

BATTLE HYMN OF THE REPUBLIC

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

The final portions of the Torah don't let us escape from the harsh realities of real-world trials and tribulations. In this week's combined portions of Nitzavim & Vayeilech, and in the following portion of Ha'azinu, the Torah discusses the harsh realities of sin and consequences.

Hashem describes the scenario that will arise after the death of Moshe. "And this nation will arise and turn to foreign gods, and they will leave the treaty that I cut with them. And my wrath shall burn upon them and I will leave them. They will be for prey and many evils, and pain will find them, and they will say on that day, 'is it not because G-d is not with us that all this evil befalls us!' And I will hide My face on that day for all the evil that they did; for turning to other gods." (Deuteronomy 31:16-19).

The next verse seems totally out of place. "And now write this song for them and place it in their mouths and teach it to the children of Israel, so that this song will be for Me as a testimony in the Children of Israel" (Deuteronomy 31:20).

The juxtaposition of the verses provokes many questions. Why does Hashem tell Moshe to write the song now? Why is the impending doom called "a song"? Why does the Torah say "it will be a testimony for Me"? Who is testifying and to whom? What does it mean "put it in their mouths"? Shouldn't the Torah be put in their ears? Why would we want to sing this distressing song anyway? Of course, Rashi and many of the great medieval commentators explain these verses with great clarity. I, however, would like to take a homiletic approach.

This past Sunday I had the pleasure of meeting with William Goldberg, a true friend and supporter of Jewish education. He left me with a moving story that he heard this past Shabbos from Rabbi Shlomo Riskin of Efrat, who was the Scholar-In-Residence at the Atlantic Beach Jewish Center.

After World War II, the Klausenberger Rebbe, Rabbi Yukisiel Halberstam, of blessed memory, a survivor of the concentration camps held a minyan in the Beth Moses Hospital in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Parshas Ki Savo arrived and with it, the section known as the tochacha (admonishment), which is filled with foreboding warnings of doom and destruction, lest the Jewish nation stray from the will of G-d.

The verses warn of unimaginable horrors: exile, starvation, rape, robbery, and torture -- to name just a few.

The custom of Jews world-over is to read the verses of tochacha quietly, so as not to rile up enemies, celestial and otherwise, who may think those calamities a good idea to cast upon the Jewish Nation.

So it was the portion of Ki Savo, and the Klausenberger Rebbe and his minyan of ravaged survivors were about to read the tochacha and re-live horrors of their recent history through the words of the ancient prophecies.

The Torah-reader started the verses of doom in a hushed tone. He began reading them quietly and quickly. Suddenly the Rebbe banged on his lectern. "Hecher!" he shouted. (Yiddish for louder.)

The reader looked up from the Torah with a puzzled look on his face. Perhaps he was reading the Torah a bit too low. He raised his voice a notch, and continued in a louder undertone. But the Rebbe was not satisfied. "Louder!" he exclaimed.

By now the reader was reading as loudly as his normal recitation, and yet the Rebbe continued to bang on the lectern and exclaim, "HECHER!" The reader could not contain his puzzlement and instead of shouting the portion he stopped and looked to the Rebbe for an explanation.

"We no longer have to read these miserable curses quietly," the Rebbe exclaimed. "There is no curse we have not experienced. There is no affliction we have not suffered! We saw it all. We lived it all. Let us shout with pride to our Father in Heaven that we have already received all the curses! We have survived these curses, and now it is His turn to bring us the blessings and the redemption!" And with that the reader continued reading the tochacha loud and clear as if singing an anthem to his nation's tenacity.

Hashem tells Moshe to write this song and teach it to every Jew that will face difficulties. It shall be "a song that should be in our mouths. And it will be a testimony before the Almighty." Our experiences should be sung with honor as a badge of courage and fortitude. Like the Purple Hearts of wounded soldiers, they shall be a witness to Him. So that when calamities befall us we shall surmount our misfortunes. They will not be agonies that we shall cower behind. Rather, they will be a testimony to our faith, our commitment, and most importantly our eternity.

Dedicate in honor of the Bar Mitzvah of our son Joshua by Suzanne and Barry Rozenberg

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