I can imagine taking my greatgrandfather to show him our community. He would be amazed to see everything we have built over the century and more: shuls, schools and welfare organisations. He would be so moved to see the continuity of Jewish life with our strong Ba'al Teshuva 'Return to Judaism' movement. I would love to show him our children learning humash at school, where he would hear the same words in the same language with the same values he had learnt as a child growing up in Lithuania, being studied by 21st century children growing up in South Africa. I think that he would be so emotional to see them read our ancient texts with such proficiency.

He would see the fulfilment of his dreams as expressed by what he inscribed in 1956 in his grandson's, my father's, Chumash. Translated from the Yiddish, he wrote: 'Mein kind (my child) I hope you will read the sedra every Shabbos and I wish that G-d may help you in learning and to be a good Jew.' After showing him everything, I would really want to ask my great-grandfather Kalman Meyer: 'How did you do it? You left home so young. You couldn't travel home. You never spoke to your parents again. How did you cope? What gave you the ability to build a life for yourself in a foreign country, with a foreign culture and language? How did you daven three times a day on a farm in Bethal? How did you keep kosher and walk long distances into town for shul? And then after World War Two you received news of the awful Holocaust that consumed your brothers, sisters, cousins and their entire world. How could you face the future after that?'

A Mighty Hand

These are Pesach reflections. As we sit around the Seder table we think about the heroic generations of Jews who lived with awe-inspiring strength. Pesach is a time when we remember and feel the might of G-d, as it says in the Hagadah from a verse in the Five Books, 'And G-d took us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great awe and with signs and wonders.' (Deuteronomy 26:8). We are called upon to live with strength and courage in our lives. To live with Torah values, doing mitzvot as good Jews, who build strong families and communities whilst positively contributing to the society around us, requires great resolve and determination. Life is full of challenges, whether it's in areas of health, financial stability or relationships. Just to do the right thing - such as to give at least 10% of post-tax income as tzedaka, not to speak lashon hara and to keep kosher - often requires steely resolve. As a community in South Africa we are experiencing our own unique challenges as a result of the current situation. During times like this I often think about my great-grandfather and what he coped with, and how he lived with such tenacity and strength. Where does our strength come from? When the Jewish People had left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea after it

miraculously split, they called out in a song of praise and said, 'G-d is my strength' (Exodus 15:2). The human spirit has the capacity to overcome the most daunting adversity because we are created in G-d's image. Each one of us has a neshoma - a soul - from G-d that reflects His power and greatness. We have a deep resilience that we often underestimate. We are much stronger than we know. We can do more mitzvot and make a difference in the world for the good to a greater extent than we realise. In addition we have been given a special gift: 'G-d gives strength to His People' (Psalms 29:11). And the Talmud says that when the verse speaks of the gift of strength it means the gift of Torah. Torah gives us the inner resolve to be able to do what we need to do in this world. It gives us a mission and our sense of meaning and purpose that is necessary to overcome all challenges. It guides us in our faith that everything that happens is ultimately for the good even when we cannot see why. It makes us realise that the Jewish People is eternal and that no matter what happens, with G-d's help, we rise above our circumstances.

#### The Wings of Eagles

'You saw with your own eyes what I did to Egypt; I carried you on the wings of eagles, and brought you to Me.' Exodus 19:4. Rashi explains, based on the Midrash, that the image 'wings of eagles' means that G-d lifted us and protected us from the onslaught of our attackers. The eagle is unique, because other birds hold their young in their feet to protect them from flying predators. But no bird can fly as high as the eagle, which places its young on its back where they are not vulnerable to any predators from above. Only predators from below - human beings who may fire arrows - can threaten the eagle, which shields her young from attack by putting them on her back. So too when Pharaoh and the Egyptian army pursued the Jewish People, G-d positioned His clouds of glory as a shield to protect His children from the arrows of the attacking Egyptian soldiers. 'The wings of eagles' as a symbol conveys G-d's love and blessings, which give us the power to rise above our circumstances. My great-grandfather could face all of his challenges firm in the knowledge that he was part of an eternal people that will always ride on the wings of eagles as they rise above all the ferocious adversity that confronts them to survive, albeit bloodied and wounded, and eventually to thrive. Elsewhere in the Torah, G-d's care and love for us is said to be 'like an eagle arousing its young, hovering over its young, spreading its wings and taking them, carrying them on its pinions' (Deuteronomy 32:11). We say on Seder night as we read the Hagadah: 'In every generation they rise up against us to destroy us and the Holy One Blessed is He saves us from their hands.' We defy the normal laws of history, in terms of which the Jewish People should not exist. And so too today, as our beloved State of Israel celebrates 60 years of G-d's miracles, it is under attack from all sides by implacable enemies, but despite of all this we face the future with strength and fortitude.

#### The Day is Short

'The wings of eagles' also conveys that the exodus from Egypt happened quickly. Matza is the bread of liberation because it reminds us that things happened with such speed that our ancestors' bread didn't even have the time to rise. Why did G-d engineer their leaving Egypt in such a way that it was a rush? He was in control of events. He could have given them ample opportunity to prepare their bread properly. It hardly seems like a good Jewish event with the catering poorly organized. Clearly, G-d wanted matza to be the symbol of our freedom from Egypt, and so, He orchestrated the rushed departure, which itself has become emblematic of the exodus. The Maharal of Prague, one of our great Rabbinic thinkers from the 16th century, says that matza represents the spiritual world because it is made in exactly the same way as bread - both as to process and ingredients - except for one very important thing: time. Matza is baked within 18 minutes of water coming in contact with flour so that it does not ferment and rise to become chometz. It follows that matza equals chometz minus time. Time, says the Maharal, is a symbol of the physical world and matza, which is bread without time, is therefore spiritual bread. That is why it is associated with speed. The capacity to do things quickly results from a person's energy, which comes from the soul. The human body without a soul cannot move and is lifeless and heavy. It is the Divine soul within us that is the source of energy, movement and life itself. The Maharal says that matza represents the Torah value of what is called zerizut - energetic action. When it comes to doing good in the world Judaism teaches us to be action-orientated. The speed of an eagle is an important symbol of Pesach and indeed in our day to day living. The Mishna in Pirkei Avot (5:23) teaches: 'Be light as an eagle'. We must be action-driven in our lives. We must live with energy and enthusiasm for doing good because time is limited. As another Mishna (3:20) says: 'The day is short, the work is great, the workers are lazy, the reward is much, and the Master insistent'. My great-grandfather Kalman Meyer, got on with what he had to do in life. With G-d's help, he found work, got married, raised a family, kept Shabbos, was a loyal contributing member of his shul in Bethal where he was chairman from 1925 to 1939, years which have been described as 'a very trying period'. He got up before dawn for the work on his farm, he davened 3 times a day, and recited Tehilim in his spare time. Energy in life is everything. Doing mitzvot, living positively, is what life is about. Modern people often think too much and do too little. The Jews of yesterday did not, it seems spend too much time and mental energy analysing their situation. They got on with their lives and did good things and built strong families and communities, without getting consumed with the kind of angst that so plagues our overly introspective society.

## A Holy Nation

‘I carried you on the wings of eagles’. The ultimate gift of the strength of Torah is the power of transcendence, the opportunity for elevated living. We weren’t just extracted from Egypt and given political freedom. We were uplifted and carried out to receive our Divine mission at Sinai. In the same message given to the people shortly before they received the Torah 3320 years ago, G-d said, ‘And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ (Exodus 19:6). What is holiness? We hear the word bandied about so often, but what does it really mean? It is about seeing human life as special and sacred, and that we aren’t merely an accumulation of molecules, but rather that we have a soul from G-d and that how we live is important and significant. Everything in this world can be elevated and invested with meaning and significance. Holiness is about living in this world in a transcendent and elevated way so that everything that we do becomes so very important – not only for us in our lives but in the heavens and indeed for all time. Matza as the spiritual bread that transcends time is an important symbol of these ideas. Judaism teaches that time is holy. Physically the time of Shabbos and Yom Tov appears the same as that of any day of the week. But for us Friday night isn’t just another night of the week, and Saturday isn’t just another day – it is Shabbos. That is holiness. A piece of meat may look like an ordinary piece of meat, but for us it is either kosher or unkosher – a reality of great significance. That is holiness. An act of kindness may just look like a simple social nicety but for us chesed is one of the most important mitzvot we have. In fact, every moment of our lives has the potential for holiness. If we merely look at the world as a physical reality, then human existence is indeed pathetic; as human beings we are then only a random accumulation of molecules fighting for survival as we scrounge around amongst other molecules – and in the end face oblivion through death, the complete end to life. We, however, live on ‘the wings of eagles’: we can fly and we can soar above this lowly view of our existence and our world. As Jews we have always been taught by G-d that the essence of human life is the immortal soul and that everything we do – whether good or bad – has eternal significance.

## Lift Up Your Hands

On Seder night we twice wash our hands with a cup, once at the beginning before eating the vegetables dipped in salt water (without a blessing and some have the custom that only the leader of the Seder does so for this occasion) and a second time (with a blessing and everyone participates) before eating the matza. The mitzvah to wash hands with a cup isn’t limited to Seder night. According to the Halachah, we wash our hands when we wake up in the morning, and also before we eat bread. We say the blessing of ‘al netilat yadayim’. What do the words netilat yadayim mean? According to one of our commentators they mean to lift up our hands – because when we wash our hands before we eat bread we elevate our hands. We raise our whole engagement with food to a higher level, saying that it’s not merely a physical act but is something that has the potential of holiness. We become elevated and special which is what the concept of holiness is all about. And in the morning when we wake up we also elevate our hands through the mitzva of washing them. Our hands are the means by which we perform the deeds and actions of this world. And when we wash them we are saying that we are dedicating ourselves to elevated living since our commentators explain that when we awake in the morning we are like new creatures, who are given life again. Every morning the very fact that we wake up is a separate gift of life from G-d himself. And we acknowledge that gift by saying ‘Mode Ani?’: ‘I Thank you G-d, living and eternal King, for having given me back my soul with compassion; your faithfulness is great.’ Every single morning this is the first thing we say when we open our eyes. And when we are washing our hands we are saying that we are hereby dedicating our lives to elevated living – to living on a special plane of significance and meaning and importance. This washing of our hands is compared to the washing of the hands of the Kohanim, the priests, as they entered the sanctuary to serve G-d. And so, too, are we commanded to look at the whole world as one giant sanctuary, a Beit Hamikdash, a Holy Temple for the service of G-d. The service of G-d is not only for the shul. The shul is a place of inspiration – encouraging us to be good Jews in all aspects of our lives. As we wash our hands on the Seder night we feel our calling to elevated living ‘on the wings of eagles’. That is why it also a night of freedom. Freedom is about transcendence, and the potential and capacity we have to reach for greatness and eternal significance. Freedom gives us the strength and ability to look at what is going on around us and to look down on the world from the heights of soaring with G-d and connecting to the generations of Jews who came before us. As we sit around our Seder tables this year let us feel the inspiration of being carried by G-d ‘on the wings of eagles’. Let us all think of our illustrious forebears and dedicate our lives to being a tribute to them, to Jewish Destiny and most importantly to our loving Father in Heaven.

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

**Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein**