

YISRO - A MAN OF CONVICTION

by Rabbi Jeff Kirshblum

The Talmud in (Sotah 11a) tells us that Pharaoh had three advisers: Yisro, Iyov and Bilaam. When Pharaoh was deciding the most prudent method to exterminate the Jewish people, he sought the opinion of each of his three advisers.

Bilaam, the grandson of Lavan, was an evil man and relished the prospect of eradicating the Jewish people. It was he who advised Pharaoh to kill the male Israelites.

Iyov was opposed to any plan to destroy the Jewish nation. Rather than display his true feelings on the issue, he refrained from offering any opinion. Perhaps he knew that his objections would be met with resistance. He most likely rationalized that he could do more to help the plight of the Jewish people at a later date by remaining in his position as advisor. As a result, he decided not to oppose or accept Bilaam's proposal, but remained silent.

Yisro, on the other hand, vocally rejected Pharaoh's idea of exterminating the Jewish people. Yisro believed it was wrong that these people should be made to suffer for no crime other than being Jewish. Yisro's loud protests angered Pharaoh and Yisro had to flee Egypt in order to save his life.

The Talmud continues by telling us that each of the three advisers was rewarded or punished according to his deed. Bilaam, who encouraged the execution of thousands of innocent Jews, was killed by the very people he sought to exterminate. Iyov, who remained silent in the face of Jewish oppression, was afflicted with a life of pain and suffering. Yisro, who fled because of his opposition, sacrificing his position of leadership and life of comfort and wealth in Egypt, eventually became the father-in-law of Moshe and his descendants became prominent judicial leaders of the Children of Israel.

We know that a very basic tenet of Judaism is that G-d repays a person measure for measure. Therefore, we can clearly understand the reward and punishment of Yisro and Bilaam. However, why was Iyov's punishment so severe? Iyov did not support the decree of persecution against the Jewish people. In fact, even if Iyov had objected, Pharaoh would have still enacted his decree. Iyov's only sin was remaining silent. Why then did he have to suffer such a harsh life, one where tragedy followed tragedy?

The Brisker Rav, Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik, explains that the infliction brought upon Iyov was indeed a punishment measure for measure. Iyov reasoned that he would not accomplish anything by objecting to Pharaoh's decree, therefore he did not raise his voice against it. As a punishment for

his silence, G-d brought upon him terrible pains and suffering. Due to his terrible plight, Iyov was provoked to cry out to G-d and complain. Wasn't Iyov the same person who chose not to raise his voice to Pharaoh's decree? Didn't Iyov believe that protesting accomplishes nothing? If this is so, then why was Iyov objecting now?

Iyov raised his voice in protest now, because it was Iyov who was personally suffering. When one suffers, he instinctively yells out in pain. Although yelling may not alleviate the pain, it does register a strong sign of disapproval. Iyov was now raising his voice as a sign of his disapproval of his painful personal situation. He was no longer silent. Thus Iyov's punishment stirred him to react in a manner that in turn demonstrated the error of his failure to raise his voice in protest against Pharaoh's heinous plan.

The Rambam (Hilchos Ta'anis, chapter 1) states that it is a positive Torah commandment to cry out and sound trumpets when disaster threatens the Jewish people. He bases that on the verse "When you go to war in your land against an enemy who oppresses you, you shall call out with trumpets so that you shall be remembered before the L-rd your G-d and you shall be saved from your enemies" (Bamidbar10:9).

The Rambam explains that the concept of trumpeting and calling out is not only in times of war, but for every impending tragedy. It is a signal for the individual and for the masses to evaluate their situation. They must determine if it is their own misdeeds that have brought the threat upon themselves. Without that signal, the threat will merely be accepted as a fact of life and the purpose of the tragedy will be for naught.

Today, the Jewish Nation is faced with a great many threats. There are threats from enemies on the outside and from enemies within our own ranks. Too many of us remain silent; our voices are not heard. Many of us feel that protests will not accomplish anything. They are the Iyov's of our generation. The pain of our brothers and sisters must be felt as if it is our own pain. We must sound out the trumpets of our conscience. We cannot stand by as though we are neutral. As Dante said: "The worst place in purgatory is reserved for those who are neutral in times of crisis".

The haftorah is found in Yeshayah 6:1- 7:6; 9:5-6.

The haftorah begins with Yeshayah's vision. He saw the heavenly throne, its seat firmly planted in the heavens but its legs resting in the Temple. Seraphic angels were hovering about, calling one to another, "Holy, holy, holy is G-d, L-rd of the hosts, all the land is filled with His glory" (6:3). This phrase is recited three times every morning and forms the focal point of the Kedusha in Shemoneh Esrei.

The vision continued. G-d asks for someone to volunteer to tell the Jewish people of the terrible doom that lies in store for them if they do not repent. Yeshayah consents. G-d foretells of the destruction of the northern land and the exile of the ten tribes in 65 years. G-d foretells the final total desolation of the entire land ten generations later.

The vision contains a beautiful metaphor. Describing the utter desolation of the land, the verse says, "G-d will drive out man far away; the midst of the land shall be greatly desolate. In another ten (generations of kings) (the entire land) will go and become barren like an elm and an oak that have shed their leaves (in the winter) but the holy seed of vitality is still in them"(6:12-13).

What is meant by this metaphor: comparing Israel to a tree in the winter? What is the "holy seed of vitality?"

When we see the trees in the winter, they appear to be dead. The leaves have fallen away. The wood is frozen. One seeing this for the first time would not be able to conceive that in the spring the tree will come back to life.

The picture of desolation and gloom was vividly painted by the Ramban when he first came to Jerusalem in 1267. He composed an emotional letter to his son. "What can I tell you about this land other than that it is desolate and bare? The holier the site, the more desolate it is. Jerusalem is the most desolate of them all." Ramban continues to describe that the buildings were in ruins and the city was abandoned. There was no minyan, no synagogue, and no Sefer Torah in the city. Yeshayah's prophecy of gloom had been fulfilled.

The Ramban was determined to bring the holy city back to life. He took possession of one of the ruins and proclaimed it to be a synagogue. He encouraged Jews to come to the city. He had Sifrei Torah brought from Safad.

From that determined beginning, Jerusalem was revived from the dead, just like the tree in Yeshayah's vision. Today, Jerusalem is a thriving, vibrant city. The sounds of Torah are heard in its countless yeshivas. The voice of prayer is heard in the synagogues that fill the city. And the synagogue that the Ramban founded 750 years ago is still there. His minyan still recites "Holy, holy, holy is G-d, L-rd of the hosts, all the land is filled with His glory," many times each and every day.

Malbim says that the "holy seed of vitality" refers to the righteous men of Israel. They will have the ability to bring the Holy Land back to life. This prophecy of Yeshayah was said shortly before the exile of the Ten Tribes to the north. When the exile occurred, everyone thought that the end of the Jewish people was at hand. Then, there arose the righteous king, Chizkiyahu, who brought Israel back to its former glory. The haftorah did not want to conclude with a depressing image of despair. It skips from verse 7:6 to 9:5, to the words of hope for deliverance, "For a child is born to us, a son has been given to us, and the rule shall rest on his shoulders" (9:5).

Most commentaries say that the "child" refers to King Chizkiyahu who indeed did give the Jewish Nation a temporary rest from the threat of doom. However it also refers to the comforting notion that in each and every generation there will be this "child," this "seed of vitality." There have been times in our history when the Jews abandoned the Torah way of life. It seemed as though there was no hope for the future. G-d, through Yeshayah's prophecy, is telling us that there will always be present in our midst, righteous Jews who can revitalize the Jewish Nation. Just as there was Chizkiyahu in his

generation and the Ramban in his generation, each one of us should do his part to invigorate the holy seed within ourselves and help bring the arrival of the ultimate "holy seed," the Mashiach.

The connection to the parshah is evident. The parshah tells us about the Divine Revelation and the receiving of the Torah. The Torah contains many rules and regulations. It also contains many blessings. The prime blessing is that the Children of Israel will inherit the land of Israel. However, with the blessings comes a great responsibility, the responsibility to uphold the laws of the Torah. As long as the Jews treasure and keep the Torah, they will be entitled to possess the land of Israel. Should they abandon the Torah, then they will be compelled to abandon their homeland.

This connection between the blessing of the Holy Land and adherence to the Torah is made clear in Yeshayah's vision. "They have closed their ears and shut their eyes so they will not hear with their ears nor see with their eyes; otherwise, their hearts would understand that they should repent and be cured. The cities will become empty of inhabitants and the houses will be without people. The land shall be deserted and empty" (6:10-11).

Have a great Shabbos!
Jeff Kirshblum

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