

# GETTING OUR (NATIONAL) ACT TOGETHER

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

## Friday Night:

Parashas VaEschanan begins with a recounting of Moshe's impassioned plea to G-d to change the decree against him so that he could finally enter the Land of Israel. However, as he pointed out to the listening nation, the shortcomings of the nation prevented this from happening.

However, if you recall, it was Moshe's own action that brought judgment against him. In Parashas Chukas, Moshe hit the rock to bring out the water, when G-d told him to do so by talking to the rock only. It sounds as if Moshe was blaming the people for his own mistake, which, of course, is not the case.

The midrash tells us what Moshe meant. Moshe took full responsibility for hitting the rock (though he could have blamed that on them too for acting so insolently and inciting his anger). However, through Moshe's incredible power of prayer, he was able to compensate for what was lost by hitting the rock instead of speaking to it. In short, through his prayers, Moshe was able to create a reality that would have permitted his crossing the river into the Land, as if he had rectified the transgression by the rock.

Then why didn't Moshe cross the river in the end? Because the Jewish people were not ready for him to do so.

This has to be understood within its historical context. Moshe was not simply a leader par excellence. He was **THE** leader of the Jewish people, and if anyone possessed the potential to be the Moshiach, it was Moshe Rabbeinu himself; if anyone could herald the final redemption for the Jewish people, it was Ben Amram-Moshe, the son of Amram.

If so, then Moshe's crossing of the Jordan River would have represented far more than the fulfillment of his own personal dream-it would have represented the final redemption. Furthermore, the midrash says, had Moshe entered the land, the first thing he would have done would have been to locate the place of the Temple, and then see to its construction, and any Temple built by the Moshiach, by definition, can never be destroyed.

As wonderful as that sounded, it did not forebode well for the Jewish people. For, the Jewish people had yet to reach their full spiritual potential, and were bound to transgress in the future, as history

has shown. In fact, there is even an allusion in this week's parsha to the fact that it would lead to an exile 850 years after being on the land (?). As per the cause-and-effect relation spelled out in Parashas BeChukosai and Parashas Ki Savo, such transgressions require a Divine response to rectify the spiritual damage that results from straying from Torah.

Any destruction should really be inflicted upon the perpetrator, but that could amount to the destruction of the entire nation, which G-d, in His infinite mercy could not accept. So, says the midrash, G-d finds other ways to cause a similar effect, without taking more lives than necessary, such as destroying the Temples.

But what if the Temple can't be destroyed? What if the Temple was built by Moshiach, prematurely before the people were ready for it, and it can't be taken as an atonement for the transgressions of the Jewish nation?

This is what Moshe was referring to.

"Had you been spiritually developed enough to usher in the era of Moshiach, I would have been able to cross the Jordan River and been your Moshiach. But, alas, you were not, and as a result, I could not build the Temple, for such a Temple would have resulted in your destruction, which I could never allow. For this reason, I must die on this side of the Jordan River, so that your transgressions should not lead to your destruction."

It is a powerful lesson. Our leaders exist in their own merit, but also in our merit. What happens to them is based very much on where we, as a nation, are holding spiritually. Prophecy was taken away from the prophets not because they didn't deserve prophecy, but because we no longer deserved to have prophets. In fact, the Talmud teaches, in every generation there are potential prophets, but if the nation doesn't deserve prophecy, they will not receive the Divine word.

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## **Shabbos Day:**

There are a lot of details and rituals to Torah-Judaism. Some are well-known and even practiced by unaffiliated Jews, such as the Pesach Seder; others are less well-known, and are often scorned by those unaware of their importance and meaning. The truth is, so-called "Orthodox-Judaism" is not nearly as respected as it once was, and, in the words of one great rabbi, respect for Torah itself is at an all-time historical low. This week's parsha hints at why and how this happens.

Only be careful and protect yourself well, so that you should not forget the things which your eyes have seen, and cause them to leave your heart all the days of your life ... (Devarim 4:9)

When you don't forget them but do them in a correct manner, then you will appear wise and understanding; if you do them incorrectly because of forgetfulness, then you will appear foolish.

(Rashi)

If you had to place your finger on one factor that denies Torah-Judaism the credibility it ought to have, it would probably be inconsistency. Even among those who accept the Divinity of Torah, there is often disagreement as to the best way to fulfill a mitzvah. There are Ashkanazim and Sephardim, Misnagdim and Chassidim, and hundreds of different groups among them all. What kind of message does this send?

Often, the message that radiates out to the unaffiliated Jew is that, we really don't know what we're doing, and that everyone is simply doing what he feels best acting out. The appearance of confusion on the "Inner Circles" leaves the "Outer Circles" even more confused, and perhaps, even frustrated. Eventually, the lack of consistency can even lead to scorn, just as the Torah warned.

For many who have found their niche within Judaism, they may not care. Who says all Jews have to be doing the same thing? Who says that every Jewish has to be a carbon copy of his brother or sister? Even during the first commonwealth, when we still possessed the land and the Temple, the twelve tribes varied somewhat from each other in their approach to the Torah; why should we be any different?

It is not a question of being carbon copies of each other. It is about being a unified nation. It is about bringing Moshiach and having one king for the entire people. It is about being a "Light Unto the Nations," and elevating mankind to a holier status. It is about sharing a common national agenda so that we can create synergy of all Jewish potential.

The Temple was destroyed for a variety of reasons, but the main reason was "sinas chinum"-unwarranted hatred. However, hatred, as we learn from Ya'akov's wife Leah, can mean "less-loved" (the Torah says Ya'akov hated Leah, but the commentators explained that compared the love he had for Rachel, Leah "appeared" hated). Hence, the unwarranted hatred Jews felt for one another that led to the destruction of the Temple may simply be less love for each other than then they had for themselves.

If so, then the Talmudic statement that, "Any generation within which the Temple is not rebuilt is looked upon as if it destroyed the Temple," makes sense. If personal agendas mattered more than the national agenda, which is the foundation of the Temple, and that destroyed the Temple, then, any generation that continues on with this approach continues to crack the foundation upon which the Temple is supposed to be rebuilt.

How do we realign our personal agendas with the national agenda, and rebuild the Temple in our day. By going back into the depths of Judaism, by going back into the basis of all Jewish traditions, back to the Talmud and the commentaries of those who were closer to the Mt. Sinai event. By jogging the national memory of the Jewish people, a collective agenda will emerge, and the scorn of the disbelievers will also be transformed into respect for the time-tested wisdom of the Torah Nation.

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## SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Everyone knows that we have an obligation to take care of our physical health, but many are not familiar with the Torah source for this. Is there a directive, or is taking care of the gift of life simply a logical extension of all of Torah?

The truth is, the mitzvah to take care of one's health is in this week's parsha:

*Take good care of yourselves ... (Devarim 4:15)*

In the context of the parsha itself, these words mean to be careful not to suffer spiritual illness, by falling to the ways of idol worship. However, it is the source of the mitzvah to guard our physical health as well, and not to do that which endangers our lives unnecessarily.

When people hear this, they often ask the question, "So how come so many religious Jews smoke?"

In reality, Torah Jews are not accustomed to living dangerously (with the exception of Shabbos morning cholents!), and we certainly don't like living on the "edge." Left alone, the Torah-Jew is content to repeat the same pattern each day, finding more than enough excitement in the world of Torah, and more than enough challenge in raising a good, G-d-fearing family.

With respect to the issue of smoking, there is a lot of responsa from great rabbis discussing the issue, and whether or not it is permissible to smoke nowadays. Practically every rabbi today has stated that, according to Torah law, a Jew should not begin smoking. As for Jews who began smoking at a time that the world had yet to realize the danger of smoking, there is controversy. As one would suspect, the issue is a very difficult one to decide, since for many who are addicted to smoking, being made to quit "cold-turkey" could result in other more serious Torah violations. The bottom line, as far as this parsha sheet is concerned, if it is an issue for you, consult your local orthodox rabbi.

However, one thing is for certain: good health is a Torah mitzvah. But I will add that in the "good ole days," when we used to have prophets among the Jewish people, a "sick" person did not go to a doctor, he went to a prophet, because physical sickness was viewed as the result of spiritual sickness, a message from Heaven to mend one's ways. Doctors existed only to advise us as to how to pursue a healthy lifestyle.

Today, though we may not be able to pursue prophets (though we do pursue "profits"), still, one must not look at sickness as being random and meaningless. The fact that we lost prophecy doesn't mean that we lost total contact with G-d. We may not be able to fully interpret the events of lives with certainty, in terms of any kind of Divine message, but one thing is clear: physical debilitation is a way to sensitize us to higher values, to the value of life and of being a part of it. Physical suffering is a push from Above to seek out the most meaningful life possible.

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## Melave Malkah:

The Talmud says that Moshiach will be born on Tisha B'Av. Physically this is true, and intellectually this is true. For, on Tisha B'Av, as we sit there on the floor (or short stools) like mourners, and recite the special liturgy composed for that day, and even avoid learning Torah (other than the sections dealing with the destruction of the Temple), we can't help but come to realize how **UNIMPORTANT** the Temple has become to us.

We have been in exile for so long now, and have lived without a Temple for almost two millennia, that we are used to it, so-to-speak. We have become like blind people who have adjusted so well to being blind, that we forgot how wonderfully fulfilling life is with sight, as if seeing the wonders of creation is not that important at all.

On Tisha B'Av, we come to our senses. Sometimes it takes a tragedy, G-d forbid, to wake us up to what we had, and what we lost. Tisha B'Av is that kind of a crisis. And realizing how much the Temple means to us is like "breaking ground" for the next one, the third and final Temple. This is why we can go into Tu B'Av, the fifteenth day of Av with an almost complete heart. Just like the joy we feel after Yom Kippur indicates Divine forgiveness, so too does the joy after properly mourning the loss of the Temple indicate that we have placed some important cornerstones in the foundation of the next Temple.

This is what the Talmud means when it says, "Anyone who properly mourns Jerusalem will merit to see her rebuilt." We should be so fortunate, and, who knows, maybe Moshiach is walking the face of the earth right now, and maybe ...

Have a great Shabbos, and a wonderful and joyous Tu B'Av,  
Pinchas Winston

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