

The Best Gift

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

I don't live a cloistered life, but last week I saw something that really bothered me.

For the first time that I can remember, I saw an Israeli couple in an airport eating *treif*. It wasn't plain *treif*. It was a burger with fries. And as they were eating their burgers, which did not look tempting in the least, they were speaking Hebrew. Words of the holy eternal language were dripping off their lips and they chewed *treife* meat. I was revolted.

I would have gone over to them with a little smile and said something nice. A little joke about traveling or something else banal to break the ice. And you never know? Maybe they'd end up at my *Shabbos* table down the line. But I was so disgusted that I couldn't look at them.

They were smug in their brazenness. They were speaking loudly, as if to rub it in my pained heart. I felt like asking them to at least speak Spanish, or English, to lessen the *chillul Hashem*.

There is so much darkness in the world, *our* world, but there is also so much light battling the darkness and, in many places, and cases, dispelling it.

Last week, I joined the Shuvu Mission in Eretz Yisroel for one day. It was an exhilarating experience. Besides meeting good people supporting Shuvu to help return a lost *shevet*, I got to meet the children who have been brought back and the staff who dedicate their days and hearts to returning them to where

they belong. Last Thursday, I went to the city of Petach Tikvah for the second time in my life to visit the Shuvu school there.

At a time when a million children in the school system of the Jewish state don't know what *Shema Yisroel* is, I saw children – young boys and girls from secular backgrounds – reciting *Shema* with great emotion.

When so many Jews have lost their way and treat *Shabbos* as just another day, we saw and heard young girls talk about how much *Shabbos* means to them. They spoke of what they gave up to observe *Shabbos* and how they look forward to it the entire week.

Before they came to Shuvu, they had no idea what *Shabbos* is. In some homes, candles were lit, and in others, there was some type of *Kiddush*, but it didn't go beyond that.

Hailing from the Soviet Union, their parents and grandparents were robbed of their heritage. They knew little more than the fact that they were Jewish. They had little idea what that meant.

Today, their children and grandchildren are studying Torah and learning about *mitzvos* and the beauty of observing them. They are returning to what the communists thought they had destroyed.

We observed as young boys in the sixth grade were tested on the principles of *yi'ush*. One was more enthusiastic than the other in explaining the *Gemara* they had learned.

Nobody in their family has opened a *Gemara* in a hundred years. These children we were visiting were deep into it.

I went to commemorate the founding and naming of a *bais medrash* in the Shuvu Petach Tikvah school in memory of my father. The whole thing was very touching. We were especially honored that Rav Meir Tzvi Bergman expended much effort to attend. His presence added so much to the occasion. In his brief remarks, he spoke of the importance of Torah and imparting it to the next generation, especially to children who would not be blessed with a Torah education if not for the people of Shuvu.

It was especially meaningful when he turned to me and said, "You could not have given your father a better present."

I gave a little speech to the children in Hebrew and told them how meaningful the dedication would be to my father, who grew up in a city without a Jewish day school. Fall River, Massachusetts was home to hundreds of *frum* families who had immigrated to America to escape the ravages of poverty, hunger and rabid anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. Yet, not more than a *minyan* of their children remained religious. Those people are forgotten. Their offspring are totally assimilated, their grandchildren lost to our people. My father survived because his parents sent him to Torah Vodaas upon his *bar mitzvah*.

My father would have been moved to see that cycle working in the reverse, where eight hundred children of irreligious parents are learning Torah and becoming *frum*. They will have the *zechus* of being proud members of *Klal Yisroel*, bringing along their parents and family members, and one day giving birth to fine, productive Torah families of their own.

I told the children how blessed they are to be in a Torah school. *Ashreichem*. And although it is something that we all take for granted, we should pause sometimes and thank Hashem that we were born in an era when Torah education is taken for granted, when we ourselves were able – and our children are able – to be in *frum* schools, with *frum* surroundings, with dedicated *rabbeim* and *moros* who teach, nurture, and guide multitudes of *ehrliche Yidden*.

There is darkness, but there is light. We should appreciate the light and the gifts we are blessed with, instead of bemoaning the darkness.

We are accustomed to voices of despair, anger and division. We should instead applaud the unity of purpose, growth and dedication of our people to bring more Torah, *kedusha* and *taharah* to the world.

In a world where not everything is always going right, where there are *tzaros* and tensions and problems, it was so heartwarming to see a little girl in the seventh grade stand up and describe how meaningful *Shabbos* has become to her. Her face was cherubic and her eyes were glistening as she spoke of how *Shabbos* lights up her life and gives her heart powerful beats that keep her going throughout the week.

She described how she is bringing along her Ima, but she's not there yet. "But don't worry," she assured us. "At Shuvu I feel like I have one hundred mothers, guiding and helping me along, and one day my mother will be there as well."

I closed my eyes and remembered the powerfully moving *drashos* that Rav Avrohom Pam would deliver about Shuvu, speaking of the future like a *novi* of

old, prophesying about a movement of schools and about such children at a time when others thought it was but a dream. His dreams have come true, and how moving it was to see them in real life years later. He would speak so softly, with the gentleness of a person purified by Torah and with the concern of a loving grandfather, about just such a day. *Ashreinu* that we are able to see his vision in living color.

Witnessing Lev L'Achim *botei medrash* packed with returnees, one takes note that there is something going on in the Holy Land. Under the radar, a revolution is taking place and the face of the country is quietly changing. The Holy Land is getting holier.

The Left feels the ground slipping from under them and is holding weekly demonstrations against the new government. They march in the streets, proclaiming that they are fighting for the democratic future of the country, without realizing the hypocrisy of their efforts to overturn the results of an election.

The majority of Knesset members of the ruling coalition are religious, and religious ministers run much of the country.

The Sefardim in whom the elitist ruling class invested much effort to turn them into anti-religious secularists are being brought back to Torah in numbers large enough to be noticeable. Their party is the second largest in the government, and its leader is respected by his colleagues as an accomplished, brilliant leader and politician. His success and that of his party is a source of pain to the Leftists, who have tried time and again to destroy him.

I went to visit my dear uncle, Rabbi Berel Wein, in his Rechavia home on *Motzoei Shabbos*. Upon returning, I witnessed the weekly leftist march on Rechov Azza, at the home of their nemesis, Binyomin Netanyahu.

As they marched, chanting about democracy and singing "*Mi ho'ish hechofetz chaim,*" of all things, a policeman warned me to maintain a distance from them. "It's dangerous for someone who looks like you to get too close to them," he warned repeatedly.

At first, I wondered what a group calling for peace and democracy could want from me, but of course it's not peace and democracy that they seek, but control, and my kind stands in their way.

At the time of the country's founding, they said that we were vestiges of the past who would quickly fade and disappear in their new utopia.

Instead, they see that they were mistaken and are rapidly losing their grip. They are on the way to fading out and becoming a minority once again in the country they had total control over for several decades.

On Friday, I took the traditional *Erev Shabbos* walk down Rechov Malchei Yisroel into Meah Shearim, watching streams of people making their *Shabbos* preparations, darting from store to store, weighed down with multiple bags of every color. It seemed that the more bags they were holding, the lighter they were. *Challahs* for *Shabbos*, pickles, olives, dips, soda, fruits, and vegetables. The more, the merrier. The more they had accumulated with which to be *mechabeid Shabbos*, the quicker the gait, the more purposeful the walk, and the wider the smile and glow on their faces.

For Yerushalayimer Jews of all ages, it's all about *Shabbos*, the highlight of the week, every week. Young and old, men and women, boys and girls, each going their own way, passing each other with barely a glance, each going about their own chores, but all unified by the same purpose, heading in the same direction: *Shabbos*.

I walked slowly, sometimes stopping and just standing there to watch them, soaking it in, snapping a picture or two, while wondering what the people of Fall River, Massachusetts and all the other *golus* stops would have given to have *ainiklach* like those people I was observing.

Ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu. How blessed we are. *Hodu laHashem ki tov*. May we always earn His blessings and merit helping others walk along the streets that sing the song of *Shabbos*.