Ram, Ram, Sita-Ram!
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PILGRIMAGE

Ram, Ram, Sita-Ram!

How my husband used the Lord's name to stop a riot in Chitrakoot

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Ionce asked Jagadguru Jayendra Saraswati, Shankaracharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham, how there could be hundreds and thousands of Gods in Hinduism, and also only one God. While the long cue of questioners tried to push me aside, the Shankaracharya asked me to be seated and said, 'Multiplicity and oneness, both are available to suit the entire spectrum of human beings, each one of them being completely different from the other in spiritual maturity and aspiration. Also, every single experience of human senses has been deified and so are all the aspects and elements of nature such that people will deal with each other and with nature with respect and courtesy. At the same time, Adi Shankara says that every being is a residence of God. You are free to choose what you want or not to, and will find what you seek. While you are still making your choice, Ram japa [chanting the name of Lord Ram] will keep you calm.' With this, he dropped a yellow marigold flower in my palm, looked right into my eyes, and gave a heart-melting, warm smile. He then turned to others in the queue and told them not to push away youngsters, because he liked to know what was on their minds. Thankful

for this time with him, I squeezed my way out of the crowded audience room, and while I took deep, refreshing breaths of fresh air, I felt as light as a cloud and glowed with joy. I was all of nine years old.

With time, Ram, Krishna, Siva, Hanuman, Ganesh, Murugan and all their numerous friends, teachers, wives, cousins, children, rishis, holy men and sadhus found adequate space in my mind. Listening to the mythological stories my mother told with elaborate explanations and analysis, it became more than clear that, with all its complexity, contradictions, and diversity, Hinduism is the religion closest to human experience. Meanwhile, I continued Ram japa uninterrupted.

Years later, when Ehud (now my husband) spoke to me on the phone for the first time, instead of saying, 'Hi, how are you?' he greeted me with, 'Ram Ram.' I was surprised. We had been corresponding for a few months with the as-yet-undeclared intention to marry in the near future [see Hinduism Today, November/December, 2000]. Washe trying to impress and flatter me by saying 'Ram Ram'? Why should he? The hungry worm of curiosity had started drilling holes into my gray matter. For some reason, though, in the ensuing correspondence, 'Ram Ram' did not surface. I wondered if he expected me to greet him saying, 'Moses, Moses.' I knew nothing about the Jewish way of greeting (Ehud is Jewish), but I was not convinced that 'Moses, Moses' would be an appropriate way of greeting him. I did not wish to educate Ehud about my ignorance but resolved that some day I would find out the reason for Ehud's 'Ram Ram.' Was it just a word he had heard

and memorized from his many trips to India, or was it a genuine salutation to Lord Ram before commencing conversation? Well, what I found out subsequently filled me with delight, and now that you have read this story so far, I must share this finding with you.

It was 1989. Ehud had traveled to spend a few months in India with the late Harish Johari, a noted scholar and author. After participating in the Kumbha Mela, they went on a pilgrimage to various shrines, temples, and to yogis and sadhus, many of whom Harish had studied with while learning tantra, ayurveda, occult teaching and yoga. This journey took them to Chitrakoot.

In Ramayana, Chitrakoot is mentioned as a place where Sri Ram, Sita Ma and Sri Lakshman spent thirteen years of their exile. At present, this place has a temple for the three. Besides this contemporary temple, there is an ancient cave on a river bank. At the very entrance of the cave there is a mammoth rock outcropping with a huge footprint, believed to be Sri Ram's. Not long ago, when the surrounding wilderness was intact, tigers came to drink water from the river, right below this rock outcropping.

As you enter the cave, you find yourself in a cathedral-like cavern with water up to your knees and a

rock island in the middle. For illumination, a florescent lamp is hanging right above the water, its tip almost immersed. The cavern narrows into an entrance to a tunnel from which water oozes out, making the knee-deep pool around the rock island and merging into the milky-turquoise river below. This tunnel is so small that only one person at a time can fit in its opening. It is believed that right beside the point at which water oozes out, Sri Ram came to meditate during his stay in Chitrakoot. All pilgrims to Chitrakoot try to visit this very spot. To get to this spot, however, the person next in line must be patient and let the person before him turn around and come out before he can get in. Thousands of pilgrims visit this holy spot every day; and the day that Ehud and Harish were visiting was no different.

Somewhere in the middle of this speck of humanity coordinating its way through the dark entrance cave someone felt uncomfortable with an unexpected nudge from the person next to him, and an altercation began. Ehud did not understand every word being exchanged back and forth, but he could easily figure out that the verbal battle was heating up. Unpleasant epithets, abuses, unprintable words and curses were being shot at each other with anger-soaked bullets. Soon the thick crowd became warring battalions and a physical fight broke out. Occasionally the hurling bodies hit the dangling light bulb--which could easily break, exposing

a wire and electrocuting the crowd.

Caught in the middle of this was Ehud, wondering if he would come out of this ancient cave intact and alive. Why such anger and hostility when everyone was on this trip to visit Sri Ram, the bearer of peace and goodwill? As the battle was getting more and more out of hand, it occurred to Ehud that Sri Ram alone had a solution to this misery. He clenched his fists tightly and began chanting at the top of his voice, 'Ram, Ram Sita-Ram, Ram, Ram, Sita-Ram.' Coincidentally, an unarmed, uniformed military man was standing right next to Ehud. He picked up on Ehud's message and blew a loud whistle. 'A foreigner is saying Ã¯Ram Ram.' You guys are fighting and abusing each other. Stop! Stop now! All of you say, Ã¯Ram, Ram, Sita-Ram. Ram, Ram, Sita-Ram.'' He continued blowing his whistle, stopping to chant 'Ram, Ram, Sita-Ram.'

The 'Ram, Ram, Sita-Ram' wove its magic spell on the angry crowd. Soon the entire group broke out chanting, ' Ram, Ram, Sita-Ram.' As the rhythmic sound filled the stuffy, hot, dark tunnel, people rediscovered their innate sense of coordination. Single-file marching resumed peacefully to the holy spot at the end of the tunnel. Once out of this narrow cave and into the open area where the Ram-Sita-Lakshman temple is situated, the offenders and the victims could not be recognized.

Everyone was chanting, 'Ram, Ram, Sita-Ram,' and walking slowly to the temple where Sri Ram, Sita Ma, and Sri Lakshman awaited to give darshan.

Mesmerized by this very direct and potent experience of the power of the Ram japa in thwarting a battle and ensuring peace, Ehud took it to his heart that Ram japa is a strong prophylactic and curative medicine for many ills that afflict human relationships. In our 'Hind-Jew' family as we call it, all our greetings to each other, and to our son Mahar, begin with 'Ram, Ram'--and why not, when the very reason for greeting and conversation is to promote peace and goodwill in our household?