

NAME THAT TUNE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

"And Moshe said, 'Do not be afraid! Stand still! and see the salvation of God, which He will show you today. For, the Egyptians you see today you will never see again. God will fight for you, and you shall be silent!' " (14:13).

These words are some of the most dramatic in the history of mankind. They refer back to the spectacular miracle of the splitting of the Red Sea (actually, it was the Reed Sea), and the subsequent drowning of the most powerful army at that time in history. But they also refer to an even more current miracle, one that happened as recently as within this decade.

When the Persian Gulf War broke out in 1989, I was living in Toronto. One of my responsibilities was to deliver a daily hashkofa shiur to some young women in a post-seminary institution. At that time, during the war, it was common to look for and find all kinds of hints to the historical significance of the current war with Saddam Hussein (who liked to look at himself as the most recent version of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king responsible for the destruction of the first Temple). Very often, I used the parsha of that week as the basis of my shiur, showing how the Torah addressed current issues in a very deep, and sometimes, subtle manner. However, in this case, the Torah's allusion to the Gulf War, and our redemption from it, was anything but subtle.

Each parsha is divided into seven aliyos, which happen to correspond to the seven days of the week. Since it is a mitzvah incumbent upon a man to read each verse of the weekly parsha twice, along with Targum Onkeles, and preferably with Rashi as well (Shulchan Aruch, 285) , it is my minhag to read one aliyah a day to finish by Shabbos morning. The day that Saddam Hussein finally followed through with his threats to bomb Israel by sending in some Scud missiles (in January 1990), that morning I had read the second aliyah of this week's parsha, which included the words above.

What made the juxtaposition of the historical events so startling was the last verse of the aliyah, which, after listening to the radio, echoed the words of the then president of the United States of America, George Bush. For the Jewish people, the Scuds were a threat to Jewish lives, and, Israeli military pride. However, for George Bush, the Iraqi attack on Israel also posed a threat to the tenuous alliance of Arab nations he had worked so hard to assemble against Saddam Hussein. If Iraq could succeed at instigating the Israeli army into avenging itself, without doubt, most Arab nations would have pulled out of the alliance, leaving George Bush and the American people to fight the war against Hussein on their own. Hence George Bush's plea that day to the Israel government and its

public: "Don't get involved! We'll fight this war for you!" And they did.

Talk about timing. It was as if Saddam Hussein and George Bush were following a script, a Divine script at that, working in concert with the Parashas HaShavuah. The truth is, we believe they were, regardless of whether or not they were conscious of it. God was talking to the Jewish people through the parsha, having the events our lives happen to correspond to the weekly portion. In the end, the conclusion of the Gulf War echoed (albeit less spectacularly) the ending of the Egyptian war, with the Jewish nation silently watching on as its enemy was Divinely overcome.

What makes this comparison even more striking is that, like Paroah, Hussein allowed himself to be dragged towards destruction, fighting a war against all the odds. No one can fully understand, by way of nature, why Paroah would commit his entire army to follow the Jewish people into the sea, and risk utter destruction, especially after witnessing what happened back in Egypt. Likewise, what logic could there have been for Hussein to take on the Coalition, as it was called back then, against all odds, and face a humiliating defeat and financial collapse? ... Unless, of course, that's what God wanted to have happen (the Ba'al HaTurim, on 14:4, even points out an allusion to how God strengthened the heart of the future king of Bavel to cause his destruction!).

However, there is a breakdown in the comparison. Egypt was utterly destroyed in the sea, and the Jews never were bothered by that Paroah, and those Egyptians ever again. However, Hussein is still around, and is still a wildcard in the Middle East. Perhaps the difference lies in our reaction to the miracle of 1990, as opposed to how we reacted to the splitting of the sea in the year 1313 BCE, some 3300 years ago.

The Torah (and Haftorah) speaks about Shira (song), the specially composed tribute to God for the miracles He performs to save the lives of His people. If anything, Shira takes the focus off our own military prowess, and focuses our attention instead on God, and how, with His help and guidance, we were able to overcome great odds, and to stand up against the world.

How important is saying Shira? The gemora says that had King Chizkiah, during the time of the First Temple, sang praises of God for the miracle that occurred for him (in his war against the massive army of Sancheriv), he would have been the Moshiach (Sanhedrin 94a)! But he did not, and the rest is history, our history, and all that occurred since then.

It's not that God yearns for a pat on the back from us. It's more that He desires to elevate us to a higher spiritual plain in order for us to be able to have an even greater experience of Him, the most sublime pleasure possible and purpose of life. Shira exhibits how much we are able to tear away the "veils" of nature from over our mind's eye, and see the soul of the matter, the hand of God orchestrating all the events of daily life towards an ultimate goal that supercedes any events of current historical importance. Such a recognition serves to "purify" the world, and lead to a period of history of miracles even greater than those such as the splitting of the sea, or the overcoming of tyrants.

It is such a perception that keeps the Amaleks at bay (see the end of the parsha), for, as the rabbis point out, the numerical value of the word amalek (spelled, ayin, mem, lamed, kuf) is, 240 (70 + 40 + 30 + 100). This is the same value as the word "sufek" (60 + 80 + 100), which means "doubt." Doubt about what? Doubt about how much God plays a role in daily life, especially when we experience negative events.

Shira is our proclamation that God is always there, and that all He does is for the good. This is why the Talmud says that one must bless God for the bad things that happen, just as he should bless Him for the good things that happen (Brochos 60b). Shira is very much this kind of response. Perhaps, then, had we taken the opportunity to sing our own kind of Shira after the miracles of the Gulf War, Hussein would never have been able to return in any form. Even more, if we take the time to see the hand of God in all that happens to us personally, and then bear witness the Divine Providence in our lives and the life of our nation, and sing Shira about it, then perhaps we can spare ourselves from being subject to the forces of nation that hold us back.

And it is through such recognition that eventually our enemies become destroyed, often by the very means they sought to use against us (Haman was hanged by the gallows he sought to use to execute Mordechai).

Can there be a better lead in to the holiday of Purim than this?

Have a great Shabbos, And, oh, don't forget to Sing!
Pinchas Winston

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