

BETTER TO BE THE PURSUED THAN THE PURSUER

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Beshalach

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Today's Learning:

Shabbat 16:8-17:1

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Yevamot 53

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Sotah 8

"Hashem said to Moshe, 'Why do you cry out to Me? Speak to Bnei Yisrael and let them journey forth!'"
(14:15)

R' Yosef Eliyahu Henkin z"l (see page 4) writes: "Blessed is He who distinguished us from those who stray. To the Jew who observes the Torah, war is despised and hated; the possibility that he might kill worries him more than the possibility that he might be killed" [see Rashi to Bereishit 32:8].

However, R' Henkin continues: The erev rav, the non-Jewish hangers-on who left Egypt together with Bnei Yisrael, wanted war with Pharaoh. This is what is meant by the verse, "And Bnei Yisrael were going out with an upraised arm." They were only waiting for the signal from Moshe.

When the signal from Moshe did not come and Pharaoh approached, the would-be warriors suddenly felt fear. This is why they cried out to Hashem. He answered, "Why do you cry out to Me?"

Speak to Bnei Yisrael and let them journey forth!" It is better to be the pursued than the pursuer.

R' Henkin adds that this may have been Moshe's mistake when he at first refused to go to Pharaoh. Moshe said (Shemot 3:11): "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt?" I am not a man of war!

Hashem answered him (3:12), "For I shall be with you." These words, and the verses that follow it, conveyed to Moshe that the exile in Egypt would not be the final exile [see Rashi to verse 3:14]. In this way, Hashem taught Moshe that He was not looking for a warrior to lead Bnei Yisrael; rather it was (and is) Bnei Yisrael's role to be pursued throughout history until the time of the final redemption. (From an undated open letter, reprinted in Kitvei Hagaon R' Y.E. Henkin Vol. I, p.196)

"Hashem will reign for all eternity!" (15:16)

The midrash teaches: if only the Jewish people had said (in the present tense), "Hashem reigns for all eternity," no nation would ever be able to oppress or subjugate them.

R' Gedalyah Schorr z"l (1911-1979; sometimes called, "the first American gadol") explains: the midrash does not mean that a simple change in words would have sufficed to bring about the final redemption. Our long history of exiles was not caused simply by the fact that Bnei Yisrael said, "will reign," instead of, "reigns."

Rather, Bnei Yisrael's words were a reflection of what they were experiencing at that moment. They did not rise to the level where they saw Hashem as King in the present. Instead, they only attained a lower level where they recognized that Hashem will be King in the future.

How do we know that Bnei Yisrael were describing what they were experiencing? Chazal say: "No two prophets prophesied in exactly the same words." Yet here, millions of people prophesied in exactly the same words; they all said "Az yashir"/"The Song of the Sea" together! How is that possible?

The reason that no two prophets prophesied in exactly the same way is that all prophets (except Moshe) did not see their visions perfectly clearly. To some extent, they had to interpret what they saw. Thus, here, where millions of people prophesied in exactly the same words, we can be certain that they were describing what they actually "saw." And, because they saw Hashem as the King of the future, but not of the present, they demonstrated that they were not yet ready for the final redemption. (Ohr Gedalyahu)

"For the hand is on the throne of Hashem: Hashem maintains a war against Amalek from generation to generation." (17:16)

Rashi writes: Hashem has sworn by His throne that His Name will not be compete until Amalek is destroyed.

Based on this comment by Rashi, R' Pinchas David Horowitz z"l (the first "Bostoner Rebbe"; died 1941) offers an explanation of the following verse(Tehilim 75:11): "I will cut down all the pride [literally: 'the horns'] of the reshaim/wicked ones; the pride of the tzaddik/righteous one will be exalted."

Why is the word reshaim/wicked ones plural while tzaddik/righteous one is singular? The "horns" of the word "reshaim," i.e., the letters at its ends are resh and mem. The gematria of these two letters is 240, equal to the gematria of "Amalek." The "horns" of the word "tzaddik" are the letters tzaddi and kuf, whose gematria (190) is equal to the gematria of the word "kaitz"/"End (of Days)."

The verse is teaching: After the pride of Amalek is cut down, the pride of the tzaddik, i.e., the End of Days, will come. (Quoted in Shoshelet Boston p. 271)

Rabbis of the New World

R' Yosef Eliyahu Henkin z"l was born in the Mohilev province of Russia on Rosh Chodesh Adar Rishon 5641/1881. He was known as a child prodigy. At age 15 he already was studying in the Mir Yeshiva. Soon after, he became the youngest student in the yeshiva of Slutsk headed by R' Isser Zalman Meltzer.

R' Henkin's early years as a rabbi were spent wandering from one city to another, sometimes because of his inability to obtain a residence permit, and at other times because the unlearned towns that hired him had no use for a scholar of his stature. During these years he corresponded with leading sages regarding halachically questionable customs that he saw practiced.

In 1923, R' Henkin was on the verge of being deported to a Soviet labor camp when he escaped to the United States. After being detained on Ellis Island for five weeks, he obtained a rabbinic position on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Shortly thereafter, R' Henkin published his important work on the laws of marriage and divorce entitled Perushei Ivra.

The best known chapter in R' Henkin's career opened in 1925, with his appointment as Executive Director of the charitable organization Ezras Torah. He would remain in this position for 48 years, and he was completely devoted to it. Six days a week, R' Henkin was at his desk in the Ezras Torah office, and on Shabbat he went from shul to shul conducting appeals. Even the halachic responsa that he wrote would end with an appeal for Ezras Torah.

Although many people have never heard of R' Henkin, his influence is widespread through the Ezras Torah luach/calendar which is widely used as a source for synagogue customs (for example, whether or not tachanun should be recited) and the timing of the molad/new moon. The halachic rulings in that calendar are R' Henkin's, based on his work, Edut Le'Yisrael. At one time, R' Henkin

was considered to be the ultimate halachic authority in the United States, and it is reported that some yeshivot would give his telephone number to all newly ordained students together with their diplomas.

R' Henkin died on 13 Av 5733/1973. (Sources: Kitvei Hagaon R' Y.E. Henkin: Foreword)

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