

We All Live In LA...

*By HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok
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Those of you who have been my readers for a number of years know that my family and I moved to Los Angeles about two and a half years ago. Like me, you probably thought I was coming here to teach Torah and expand our Yeshiva. True those things have happened. However, it just recently dawned on me that Heaven had an even greater purpose for me to come here. Not only have I been teaching, I have also been learning! Yet, just what it is my eyes see and my heart now understands is a lesson I am not so sure I ever wanted to learn. Yes, Heaven had its purpose in bringing me here.

Here I am in Los Angeles, land of the rich and famous, both of which I am not. Where I live, in the Valley, I have neighbors of all types, rich and poor, Jewish and Muslim and of course, Hispanic. I have long joked saying that we do not live in southern California, but rather in northern Mexico. Judging from the fact that even in Fort Wayne, Indiana, as far from "south of the border" as one can get, there is a public elementary school where Spanish is the primary language, I often wonder just how far north does the border of the "new" Mexico extend?

You really need to learn Spanish these days; I do not consider this an option, but a necessity. I do not consider the growing Spanish population and cultural influence any kind of a threat. This is the United States, a land of democracy and here, majority rules. Therefore, if and when the majority speaks Spanish, well then, that is the way it is. I understand how non-Hispanic Americans might feel frightened by this large and looming change on the American cultural horizon, but life is full of changes, even big, life-altering changes. Therefore, Spanish and Hispanic culture is clearly the future for the United States. It does not matter whether you like it or not. It is what it is and you cannot and will not do anything about it, period!

No, Heaven did not bring me here to Los Angeles to show me the inevitable rise of Hispanic culture here in the U.S. One can clearly see this everywhere in the country, even in little towns, like Fort Wayne. What I see here, true, I have seen elsewhere, but Los Angeles really exemplifies a festering problem. I would go so far to say that today, we all live in Los Angeles, meaning in a "LA" state of mind. I assure you that I do not say this in complimentary fashion.

Los Angeles, is tinsel town, home of the Hollywood stars, the rich and the famous, the Lindseys, the Britneys, the Parises and the Nicoles. These are the names of pop celebrities whose wild and often illegal antics grab headlines and choke our news

media, like a chicken-bone in the throat. Our news media vomits out stories of the rich, famous and disgustingly spoiled and how they are involved with alcohol abuse and drugs and suffer from all kinds of psychological illness, with depression being on top. Somehow, these failures at life, these poor excuses for human beings, these terrible role models for our children are the same ones idolized in numerous magazines, with their pictures plastered throughout the media everywhere.

It does not matter whether or not one is Hispanic, Caucasian, African-American, Asian-American, Jewish-American or Muslim-American, everyone from every culture is caught up in the wave of Hollywood "star worship." I wonder how different modern day "star worship" is from the Biblical idolatry of worshipping the stars. Argue the differences intellectually all you want, bottom line; they are the same. This is one of the lessons I have learned by coming here to Los Angeles and one reason why I say, "We all live in LA."

Now, forgive me for getting a little apocalyptic, but I feel it is most appropriate. In the writings of the Kabbalists, it is prophesied that before the coming of Mashiah, humanity would enter into a period where everything would be turned upside-down. It is prophesied that these would be the worst of times and humanity as a whole would cry out like a woman in childbirth. This period is actually called the "birth pangs of Mashiah" (hevlei Mashiah, in the original Hebrew). Now, one can discuss religion and theology all one wants and argue back and forth whether or not these times are coming soon or already upon us. Internet chat is ripe with discussions of this nature. Indeed, it fuels a tremendous amount of internet chatter coming from all sides, Jewish, Christian and especially Islamic. If you do not know by now who is Al Mahdi, I suggest you do some web research.

The Kabbalists have prophesied that one of the initial signs of the dawn of the "end of days" and the "birth pangs of Mashiah" was to be the fall of the stars from Heaven. Until recently, like everyone else, I interpreted this somewhat literally. Maybe we were supposed to watch for meteors or a comet or something. Then it dawned on me, Kabbalists, like the Biblical prophets before them, always spoke using a set of metaphors. Often they themselves did not understand the depths and significance of the metaphors that Heaven placed in their minds and mouths. Yet, their words were transcribed for future generations, who would have their eyes opened and their hearts understand, when the time was right. Well, maybe now that time has come.

I see the proverbial fall of the "stars of heaven/Hollywood" everyday. I see it in the Lindseys, the Britneys, the Parises and the Nicoles. I see it in the tabloid newspapers in every supermarket. I see it in garbage television programs dedicated to so-called entertainment. Yes, the stars are falling all around us. Their disgusting influence has taught our young daughters to dress like whores and act like gold-diggers. Our young men are taught that "looking good" is everything; fashion and popularity are the "gods" of today. Today, almost every garment one buys proudly and boldly displays

its manufacturer's name all over it. We have become a culture of walking advertisements for Nike, the Gap, Gucci, Guess, Levis, Adidas, Puma and more and more without end.

How twisted have our minds become when we fail to realize that we are slaves to the masters of fashion and willingly do their bidding of freely advertising their products. We are like the Jews in ancient Egypt who served Pharaoh in despicable slavery all the while believing that they were living somewhat decent lives. The Kabbalists referred to this as the lowest of the depths and they prophesied that we would again descend to this level, prior to the coming of the "birth pangs of Mashiah." Maybe our worship of the lords of fashion is the intoxicating drug that keeps us happily imprisoned in our mental slavery. Maybe our worship of the modern stars also keeps us happily distracted and imprisoned in a cell of delusion and illusion. Maybe the stars are falling and taking us with them to the deepest of the depths of ruin!

I believe the signs and prophecies of the Kabbalists and Biblical prophets are being fulfilled all around us. I believe we are living in perilous times. I believe we should be very alarmed. I believe we should be taking every precaution and making every preparation for what could possibly befall us. Yet, it is I alone who would believe this. It is I alone who is alarmed. I alone am taking precautions and I alone am preparing.

For my efforts, I am called an alarmist. I am told that no one knows what will be and if "the apocalypse" comes, we will not be able to do anything about it anyway. So, why bother to worry and prepare? Just simply enjoy life and forget about this entire alarmist, doomsday nonsense; this is what I am told by so many who just want to be left alone to worship their fallen stars and serve their gods of fashion. I only wish that these same people would care as much about G-d, the Creator and His Torah as they do about their gods of Hollywood and lords of style and fashion.

The Kabbalists long ago warned that just as it was in Egypt prior to the redemption then, so would it be prior to the redemption brought about by the Mashiah. In Egypt, not everyone was redeemed. Legend tells us that during the plague of darkness, a large number of the Jewish people died. These were the ones who did not want to leave Egypt and were happy where they were at. Under darkness, they died. No one saw them die; they just did, unnoticed and unmissed, even unrecorded in Torah. When redemption finally came days later, it was welcomed only by those who survived those who had long desired it and waited for it. As it was then, so too do we expect it to be again.

Another plague of darkness is coming. When it does, those who enjoy the worship of the stars of Hollywood and serve the masters of fashion will meet their destinies even as they did in their past lives in Egypt. Like Solomon said, "there is nothing new under the sun." Some souls never learn. Some souls lived in Egypt; some souls live in LA. The two are the same. This is not a physical proximity. This is a state of mind, a

mindset of slavery, of idol worship, of lies, falsehoods and self-deceptions, of lusts and pursuits of pleasures. Any of this sound familiar? Any of this sound likes you? Maybe you are a modern-day slave in Egypt and just as obviously unaware of your predicament as were the Jews in ancient times.

Now, let us pause a moment for a reality check. I do not want you to think for a minute that all my talk about "end times" and "birth pangs" is a bunch of religious scare tactic hype. I am not talking about religion at all; I am not even talking about G-d. Actually to continue our discussion it is best to leave both G-d and religion out of it. Our modern idol worship might share tendencies with religion, but it is not a religious problem, it is a psychological one. Idolatry is a psychological illness; it leads to human instability. It is the instability in the person and in society at large, that leads to all kinds of social and political unrest.

When terrible things happen in our world, do not go pointing your finger to Heaven and say "G-d did this." Rather, look for causes that are more down-to-earth. Granted, I do believe that Heaven ordains everything, great and small. However, Heaven most often allows nature to take its course. When we walk down a path that inevitably leads to destruction, Heaven allows nature to take its course and allows us to face our fates. Only when one makes the sincerest of efforts to change their course in life, obviously coupled with serious changes in attitude, can one have any realistic expectation of avoiding a disaster of one's own making.

I do not see many people today sincerely willing to expend the efforts to change their attitudes in life and thus their behavior. How many times have I tried to tell people to invest their time in their own self-improvement, be it physical exercise, Torah study or silent meditative contemplations. Yet, I am told they are too busy, they are watching American Idol, or some other inane television program, which is just so important and cannot be missed. What is good for myself must wait, they say, I must first worship my social and cultural masters. And we wonder why fools die in plagues of darkness, ancient and modern. Just remember, not all darkness is physical; darkness of the mind, of awareness, of wisdom is just as deadly a plague as any physical darkness.

Whether or not we will face an apocalyptic "end of days" time will soon tell. Yet, if it does come, do not blame Heaven, do not point a finger to G-d. Recognize that we ourselves created our own apocalypse. Our foolish intoxicated blind worship of the fallen stars, fashion, society and culture has brought us to this brink.

We have lost focus of the important things in life and to makes matters worse, we deny it. We proclaim ourselves free and righteous all the while we devour the latest edition of a fashion or entertainment magazine. We are so absorbed into the glitter of tinsel town society that we all have become citizens of Los Angeles and fail to

recognize that by doing so, we have returned to Biblical Egypt and have become re-enslaved, as were our ancestors.

I know! I know! You do not care. You are not going to make any changes whatsoever. I also know that right now you are saying that you want to and will make changes. But, let us be honest, you know in just a few minutes from now, after you put down this essay, you will forget all about it and go back to your petty little interests in stupid unimportant things. After all, you are only slave, deluded into thinking you are free.

It takes a lot to really be free. Yet freedom has to be fought for, it has to be won. And then it has to be protected from all who seek to take it from you. Today, you are a slave. You will be tomorrow as well, unless you rise up, like ancient Spartacus, and create a "slaves rebellion." But, why should you expend the effort, slavery is not all that bad. Even in the wilderness, the ancient Jews cried to return to Egypt.

If you remember, it was those ancients who cried to return to Egypt that eventually all died in the wilderness. Only the new generation, born to know freedom, fought to maintain it. It was they who merited to enter the Promised Land. They worked hard, they fought, and therefore, they won; true, all the help of Heaven. But we are their children. We are no different.

Some of us will die in the darkness. Some of us will die in the wilderness. Some of us will live to enter the Promised Land. Read these stories in your Bible. Learn from them. They are not only history; they are legend. They are an archetype and role model for us to follow. We will chose our course and destiny. We already have. Of course, it is never too late to change.

I moved to Los Angeles a few years back, but my move was only physical. For me, where my body resides is of no consequence. For you see, I live in Yerushalayim. I have always lived in Yerushalayim and I pray I always will. Israel and Jerusalem, Egypt and Los Angeles are states of mind and consciousness. It does not matter so much where your body resides, but where your soul resides, this makes all the difference in the world. Most of you live in Los Angeles, archetypal Egypt, no matter where you reside physically. I really suggest you consider a move before the "big earthquake" comes. And I am not talking about a physical earthquake either....