

THE WILLOW PEOPLE

Contributed by Moshe Kempinski

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Nothing makes sense in a world that has become such a sticky mixture of truth and falsehood, darkness and light. This is a world where murder and mayhem continue all across the globe and yet two or three young boys setting up a makeshift shack on an empty hillside 100 meters from their home in Judea and Samaria becomes headline news instantly. Somehow in these days proportionality and context has disappeared.

Europe is slowly sinking under the wave of Islamic emigration washing over its shores. Islamic Jihadist networks span Europe from Poland to Portugal. This was mainly due to the spread of radical Islam among the descendants of guest workers who were invited into these countries to fuel Europe's postwar economic miracle. As a result throughout Europe, immigrants or their descendants are volunteering for jihad against the West.

It is that same Europe that just provided the relatively new President of the United States the Nobel Prize for his efforts for Peace. What exactly has this president done for Peace? Well,..actually nothing. Yet he has done something that has enamored him to the Europeans. In his attempt to become loved by all the nations of the earth he has decided to castigate, abandon and ridicule one small country, Israel. That is all that would be necessary to grant him the coveted prize.

A world that has lost much of its spiritual moorings continues to drift aimlessly and can only come together on one thing, its condemnation of Israel. As a result the new Haman of Persia speaks of the extinction of Israel and the world may shake its head and may even take "drastic action" like walking out on his speech... but not much more than that . Missiles are being aimed at the heart of this country and the world is still energetically divesting itself of Israeli academic and economic connections. This world is becoming a rough and dangerous neighborhood again.

As I sit here on the cobblestone pathways of the old city of Jerusalem I look at the people surrounding me. I would have thought that one would sense tension and concern. One could have imagined that the fear of confronting such a hostile world would be etched on the faces of all those around us.

Instead all around me I saw "old men and old women sit in the squares of Jerusalem….and the streets are full of boys and girls playing"(Zachariah 8:4). . In the air , sounds are heard that are the sounds " heard in the hills of Judah and in the courtyards of Jerusalem the sound of gladness and the sound of joy, the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride.(Jeremiah 33:11).

I believe that this secret of the unusual strength of this people could best be understood from a torah insight offered during Sukkoth by Rabbi Hanan Porat. He returned to the Talmudic explanation of why we bring together four specific species on this holiday. We read that "...ye shall take you on the first day the fruit of goodly trees(the etrog) , branches of palm-trees(the lulav branch of the palm tree) , and boughs of thick trees(the Hadas -Myrtle branch), and willows of the brook, and ye shall rejoice before HaShem your G-d seven days.

The Talmud describes the classic understanding that the etrog represents a species that has taste and smell, Spiritual knowledge and Divine deeds. The palm branch has taste but no smell, the myrtle branch has smell and no fruit and therefore no taste. The willow branches have neither. The Talmud describes how each gives to the other what the other is lacking.

Rabbi Porat then asks " what then does the willow branch give...it has nothing". Furthermore the willow branch is not insignificant as it is a critical member of the four species. During the days of the temple, willow branches were brought from the village of Motza and were placed around the altar throughout the feast . On the last day after putting away the lulav and etrog we remain holding five branches of the willow branches in our hands.Finally at the end of the service they are flung on top of the Ark of the Scrolls, a place of honor. Not a minor role at all.

Rabbi Porat suggests that throughout the bible we find the willows connected to water , rivers and brooks. The willow branch cannot live long separated from water. It needs water and is clearly aware of its need and yearning for water.

It is that yearning that the willow branch gifts to the other of the four species.

One can become so enamored with the fact that one is filled with taste and resplendent with fragrance and forget that he must be filled with constant yearning. Yearning is the most powerful force in our spiritual growth. Without that yearning even those that seem to be filled with Torah knowledge and Spiritual activities can wither unless they constantly retain that yearning for soothing and quenching living waters.

That is the secret of these people. They continue to hope because they continue to yearn.

" By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. Upon the willows in the midst thereof we hanged up our harps.(psalm 137:1-2)

They continue to be strengthened because they continue to yearn. As a result, despite the dry parched wilderness that has engulfed the world, they and all those who continue to yearn for those healing waters will be redeemed.

"For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring: And they shall spring up as among the grass, as willows by the water courses." (Isaiah 44:1-4)