

Paper in the Wall

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In 1974 when Henry Kissinger was pressurizing Golda Meir to make concessions in the interest of peace in the Middle East, Golda took him to the Western Wall. Kissinger stood there and was visibly moved. He started to pray. He said, "Dear God I want to thank you for enabling me, a penniless German Jewish refugee to succeed beyond expectations in the free United States of America." And Golda said, "Henry that is a lovely prayer." Kissinger continued "Dear God, please protect my patron Richard Milhouse Nixon and enable him to withstand the political trials he is undergoing." And again, Golda said "Henry, that's a really nice prayer." Finally, Kissinger turned back to the wall and said, "Dear God please imbue Golda Meir and her cabinet with the common sense to make concessions and not be stubborn in the pursuit of Israeli interests." And Golda glowered at him and said "Henry, remember, that's only a wall you are talking to!"

I was reminded of that joke in London last week. There were pictures in the press, of a prominent a British born Conservative party politician of Muslim parents, Sajid Javid. The photos were taken of him on a visit to Israel, with a *kippa* on his head, putting a piece of paper into a crack in the Western Wall.

Sajid Javid is a remarkable, multi-talented man. Thanks to his own hard work and brilliance, has risen high in English political life. He supports Boris Johnson in the race for leadership of the Conservative party. And if Johnson becomes Prime Minister, Javid is hoping to get one of the top jobs. So that I guess he has every reason to follow Kissinger and pray for his patron at the Wall.

I have absolutely no problem with praying. Why, I do it myself! It's the paper in the Wall I have problems with. The impression is that this is important in Judaism. When it is more often than not, just a simplistic if not superstitious ritual. Furthermore, any notable politician visiting Israel is made or encouraged to carry out this performance of the paper in a crack of the Wall, as if this is what defines Israel as a Jewish State and is crucial to the Jewish religion.

What must any reasonable non -Jew think about Judaism if it promulgates this charade of sticking a piece of paper into a wall as a crucial part of its tradition? And it's no answer to reply that all religions do stuff like this

all the time. I know they do. But I expect better from mine. If people think that this is the way to communicate with God, do they think God actually reads the paper rather than their minds? Or that God has to read a request in order to understand it or responds to it?

Sure, writing charms on wood, stone or paper goes back way before Judaism ever appeared. And although the Talmud rejects superstitious practices as pagan, it is prepared to bend the rules if they work! If you are interested in the origins of such practices, I highly recommend reading Yuval Harari (yes, he of "Homo Sapiens"). His earlier book is called "Jewish magic before the rise of kabbalah." It you will cure you! But it is indeed Kabbalah and its child Chasidism that has given this paper request act significance and exposure today.

The *Kvitel* is a piece of paper that you give to your Rebbe or Chacham's secretary with your name, the names of your family and anyone or anything else you want the holy man to know. The secretary hands it to him just before your audience. He may or may not look at it and then, usually he gives you a blessing. All Chasidic dynasties do this and given their massive expansion and influence on Judaism today, you might even say it has become mainstream.

Lubavitch Chabad make a huge to-do about placing such *Kvitelech* at the grave of their late much missed Rebbe. I was recently telling an important Chabad figure how much I admired the Rebbe and why I thought he was the most impressive Jew of the last generation. To which he replied, "Have you visited his grave?" And when I said that I was not much of a grave visitor, he offered to put a piece of paper there for me and seemed absolutely shocked when I politely declined.

I have visited the Wall countless times over the years and prayed there often. I recommend Midnight when it is not too crowded. I love the sense of being close to the past, to the very stones my ancestors saw and touched. But I have never ever ever put a piece of paper there. The whole idea strikes me as ridiculous. Although I do not underestimate the importance of the placebo effect or the psychological benefits of symbolism. What I do object to, is that this particular piece of theater has now become the most recognizable face of my majestic religion and that this pantomime is how Israeli leaders or rabbis hope to impress the outside world. And, incidentally I do not understand why we have to treat the whole area as if it were a synagogue.

I can understand visiting Yad Vashem or graves of notable people and treating them with reverence. Even Karl Marx has one. History is important. Very important. But Judaism has far more significant ways of impressing

people than bits of paper. That a marginal, minor ritual should be elevated above all others and that this is what every visiting dignitary is encouraged, if not pushed to perform, is, in my humble opinion, an insult to the grandeur and spiritual integrity of Judaism,

And while on the subject of irrationality. Why does a non-Jew have to wear a *kipa* altogether even in a synagogue? Let alone a historical site. According to Jewish Law there is no such obligation. Indeed, why do Jews visiting the Wall have to put one on either? We have elevated minutiae to become accepted norms, instead of interesting phenomena!