



GROWTH

At The

SHABBAT TABLE

PARSHAT
VA'ETCHANAN

*"Prayer is not a transaction; it is
a relationship." (R' Jonathan Sacks)*

Knowing What to Scream

R' Shlomo Farhi related an extraordinary story.

There was a certain rabbi who visited a group of soldiers that were to head into Gaza, in order to give them blessings and words of encouragement. One soldier approached the rabbi afterward and asked him: "I never grew up with anything Jewish... I'm having trouble understanding; does your blessing help me? I can't really connect or relate to this concept; what am I supposed to do with your beracha?" The question sparked a meaningful conversation, in which the rabbi shared the following story.

"There was a minister of education named Zalman Oren in the 1960s. This fellow, a communist who turned socialist and then atheist, grew up in Russia and eventually made his way up to the ministry of education in Israel. One time, he was speaking to a group of young officers in the army, and he mentioned parenthetically that he wasn't always the way he was at the time. He explained that he grew up as a little kid going to yeshiva; he was taught Mishna, Gemara, and even knew Tehillim by heart. But in 1917, when there was a big upheaval in Russia, he became a communist, and through that, an atheist. 'Now, I don't believe in anything,' he told them. 'Not Torah, not mitzvot, not G-d – nothing.' He then added a 'fun fact' about himself, that during the war, when the fighting reached his city, he ran away to the nearby forest, where he suddenly came under massive fire. 'As the bullets whistled by me in the air, and as I experienced incredible fear, I ran for cover and screamed the words of Tehillim without thinking, and I was so embarrassed. There I was, an atheist, who cried the words of Psalms in uncontrollable fear... how embarrassing...' And just like that, he ended his tale, with no lesson learned and no teshuvah. One of the soldiers who was there at the time approached Mr. Oren angrily and told him, 'You know, you're really a wicked person.' Mr. Oren was taken aback. 'What do you mean?' he asked. 'You're not even a religious man yourself! It's not like you have a kippah or tzitzit! Why am I a wicked person?' The soldier explained, 'I grew up in a country where you ran the education. I didn't attend yeshiva. You made sure that in the secular Israeli school that I went to, we never learnt any Tehillim! We never learnt any prayers! I'm now a soldier in the army. When you ran, you at least knew what to scream. But because of you, when they're firing at me and I want to scream something – which has happened to me before, where I'm desperate for help and I want to turn to something or someone bigger than myself – I don't know what to yell, and I don't know who to yell to!"

The rabbi concluded the story and then addressed the young soldier directly. "Because of this, I came to give you a beracha. As for how it helps you – I'm going to teach you what it is that you could scream if you ever feel you need to." He took out a piece of paper and in big letters wrote out the words of Shema: שמע ישראל ה' אלוהינו ה' אחד. He read it together with the soldier, and taught him how to cover his eyes when he called out to G-d with these words. "These are words that Jews have said in the worst times and in the best times. They said it in the gas chambers, in the Inquisition, in the pogroms, and in times of incredible

torture. It should stand by you, and it's there in case you need to reach out for help." The soldier was extremely moved, and gave the rabbi a warm embrace before leaving to Gaza.

As far as the rabbi knew, that was the end of the story. A while went by, and out of nowhere, the rabbi got a call from Soroka Hospital. "There's a soldier here who requested you by name," the voice said through the phone, "and he's asking for you to come visit him." The rabbi was confused at first, but then realized it must have been the same soldier to whom he had taught Shema. He got in his car and raced to Soroka. As he pulled up to the medical center, an older Israeli man pacing back and forth in front of the hospital noticed him. "Are you the rabbi that my son is calling?" he asked. He nodded in the affirmative, and the father led him up the stairs to the soldier's room. The rabbi couldn't believe what he was saw. There wasn't an ounce of the boy's body that wasn't covered in bandages. He was injured from head to toe. The weak soldier motioned for the rabbi to come close, and he began to speak. "My friends and I went in and we did unbelievable work. Baruch Hashem, we were able to eliminate terrorists and conquer certain areas. One afternoon, we got into an alleyway where they were firing at us, and we knew that we must be close to something important. We took cover, and saw three terrorists standing at the other end of the alleyway. We fired at them, managing to kill one. The other two escaped into a different building, and I called my two friends with me to run after them into the building on my lead. At that point, the fighting got very heated. We saw that they were at the far end of the stairwell, and we were on the other side. We were firing in close quarters of each other. Finally, I pulled out a grenade and, telling my buddies to duck, threw it across the hallway, where it exploded and killed the two terrorists. We stood up from our cover, but we didn't realize that there was another terrorist that was hiding there the whole time. Before I knew it, I was witnessing in slow motion how he pulled out his grenade and threw it right at us. As it was bouncing toward us and we were all exposed, I knew that I had just sentenced myself and my two best friends to death. I didn't know what to do; there was no time to react. The only thing that came to my head was to scream, and so I covered my eyes and yelled 'Shema Yisrael.' But as I jerked my hand up to cover my eyes, my gun, which was on my arm, swung forward, and the butt of my gun slapped the grenade coming toward us, causing it to ricochet to the other side of the hallway, killing the terrorist. My friends and I were injured badly, but we're going to be okay. I had to call you to tell you that your blessing, in which you taught me what and how to scream, literally saved my life and the lives of my friends, and I can't thank you enough..."

As we read the infamous words שמע ישראל ה' אלוהינו ה' אחד in this week's Parsha – words with so much powerful history – let them invigorate our strength, resilience, and unbreakable connection to Boreh Olam, Who is, indeed, our one and only source of salvation.