

# WHEN YOU ARE LEAST EXPECTING IT

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*This time I will praise Hashem! Therefore she called him Yehudah, and she stopped giving birth.*<sup>[2]</sup>

The plain sense of the text creates the impression that the last phrase is a consequence of the one before. It is as if to say that her overwhelming feeling of gratitude to Hashem for giving her this child resulted in her having no more. This seems counterintuitive – even cruel!

It is anything but. To understand our *pasuk*, we will have to explore part of Hashem's system of reward and punishment. Know this. It is unusual for Hashem to punish a sinner at the time that he commits the sin. To the contrary, He often waits so long, that the sinner has forgotten his offense altogether.

Several factors contribute to this. Firstly, if a sinner were immediately struck down for his sin, we would have little room for free-will, without which there is no purpose for our existence. Who would be foolish enough to sin if the consequences of his misbehavior would be immediate and drastic? Of necessity, the punishment must be deferred.

Deferring punishment for a long time, rather than a shorter period, creates some interesting effects. Because it comes when the sinner has a clearer conscience – having long forgotten his misdeed – he is least prepared for it. It hurts more. The psychological effect of the *onesh* is therefore magnified. He views himself as righteous, involved in *zedakah* and mitzvos. When tragedy strikes, he bemoans his fate – inexplicable to him! – and even complains of his mistreatment by G-d. (This is what Chazal mean<sup>[3]</sup> when they teach that Hashem punishes Jews by day, and the nations by night. We are punished during the “daytime” periods of our lives, when we seem to be bathed in the spiritual light of the many mitzvos we do.)

Hashem does this, of course, not out of cruelty or vindictiveness, but as part of His *chesed*. It allows Him to minimize the separate tragedies and punishments that the sinner must endure. The intensity of the single tragedy spares him having to endure others.

This protocol applies chiefly to people who are generally good and righteous, but still transgress. This works out best for their interests. While their transgressions are still in full bloom, Hashem withholds His punishment. He waits until they cease their particular transgression<sup>[4]</sup> – and then some! The *onesh* comes when the previous sinner has forgotten his misdeeds, and does not really expect it. The psychological quality of a single punishment then obviates the need for a greater number of

undesired episodes of retribution.

For the general evildoer, this system does not work – and therefore does not apply. If his punishment comes when he thinks of himself as completely blameless, he is likely to become so resentful and bitter that it will drive him to even greater evil. Therefore, sometimes his punishment will indeed occur close to the time of the commission of an *aveirah*. When Hashem delays punishment for the generally good person, he will react properly when it comes. Even if he completely forgot about his prior misdeed, he trusts enough in Hashem to accept His judgment, and justify his fate as required by his behavior of a forgotten past. The *rasha*, on the other hand, will lash out at G-d when he cannot understand his "mistreatment" by G-d. This would result in even more punishment down the line. He is better off if he pays his price while he still remembers his sin.

We now arrive at the meaning of our *pasuk*. When Leah said that this time she will praise Hashem, she implies on some level that she did not have so much of an obligation to praise Him for her first children. Indeed, the names she assigned to the first three are self-referential. They speak of her pain, how Hashem saw it, heard it, and gradually lessened it. She did not give full-throated gratitude to Hashem for the simple fact that she was able to bear children – especially while her sister Rochel was not.

With the birth of Yehudah and Leah's assigning a name that does express that gratitude, she puts that fault behind her. She may never have realized that there was something wrong or incomplete about her reaction to the first sons she bore. If she did, she had now moved beyond it. Precisely at that moment, the phenomenon that we have described kicks in. Having freed herself of her previous misconduct, she is now punished for the previous sin.

She is prevented from having any more children.

1. Based on Meleches Machsheves by R. Moshe Cheifetz, 1663-1711.
2. Bereishis 29:35.
3. Yerushalmi, Rosh Hashanah 1:3; Bereishis Rabbah 50:3.
4. [but with insufficient teshuvah to spare them from punishment entirely].