

SHADOWY EXISTENCE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Immortality of a Nation - A Shadowy Existence

The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 87:12) says that in the merit of Yosef's not succumbing to the advances of Potiphar's wife, the Red Sea would one day split for his offspring. This is derived by means of lexical correlation: Regarding Yosef the Torah writes "Vayanas - And he [Yosef] fled and went outside (39:12)." In regard to the splitting of the Red Sea it is written, "The sea saw, vayanas - and it fled." Is there some deeper relationship between the splitting of the sea and Yosef's overcoming the desire to sin with Potiphar's wife, or is this simply a play on words?

In his famous essay Concerning the Jews, Mark Twain wonders:

If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star-dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also away out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvellous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian, rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

What indeed is the secret of our miraculous immortality? Let us examine our nation's infamous archenemy, Amalek; perhaps by identifying what quality it is Amalek seeks to destroy, we will have uncovered the secret of our existence. The Torah commands us to obliterate all remembrance of Amalek:

It shall be that when Hashem, your G-d, gives you rest from all your enemies... you shall wipe out the memory of Amalek from beneath the heaven. (Devarim/Deuteronomy 25:19)

Why does the Torah stress that the memory of Amalek shall be erased "from beneath the heaven?"

The Ba'al Shem Tov explains the verse (Tehillim 121:5), "Hashem is your shadow," to mean that just as a shadow follows in a most precise manner the movements of its producer, so too Hashem "shadows man," dealing with us in a manner corresponding to the way we serve Him. For instance, one who goes out of his way to judge his fellow favourably, Hashem will likewise "go out of His way" and give him the benefit of the doubt even where he may not deserve it. By the same token we could infer that if one serves Hashem with exceptional dedication - rising to overcome difficulties and trials that challenge one's very nature, forcing him to stretch his feeble humanity to levels he himself would never have thought possible - then Hashem will correspondingly "move heaven and earth" to accommodate such a person.

Perhaps this can help us understand the answer to an age-old question: Why did the salvation of Chanukah come about through a full-fledged miracle (both in the exceptional victory of the tiny Jewish army over the mighty Greek forces, and in the oil of the Menorah lasting eight days), while the salvation of Purim - the ascent of Queen Esther to the monarchy and the subsequent downfall of Haman - came about through ostensibly natural means?

Haman and the Persians desired no less than to annihilate the Jewish nation. Our very existence was challenged, and we reacted by an exceptional outpouring of prayer and fasting. In truth, though, there's nothing very exceptional about the Jewish reaction to the Haman- problem. It was do or die - literally. One would only expect that in a fight to the death, one does whatever one has to do to win.

Antiochus and the Greeks, by contrast, did not come to kill. All they desired was our conversion. "Become like us - and we will do you no harm." Indeed, there were those who succumbed to their overtures, and were lost to our nation for eternity. It would have been easy enough for our ancestors, too, to take the conversion route, doing perhaps as the Marranos did during the Spanish inquisition, outwardly behaving as gentiles, and keeping their Judaism behind closed doors. Yet they refused to succumb. They would have no part of a culture that demanded they relinquish the religion of their forefathers. Despite Greek decrees, they continued to study Torah publicly, honour the Shabbos, and keep the mitzvah of bris milah. "Let us rather die as Jews than to live as heathens."

The Jews in the time of the Greeks stretched the very limits of their humanity; they gave everything they had and more - their very lives - for the honour of Hashem's name. In return, Hashem repayed them with nature-stretching miracles. The Jews of Persia did what was right and what was expected; Hashem saved them too, but by "natural means."

The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 87:8) compares the verse here, "And he fled, and went ha-chutzah - outside," to the verse (Bereishis/Genesis 15:5), "And [Hashem] took [Avraham] ha-chutzah - outside." Rashi (there) comments that Hashem took Avraham "outside" the normal limitations of nature; He

"elevated him above the heavens," promising him a child through Sarah, who lacked the natural ability to give birth. Yosef too, by overcoming the exceptional challenge of Potiphar's wife, went "outside" and above the restrictions of his own humanness. He could have succumbed to sin; he could have claimed that the test was simply too great, the temptation overwhelming. Yet he didn't. With "superhuman" effort, he fled the crime scene, leaving everything behind, and ultimately suffering a twelve-year jail term as a result of her wrath. In his merit, the Red Sea would one day "flee" from before his offspring, bending the laws of nature for he who bent his own nature. (Perhaps this also explains why the sea couldn't split until the Jews first jumped into its raging waters; in order for nature to surrender to the Jews, they first had to surrender their lives to Hashem.)

What Amalek seeks to destroy is our ability to rise "above the heaven," giving Hashem everything we have and more. Were he to have succeeded in doing so, perhaps our miraculous existence would have indeed succumbed to the natural forces that have eroded nations far stronger and more numerous. The Torah thus commands us to erase his memory from beneath the heaven. [Based in part by an essay in Nesivos Shalom, Ki Setze p. 130]

The "secret of our immortality," Mr. Twain, lies in our willingness to give everything we have, and far more, for the sake of Hashem and His Torah. Our continued existence, in the face of centuries and millennia of hatred, exile, and persecution, defies explanation. It's something that those living "beneath the heavens" can't rationalize nor understand. As we observe Chanukah, which celebrates our supernatural commitment to Torah and mitzvos, we take the opportunity to rededicate ourselves to the values and ideals that remain just as fresh and as relevant today as they were in the times of Mattisyahu and our ancestors.

Have a good Shabbos and a freilichen Chanukah.

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