

TAKING MATTERS INTO ONE'S OWN HANDS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Seven days after leaving Egypt, Bnei Yisrael found themselves in quite a predicament: Ahead of them lay the raging waters of the sea; from behind, Pharaoh and his powerful army approached.

Moshe did the only logical thing he could: He screamed out to Hashem.

"And Hashem said to Moshe, 'Why do you cry out to me? Speak to the Children of Israel, and let them journey!'"

Rashi comments: Now is not the time to pray, the Children of Israel are in great distress.

We're not used to thinking this way. Normally, when we're really in distress, crying out to Hashem would be the very thing we're expected to do.

When the Jews traveled in the desert, during the daytime, a pillar of cloud went before them to guide them and show them the way. At night time, their encampment was lit by a pillar of fire. On the night that Hashem split the sea, the Torah writes that the pillar of cloud picked itself up from in front of them and went behind them.

Rashi explains, that instead of disappearing as it normally did at night time, it went behind them to protect them from the arrows and stones being slung at them by the Egyptians.

This explains why the Torah tells us that the cloud went behind them, but we may still ask why it goes out of its way to tell us that the cloud departed from in front of them in order to go behind them? It would have been enough to say that the pillar of cloud went behind them to accept the arrows and the stones and protect the Jews.

There is a fundamental difference between the guidance one gets from a pillar of cloud, and that which one receives from a fire.

The pillar of cloud guided them during the daytime; it showed them the way to go, and the path they should take to reach their destiny. There is no need for a pillar of cloud to light up the way during the daytime; during day hours we see perfectly. The guidance it offered could only have been to show them the way.

The pillar of fire enlightened the night for the Jews. When enveloped by darkness, even if one knows or thinks one knows the way, he may still get lost because he doesn't see where he's going.

The cloud pillar offers guidance; the fire simply lights the way for you.

The Torah goes out of its way to tell us here that the cloud pillar departed from in front of them; they were not going to be receiving direct guidance as to which route to take. Yet the fire pillar was there to light the way.

The idea here is that there are times when although Hashem may be there to light the way for us, He does not necessarily lead us by the hand. We are forced to take affirmative action; the failure to do so, even when undertaken ostensibly as an act of faith, is a failure on our part. To be sure, the fire pillar will remain to brighten our way and help us make the right decisions, but the steps are ours to take.

In an interesting letter to Rabbi Abraham J. Twersky this week in Hamodia, a mother writes that she's experienced some friction from her family over her refusal to leave her small children at home alone without a babysitter, relying on the neighbors to listen in with an intercom system. Her siblings, she writes, criticize her for having a lack of faith in Hashem in because she worries something G-d forbid may happen while she's gone.

There may be times that it's permissible to throw up our hands in despair and cry out to Hashem; the Torah teaches us here that we haven't reached that point until we've exhausted all possible avenues, even those that seem most unusual. Standing before the raging waters, Moshe is perhaps justified in feeling there is nothing left to do. Sure there is, says Hashem: jump into the water! My pillar of fire will go before you to light the way, but you must take all the necessary steps to ensure your success in the endeavor.

One of the global symbolic expressions of prayer is outstretched hands. While there are surely many reasons for this, perhaps one of them is this: even as we pray, we acknowledge the fact that our hands must be outstretched, ready to take action and do what needs to be done. We pay for Hashem's assistance, for His guidance, for strength. But we acknowledge that our hands must be ready to do what they have to do in order to accomplish what needs to be done.

In the famous enjoinder we sing, "We are believers, sons of believers, and we have no one on whom to lean, except on Avinu She-bashomayim, our Father in heaven." We are believers, sons of believers: Just as our forefathers did on the brink of the Yam, we believe that Hashem will be there for us, to help us see our actions through to completion. But we acknowledge that the responsibility to do the deed lies in our hands. A person can only lean on something or someone once he has stood himself up on his own two feet. A hand to lean on is of no use for one who refuses to get out of bed.

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