

Good Shabbos Everyone. Why did the Sages choose to call our celebration of the miracle of Mordecai and Esther - "Purim?" The Sages wanted to emphasize the nature of evil. The evil Persian King Ahasuerus used Purim - lots to randomly choose a date to kill the Jews. This act symbolized the attitude of Ahasuerus, namely, everything in life is chance. The idea that everything in life is chance, is the ultimate evil because such an attitude goes against the very foundation of our faith. We Jews believe that Hashem is the Master of the Universe who involves himself in even the pettiest details in the life of a Jew.

One of the 13 principles of the Jewish faith is "I believe in perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed is His Name, creates and guides all creatures." One who believes that everything in life is chance, is effectively denying Hashem. Thus the name Purim celebrates the victory over those who deny Hashem. We are a nation which is guided by the Hand of Hashem. As Dovid Hamelech tells us "Hashem is my Shepherd, I shall not lack... Even when I walk in the valley overshadowed by death, I will fear no evil, for You [Hashem] are with me." (Tehillim 23:1,4) Among the prisoners at the Auschwitz concentration camp was the Veitzener Rav, Rabbi Zvi Hirsh Meisels, who had served his community with distinction until the German invasion. When the Nazis forced Rabbi Meisels and his family from their home, there was little time or opportunity to take anything along. One item that the Rav made sure to take with him was a precious tallis which had been presented to him as a gift by his father-in-law. The tallis had belonged to the renowned gaon and tzaddik Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum, author of Yeytev Lev. Our Sages teach that tzitzis protect a person from evil, and Rabbi Meisels was convinced that a tallis which had been worn by a tzaddik would provide additional protection in the dangerous times ahead.

Upon arriving at Auschwitz, the Jews were forced to surrender all their possessions. Thus, Rabbi Meisels had no choice but to hand over his precious tallis. He was determined, however, to do everything in his power to get it back. Through careful inquiries, he learned that all confiscated possessions had been brought to one central location in the camp. There they would be sorted; all items of substantial value would be sent to Germany for the government and army personnel to enjoy.

Somehow, Rabbi Meisels managed to join the group of prisoners that was assigned to sort these possessions. In the course of his work, he found his tallis. Joyously, he stuffed it inside his clothes and brought it back to his barracks. He knew that in doing so he had taken his life in his hands; if the guards found the tallis and realized that he taken it back without permission, he would probably be killed on the spot. To minimize the risks, Rabbi Meisels was forced to cut the tallis and turn it into a tallis katan (small tallis) which he was able to wear underneath his inmates' garb. This, too, was fraught with danger; the gray inmates' clothing was very thin and upon careful inspection, anyone might notice that Rabbi Meisels's clothing looked somewhat bulkier than everyone else's.

This, however, was a risk that he was willing to take. Incredibly, he wore the tallis katan until the final days of the war, when he was working in a labor camp near the city of Branzweig. It was at that time that the Germans decided to empty the labor camp of its prisoners. The sound of American gunfire could be heard in the distance, and in attempting to flee, the ruthless Nazis took with them those Jews who still remained alive.

Before boarding the cattle cars for yet another time, the inmates were searched in case they had anything of value on their person. It was then that the tallis katan was discovered. A German guard named Willy ripped the garment off Rabbi Meisels' body and threw it into a fire as the Rav watched in horror. Rabbi Meisels was devastated. He firmly believed that the tallis katan had been a source of merit for him. Now, with the Germans in a panic as the Americans bore down on them, the danger was perhaps greater than ever. And his tallis katan was gone. Still, Rabbi Meisels knew that the other Jews who had survived to that point had done so without the benefit of a tzaddik's tallis katan. Just as Hashem had watched over them, He would continue to watch over him.

The Nazis herded their prisoners onto the cattle cars in their typically brutal way. The cars had little ventilation, and no food or water for the Jews, who were packed tightly next to one another with no room to move. Willy, the wicked guard who had destroyed the tallis katan, was one of those placed in charge of the car carrying Rabbi Meisels and his son, Zalman Leib.

The guards made sure that conditions for themselves in the car were better than for their prisoners. They placed benches down in the center of the car and sprawled themselves out. They also made sure to have an ample supply of food and drink. Darkness fell as the train wound its way along the countryside.

Rabbi Meisels was overcome by exhaustion and attempted to sleep in the only way possible: as he stood, he turned his head to the left and rested it upon the shoulder of his son. Later, Zalman Leib would rest his head upon his father's shoulder. This was how they had slept on all their cattle car journeys since the war had begun.

Rabbi Meisels had been asleep only a few minutes when he was awakened by his son's anguished voice. "Tatte (Father), my shoulder hurts so much! I'm sorry, but I can't take the pain any longer." Rabbi Meisels had no choice but to raise his head, though he found his son's complaint strange, since they had slept this way many times before. Rabbi Meisels' neighbor to his right then told the Rav to rest his head upon his shoulder, while Zalman Leib, now also overcome by exhaustion, placed his own head upon his neighbor to his left.

Moments later, the sound of American warplanes was heard. The drone of the engines soon mixed with the sound of gunfire as the Air Force crews, mistakenly assuming that the train was carrying German soldiers, strafed the train.

Suddenly, the gunfire ripped a hole in the roof of the car in which Rabbi Meisels stood, and shot directly between the tilted heads of the Rav and his son — hitting Willy and tearing off both his hands. Soon after, the sounds of the planes grew fainter as they headed off. The Jews in the car were all unharmed. Willy screamed in agony and pleaded for the others to do something for him. One of the other guards called out sarcastically, "Well, Willy, I guess you won't be able to throw the Jew's prayer shawl into the fire any more."

Upon hearing these words, Willy turned to Rabbi Meisels and begged forgiveness. Rabbi Meisels still had with him a small Book of Tehillim, from which he had never stopped praying since the German invasion had begun.

Now, he and his son sang a chapter in unison, "Behold! The Guardian of Israel does not sleep, nor does He slumber One of the Jews in the car, who was not religious, said to Rabbi Meisels, "Please continue to pray for us. It is obvious that G-d is watching over you. And just as He made that gunfire miss your heads and punish your persecutor, so may He soon rescue us all from these evil tyrants" (from Sefer Mekadshei Hashem). (Shabbos Stories, p.175 R. Shimon Finkelman)

Just as Hashem rescued the Jewish Nation from the evil tyrants on Purim, so too should we all merit soon the ultimate rescue, the redemption speedily in our days, Amen. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**