

Author: Rácz Norbert Zsolt. Hungarian original was published in Keresztény Magvető, 2019, 125, 317-321, with the title: "Mindeddig megsegített bennünket az Úr". All copyrights remain with the publisher.

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UnitarianTorch contact: kokenyesi@unitariantorch.com

Thus Far the Lord has Helped Us

"Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen, and called its name Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the LORD has helped us.""

1 Samuel 7:12 NKJV

Dear celebrating brethren,

If we could sum up the relationship of the Lord and His chosen people in the Old Testament, it would sound like this: The Lord calls out to His people, and then the people react in some way to the calling. In almost all biblical stories of the Old Testament, that sequence of action recurs: the Lord reaches out with His hand, and then the nation of Israel responds. Of course, the Lord reaches out in many different ways. Sometimes He addresses them as a father would talk to his child. Other times He beckons as a lover would to his sweetheart. Yet another time He curses at them, admonishes them, or thunders at them, or He, as a ruler with flaming eyes, threatens them with destruction, or He creates laws as a wise governor would. I could present a long list of the ways the Lord reaches out and addresses His chosen people; however, the essence of His message remains unchanged: Come and be in my presence; be my people.

In response, the people can respond in one of two ways: either accept the outstretched hand, or reject the hand and move away from the Lord. If the people say yes to His message, then their affairs will go well. The people will become more powerful, live in security, achieve prosperity, and be happy. If, on the other hand, the people move away from the Lord, then catastrophe will strike, foreign powers will rule them, they will be struck by blow after blow, and they will be impoverished. Of course, these consequences don't happen because the Lord rewards the obedient and punishes the wicked, but primarily because a life of abundance is the result of walking with God. In contrast, catastrophes, hardship and possible destruction are the results of moving away from God. Keeping the commandments of God is the task of the entire faith community making it possible the development of improved virtues such as the feeling of belonging in the community, the empathy, the caring for the destitute, the lifting up of

the fallen, and the living of a moral and virtuous life. Moving away from God brings about the opposite. Selfishness, arrogance, and the oppression of the weak for the purpose of gaining more power. The obvious consequence of all these are catastrophes, because only destruction can result when people prey upon each other like wolves.

In our Bible verse, and the story that follows it, the people are light years removed from the Lord. While they recovered the Arch of Covenant from the Philistines, their fear never went away, because the Philistines continued to menace them. Something was broken, something was torn up. The people lost their self-confidence and belief.

The idols of Astarte and Dagon that the people worshipped were just the symptoms, much like a pale skin or a fever are symptoms, but not the cause, of a disease. The actual disease the people were suffering from was their insecurity in their own future. Their old stories degenerated into kids' fables suitable only to excite the imagination of children. Who in their right mind would believe that they used to be a mighty nation? That the word of Joshua parted the Jordan River while the Arc of Covenant was carried to the other side? Or that the walls of Jericho fell down when the trumpets sounded? Who in their right mind would believe these tales? The bitter truth is that the Philistines were near, and they were just waiting for the command to destroy their enemy.

The people were far away from the Lord, because they had lost confidence in themselves, and had lost their faith. One person, the prophet Samuel, the aging perpetual idealist who dwelled in the royal palace as well as in small huts, continued to proclaim: *Trust yourselves; we will be powerful. Believe in God, and discard the idols. You need to heal, my brethren!* He continued such proclamations for twenty years. It had been twenty years since the Philistines conquered Israel, and after all those proclamations the people finally said: "That's enough; let's make a final attempt. If for nothing else, for the sake of this old man."

They gathered at Mizpah and listened to the prophet with uncertain feelings; some believed his words while others had a dismissive smile on their faces. But the Philistines got word of their preparations and attacked the Israelites. The well-organized, well-fed, paid-to-fight army of mercenaries lined up near Mizpah. The only choice that remained for Israel was to confront them; otherwise they would perish. The only choice that remained for the people was to believe. And then the miracle happened. A loud sound was heard coming from the heavens; perhaps, it was the sound of God that frightened the Philistines. Or was it, perhaps, the yell from the throats of thousands of Israelites? Or was it, perhaps, the roar of the power in their hearts and in their hands holding a sword? No one knows precisely; however, the entire expanse around them started to rumble. The consequence of the miracle was that the well-organized, well-fed, well-armed Philistine army ran hastily in retreat.

When the men returned to Mizpah, the unbelieving nation couldn't even celebrate. They didn't know how to win, and now, they didn't know how to celebrate their victory. That

was when Samuel erected a stone and prayed with the sigh of an anguished old man: "Thus far the Lord has helped us." This was not the boasting of a victorious general; it was not a statement from a strong, self-confident nation. This was, rather, the reflection of a person peering into the past, and projecting into a hopeful future: now you can see that if you believe and if you trust, the Lord helps you.

Dear celebrating brethren. How many times have we been a people who believed sometimes, but not at other times? How many times have we as Hungarians in Europe, as Transylvanian Hungarians in Romania, or as Unitarians in the ocean of other denominations gathered around a prophet-sounding person and smiled at those kids' fables, at our bright historic past, at our great patriots, at the ideas that our current condition can be improved. How many times have we gathered at the Mizpahs of our history, and half-heartedly listened to our own Samuels, reluctantly followed their advice, and did all that because prophets must know better, so we can just follow them.

My dear brethren. It is important to analyze our history and our traditions, because each and every historical event records a decision, and its consequences. If you act this way, then that will be the consequence. Learning from those historical lessons helps us to recognize, to comprehend what we need to do in those situations that recur time and time again. Samuel's action is such a recorded event. If you are true, if you believe, and if you trust, the Lord will help you as He has done on countless occasions before. If you believe, you will remain in existence. If we believe, we will remain in existence.

Those same lessons are taught throughout the history of the Unitarian Church. During the course of our 450 years of existence we have had our share of peril, our share of balancing acts at the edge of a precipice. Peril first visited us about fifteen years after the founding of our Church, when the Prince wanted to erase this strange and heretical denomination from the list of religions in Transylvania. Then they wanted to break the back of our Church through the Agreement of Dés. Then came the 18th century in which blow after blow struck us, and the Church barely survived. And don't forget about our latest balancing act at the edge of the precipice during the communist dictatorship in the 20th century. Who would have thought, who would have believed that we would have a celebration on this day?

My brethren, so many times we have stood at Mizpah, and with a sigh we embraced idols. because it had been rammed down our throats that *we can't, we shouldn't, we are small and weak, and that they conspired against us*. When we don't have the courage to let go of those idols that destroyed our self-confidence, we allow the well fed and strong Philistines to achieve victory and to rule over us, to oppress us, and to stomp on us.

My brethren, as you see from the examples I listed the Lord dispatches Samuels for all times. These Samuels stood in front of the people, and declared: *Do not be afraid, because the Lord will help us*. These Samuels sighed with relief after each struggle not with noisy celebration, but with the inner peace of prayerful men, and with the confidence of victors: Thus far the Lord has helped us.

In the 16th century the Lord gave us Enyedi György to lead us. In the 18th century He gave us Szentábrahám Lombárd Mihály who reconstructed our Church from the ground up. In the 20th century Erdő János like a pillar guarded the faith, the strength and the self-confidence of our denomination. On each of those occasions when the Philistines approached, we had no other choice but to engage them. In those struggles we had no other option but to believe and to hope that despite the immeasurable power of our opponent the Lord would be with us.

We believed then, and remained in existence. We believe now and we will remain in existence.

Today, yet again, we stand at Mizpah. We won the struggle, and the new stone was erected between our church and the school building. For myself, the only true prayer I can speak is: Thus far the Lord has helped us. We had to wait a long time; this struggle lasted a long time. The thought of erecting a statue for Dávid Ferenc was expressed almost 150 years ago. How many times in those 150 years have a thousand-strong group of Philistines appeared in front of us? How many times has the erecting of a statue seemed impossible? To the people who lost their self-confidence and their faith how many times did even the thought of dedicating of a full-sized statue of Dávid Ferenc in Kolozsvár seem laughable?

Throughout the past 150 years there were people, the Samuels, who generation after generation answered “*Yes, you can*” to the unbelieving people who were working against them by saying: “*We can not, we shouldn't, we are not allowed, it will never happen*”. Those Samuels may have spoken softly, but they passed on the dream by whispering into the ears of children who, as they grew up into first fruits, have revitalized the Church, because they did not forget this dream among their many other dreams.

So, after those long years we are once again standing at Mizpah as the people who cannot truly celebrate, who no longer feel the taste of victory. But the Lord has helped us. I wish I could say that after a magnificent achievement we can now lean back. After all, we accomplished it. The Philistines are defeated. Look how mighty is this small Unitarian Church. The Hungarians will be strengthened by this as the Transylvanian Hungarians point to this statue and say: *Here is the proof of our strength!* However, my brethren, the struggle against the Philistines did not end at Mizpah, but continued for hundreds of years. Samuel died, Saul died, King David died, but the Philistines still needed to be confronted because they remained a threat; as they were there then, and they are there now. However, the events at Mizpah, and in Kolozsvár entered into the history books and into the common consciousness, and when a new threat emerges, and hopelessness and disenchantment takes over the future generation, it will be sufficient for them to point at this statue, and say: Do not forget brethren, thus far the Lord has helped us.

Here we stand, surrounded by the entire world, Unitarians, Transylvanian Hungarians, and by looking at this statue, we understand that it will not solve all our problems, and it

will not bring salvation. However, it serves as witness that the intent of true believers and the work of virtuous people will bear fruit. There might be a long wait time. We may not live to see it; however, the fruit will be brought to bear.

May it be that the unveiling of this statue – for which we give thanks to the Lord – helps us with that. Whenever we walk by it and look upon it we can say with confidence in our hearts: *There is no need to be discouraged*. Thousands of Philistines might come, they may attack from all sides, we might appear weak, but here now stands the proof that the Lord will always help the people who live according to His will, who are faithful, honest in their intentions and who are +virtuous in their actions. Amen