

HEAVENLY WHISPERINGS

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Purim is one of the most joyous festivals in the calendar and is celebrated with an overflow of buoyant spirits and loving affinity with fellow Jews. The history behind the festival has timeless lessons that are as relevant today as they were for our people in the times of Megillas Esther.

At the end of a seventy-year exile period in Babylon, the Jewish people expected to be redeemed, in line with a well-known prophecy passed down the generations after the Destruction of the Holy Temple. When the seventy-year mark passed and they remained in exile, gloom and feelings of having been rejected by G-d began to eat away at the Jewish soul. As the events of the Purim story unfolded, with Haman's ascent to power and his vicious plot to annihilate the Jews, the situation seemed more and more hopeless. In the depths of their despair, Mordechai and Queen Esther emerged as Hashem's tools of salvation. The Babylonian exile and the nation's trials and tribulations were then acknowledged as purposeful and meaningful. The entire nation re-embraced Torah and mitzvos with renewed faith and devotion.

The Purim message is meant to uplift and fortify us not only on Purim but day in and day out, as we encounter the full gamut of life's challenges. At the conclusion of this week's Torah portion, the last in the book of Shemos, there is another important message that can assist us as we encounter the many bumps in our life journey that test our faith and endurance.

The Torah tells us that the Jewish people were accompanied in their desert travels by a miraculous pillar of cloud during the day. At nighttime they were led by a pillar of fire that never left the camp. What insight can we glean from this miraculous phenomenon? What was the significance of these two symbols of G-d's presence that never once deserted the people during the 40-year odyssey across the wilderness, until they entered the Promised Land?

I believe that the Torah is imparting to us a very important message. The first test recorded in the Torah that was given to Avrohom Avinu was Hashem's command to 'leave your land, your birthplace, and your parental home to the land that I will show you.' Hashem shrouded Avraham's destination in obscurity. The commentaries explain that this obscurity was an essential part of his challenge.

As we move along the road of life, we often feel unsure of our ultimate destination. Each stage of our lives is fraught with worry. Will we find our bashert? Will we be blessed with children? Will we be able to raise them properly? Will we be able to provide for our families? Will we marry off our

children? Will we succeed in our career goals? The list goes on and on.

Even when things seem to be as clear as day, our goals often seems to be shifting. When we finally conquer the peak and momentarily enjoy the plateau, there invariably looms another peak up ahead whose summit is in the clouds.

The pillar of cloud that led the Jewish people throughout the wilderness at each stage of their journey symbolizes the ever-shifting end point that tends to elude us we make our way through life's vicissitudes. Just as the Jewish people continued traveling into a cloud and the cloud itself kept moving forward, so in life we need to stay on course and keep moving forward, even if our ultimate destination appears blurred or elusive.

At times we are beset with a mist of darkness and long for sunlight. We sometimes feel a clammy feeling welling within us, urging us to abandon our spiritual struggles. We are unmotivated. We feel overwhelmed and paralyzed. Life's challenges seem overwhelming.

At times like these we need to allow ourselves to be led by the "pillar of fire," our internal spiritual compass that will lead us in the right direction. We follow our instincts-not our emotional, impulsive instincts, but the voice of conscience and the whispering of our soul. This thought is embodied in the pillar of fire that led the Jewish people at night through their sojourn in the wilderness.

I fondly treasure memories of the close relationship I merited to have with the great Reb Sholom Noach Berzovsky, the Nesivas Sholom of blessed memory. He was a giant of spirit, always bursting with an optimistic and positive approach to life although he was extremely frail, thin and of a physically diminutive stature. I once asked him, "Rebbe you are so weak and you suffer physical ailments. How do you always seem to display such strength and youthful vigor?"

I recall the smile that broke out on his face as he told me, "Naftali, I always feel that I am simply a sack of bones with a neshama that is moving me along. I long gave up on relying on my body to propel me forward in life."

The pillar of fire, our neshamos, that connects us to our heavenly source can also serve as our spiritual guide as we move into life's uncharted waters, urging us to press on and not to surrender to fear. Knowing Hashem is with us, illuminating the darkness and lighting the way forward, infuses us with strength.

The more we internalize the message of the pillar of cloud and fire, the more it will fortify us with reassurance and confidence in our life's path, ensuring that we realize its ultimate, blissful destination.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos

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