

Where are you? And what are you going to do about it?

There is a famous story told of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the Founder of the Chabad Movement of Chassidim, who was imprisoned in Tsarist Russia for the “crime” of disseminating Judaism amongst the Jewish population. Whilst he was awaiting trial he entered into a discussion with the Chief Warden of the Prison who questioned him on portions of the scripture which he had difficulty comprehending. One of the questions he asked was:

“We read in the Book of Genesis that when Adam & Eve sinned, they hid themselves amongst the trees of the Garden of Eden, and G-d called out to them “Where are you?” What I want to know is, if G-d knows and sees everything, surely He knew where they were, so why did G-d need to ask where they were?”

Rabbi Schneur Zalman replied:

“The Torah, our heritage is not merely a history book, but rather a teaching for every human at all times. G-d did not need to know where Adam was. The Almighty knows where man is at any given moment. The question is not directed to G-d but to man, and to each one of us in every generation. We do wrong, and then we believe we can hide from the consequences. But always, after we have done wrong we hear the voice of G-d deep down in our hearts asking, what have you done with your life? Where are you?”

We once again have reached this special time in the Jewish year, the period leading up to the High Holydays. It is time for our own spiritual check up, to search into ourselves to see in which way we may improve in our relationship with G-d and with our fellow man. And just as we annually make a financial auditing on our own accounts, so too we make a spiritual stocktaking of our lives, look at our cheques and balances to make sure we are not going overdrawn.

Our Sages of Blessed Memory say that during this time we must increase in three very important areas and aspects of Jewish life...”With Repentance , Prayer, and Charity we avert the severity of the decree.”

I am always reminded of the beautiful story of Jonah which we read on the Afternoon of Yom Kippur as the Haphtarah at Mincha.

Jonah was instructed by G-d to travel to Nineveh, to persuade the wicked people there to repent. Instead we are told how he failed to listen to G-d instead he wanted to run away, to somehow hide from His countenance. Jonah thought that by running away to Tar shish, by disassociating himself from His G-d and His people he would be able to relieve himself of his responsibilities. Again and again Jews have been trying to flea from the presence of G-d, like Jonah in the story, but subsequent events taught Jonah the folly of his belief. When the

storm was raging on the ship that was travelling to Tar shish, the sailors drew lots to determine on whose account the calamity had befallen the ship. And the lot fell on Jonah. They asked him four questions. "What is your trade? And from where do you come? What is your land? And of what people are you?"

Jonah answers those unforgettable words. "IVRI ANOCHI", "I am a Jew"

At that moment all that really mattered to Jonah was "I am a Jew." In every generation the Almighty calls out to man, "Where are you?" What have we accomplished in the days allotted to us? G-d gives us a lifetime. What have we given in return?

On behalf of my wife, Yehudit, and our children, may I take this opportunity of wishing the entire community to be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life and goodness for the forthcoming year, a year of health, happiness and peace for all Israel, both materially and spiritually.

Amen.