

A Wordless Prayer at The Kotel

Contributed by Moshe Kempinski

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The Saturday night before Yom Kippur was also the last night of Selichot (penitential prayers) before the start of "the Awesome Day". As I drove to the Kotel(the Western Wall) in my car I found that all the roads in Jerusalem heading towards the Old City were unusually clogged. I later found out that highway number one, the main artery from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was also backed up heavily. As I approached the old city close to midnight, I found my way blocked by police roadblocks, until I was finally allowed through due to the Old City sticker on my car windshield . As I finally drove through the Jaffa Gate I was engulfed by a river of people rushing towards the Western wall. The striking difference from other such experiences was that almost all the people around me scurrying on the road looked as if they were so called "secular Israelis". Yet it became clear that they seemed to be driven towards the Western Wall adjacent to the "heart of the world" by some inner passion. The so called secular majority of this country had recaptured the Kotel on this night. As I finally made it down the steps the sight took my breath away, as I watched the multitudes fill the Western Wall Plaza. It is true that I have seen this plaza filled many times before but there was something very different about this night. The sight seemed so incongruent and yet so natural at the same time.

On the Shabbat prior to this evening, I had been reading of the great rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev(1740-1810).The "Berdivetcher" as he was known was one of the main disciples of the Maggid of Mezeritch and he passed away almost exactly 200 years ago. He was known as the "defense attorney" for the Jewish people, because he would consistently intercede on their behalf before G-d .With his intense and passionate love for every one of his people , he would always search for the positive essence in each of his brothers and sisters as he stood in prayer before his Creator..

I thought about Reb Levi Yitzchak again as I saw the crowds gathering at the Kotel. What would he have said? I also contemplated how such a sight would have empowered him to shake the very heavens and demand redemption.

As I got closer to the wall, I watched as these Israelis, who were not so familiar with the decorum and customs of the Western Wall, gathering chairs. Some sat waiting and talking while some even lit up a cigarette. They were waiting for the start of the selichot prayers at 12:30.My initial frustration with what on the surface seemed a brazen irreverence, melted away as I saw individual after individual reading psalms or prayer books .Others were furiously writing notes to put in the wall and others just sat with their eyes closed.

I again thought of the Berditchever and thought how he would turn to G-d and say something like,

" Hashem you know that your children have wandered in the wrong pastures. You know that they have felt unworthy to come before You. You know that they have perhaps even forgotten the words, the passion and the reverence. But look ,Sweet Father ,how your children are yearning to be in your presence. Let their presence here before you be like a mighty prayer"

I was wrong. That is not what he would have said.

At half past midnight the selichot prayer began and continued for an hour and a half. I stood back in awe and wonderment. These so called lost children roared their prayers like true lions of Judah. As they held on to their makeshift or well folded Kippot they sang and prayed with a passion that came from some inner secret space They prayed with a smoldering intensity I had not expected because of my arrogance .They cried out "Amen , May your name be magnified for ever and ever "with a bellow that seemed to shake the Western wall. A people that had been touched by G-d can never truly lose that inner spark and dim their burning heart.

Reb Levy Yitzchak would not have said anything on this night . He would probably have looked at his brothers and sisters with tear filled eyes and then raise his face to the heavens with outstretched arms.

His eyes beseeching the heavens would have said it all " At Matai HaShem ,At Matai..until When, Hashem , until when? .