

To You Will Bow Every Knee

Translated by Elli Fischer

"Everyone who dwells on earth shall recognize and know that to You will bow every knee...And they will all accept the yoke of Your dominion."

Aleinu L'Shabei'ach

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WE ARE IN THE midst of a pandemic. Millions of people have taken ill and lie in distress on their sickbeds, tens of thousands have passed away, and the global economy is collapsing. The world has not known a crisis like this in over a century.

On one hand, Chazal said, "Calamity does not befall the world except because of Israel,"¹ and Rashi comments there: "To frighten [Israel], so that they return in *teshuvah*." Indeed, we are commanded to examine our actions and return in *teshuvah*. However, it is clear that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is also sending a message to all of humanity, to every human being, wherever they are.

Often, when I see the sublime entreaty of *Aleinu L'Shabei'ach* that concludes our prayers,² I think to myself: How will we reach the fulfillment of this prayer, "To You will bow every knee, will swear every tongue; and they will all accept the yoke of Your dominion"? Does not the world today consist of great powers, microstates,

and everything in between, each with its own unique culture? They are so different from one another, with distinct beliefs, cultures, and worldviews. They do not think alike.

However, it seems to me that these days the entire world is indeed on bended knee, powerless.

When Titus the Roman became arrogant after defeating powerful armies, occupying Jerusalem, and destroying the Beis Hamikdash, he taunted the Heavens: "It seems to me that the God of these people only has power over water. Pharaoh came, and He drowned him in water. Sisera came, and He drowned him in water. Now He threatens to drown me in water. If He is truly powerful, let Him come upon dry land and do battle with me."³ A Divine echo went forth and said to him: "Wicked man, son of a wicked man, descendant of the wicked Esav, I have created in My world a tiny creature called a gnat...Go upon the dry land and do battle with it." A tiny gnat entered his nostril and pecked at his brain for

¹ Yevamos 63a

² Sefer Totzaos Chayim, written by the author of Reishis Chochmah, writes *Aleinu* is the equivalent of reciting *Shema*.

³ Gittin 56b.

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seven years, until he died a horrible death, after suffering terribly.

Contemporary, modern man has also become arrogant. He has already walked on the moon, sent a probe to Mars, and invented the means to retrieve any information from anywhere in the world instantaneously. He studies and discovers the secrets of science, to the point where he feels he is master of his fate and in control of his life and his environment. It seems as though a Divine echo has gone forth and said to him: "I have created in my world a tiny creature, immeasurably smaller than a gnat, so small as to be invisible. It is called a virus. Go upon the dry land and do battle with it."

The entire world is on bended knee, begging for its life, powerless to defend itself from this tiny creature. Yet we still have not merited that "they will all accept the yoke of Your dominion, and You shall reign over them, speedily, forever."

Perhaps our Sages further elaborate this idea,⁴ suggesting that Titus's experiences reflect a pattern:

The wicked Titus entered the Kodesh Kodashim while cursing and blaspheming.... He said, "The God of these

people only has power over water. If He wants, He can come upon dry land and battle me, and we will see who wins." Hakadosh Baruch Hu said to him: "Wicked man, son of a wicked man! Lowly inferior creature! I will send the smallest of My creatures against you, to eradicate you from the world." A gnat entered his nostril, and he died a horrible death...For it is the way of Hakadosh Baruch Hu to send tiny things as His agents against all who are arrogant against Him. He sends a tiny creature to exact retribution, to teach you that the power [of the wicked] is insubstantial.

The midrash continues:

And in the future, Hakadosh Baruch Hu will exact retribution from the nations by means of tiny things, as it says (Yeshayahu 7:18): "On that day, Hashem will whistle to the flies at the ends of the channels of Egypt and to the bee in the land of Assyria."

May it be His will that we merit the speedy fulfillment of these words from Aleinu: "They will all accept the yoke of Your dominion, and You shall reign over them, speedily, forever."

⁴ Bamidbar Rabbah 18:22.

These essays were written during various stages of the coronavirus pandemic. Facts and knowledge about this virus change daily. Torah is forever.