OF TRANSFORMATION AND CONFORMATION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d spoke to Moshe, saying, "Pinchas, the son of Elazar the son of Aharon HaKohen, turned away My anger from the Children of Israel, when he was zealous with My jealousy in the midst of them, so that I didn't destroy the Children of Israel in My jealousy." (Bamidbar 25:10)

The posuk is referring to Pinchas' act of zealousness at the end of last week's parshah, when he killed Zimri (a prince from the tribe of Shimon), and Cozbi, the Midianite princess sent in to lure Moshe. From amidst the chaos ...

Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon HaKohen, saw and he arose from amidst the assembly and took his spear in his hand. (Bamidbar 25:7) After 176,000 Jews had died for worshipping Ba'al Peor, and 24,000 from the tribe of Shimon died in a plague, Pinchas' act of zealousness restored the order. As a reward for this, Pinchas attained the unattainable: the kehuna (priesthood).

This is because Pinchas had already been born when G-d told Moshe that Aharon and his sons (i.e., Nadav, Avihu, Elazar, and Itamar), and their seed after them, would be priests forever. This meant children that would thereafter be born to Elazar; not those that had already been born, like Pinchas. This is why this week's parshah has to state:

" ... The Covenant of the Kehuna will be for him and his descendants after him forever ... (Bamidbar 25:13)

There is only one problem, says the Pri Tzaddik: How could Pinchas retroactively become a kohen (which is what he would have had to have done to become a kohen, since G-d was not about to change the law just to let Pinchas become a kohen)? The answer, says the Pri Tzaddik, comes from the Zohar:

After Pinchas acted zealously ... and the tribe of Shimon came after him in anger, his soul left him, at which time the two souls of Nadav and Avihu entered him. (Zohar, Parashas Tzav 14b)

In other words, in the blink of an eye, the body of Pinchas both lost its previous soul and inherited two new ones, or better yet, two older ones: the souls of Nadav and Avihu. It was Nadav and Avihu who had died when they offered the "strange fire" back in Parashas Shemini. Now, according to the Zohar, it was the souls of Nadav and Avihu that had transformed Pinchas into someone who could, in effect, retroactively become a kohen. In other words, concludes the Pri Tzaddik, Pinchas' entrance

into the Kehuna did not constitute a change in G-d's law, but the continuation of it.

This introduces a new idea that is alluded to by the Ba'al HaTurim, who states that Pinchas eventually became Eliyahu HaNavi. Normally, reincarnation means that a soul comes back in another lifetime and in a new body (usually unbeknownst to the person himself). However, this is usually only after the person has died and "returned" to the ground.

Nevertheless, this had not been the case with Pinchas, whose life didn't even skip a beat-literally. Instantaneously as Pinchas' own soul left him, the souls of Nadav and Avihu entered him; according to the Arizal, when Eliyahu's time came, that soul also entered Pinchas' body while he was living.

The addition of such souls, according to the Arizal, happens often in history. For reasons known mostly to G-d, He sends the souls of tzaddikim down as an "additions" to living individuals, sometimes for a short duration, sometimes for the rest of a person's life. Usually it is special souls being given to extraordinary people who have a major role to play in Jewish history.

Not only does this help to understand how Pinchas later became a kohen, but it also reminds us that it is a mistake to judge people by what the physical eye alone sees. We can judge actions, but it is very hard to judge souls, if not impossible. This is something only G-d can do.

Shabbos Day:

Reuvain, the first born of Yisroel: the children of Reuvain: Chanoch, the family of Hachanochi ... (Bamidbar 26:5)

Since the nations spoke disparagingly of Yisroel, saying, "How can these trace their descent by their tribes? Do they think that the Egyptians did not overcome their mothers? If they proved themselves master of their bodies, how much more so were they over their wives!" For this reason the Holy One, Blessed is He, put His name upon them, with the letter "heh" on one side and the letter "yud" on the other side, intimating that "I bear testimony for them that they are the sons of their fathers." (Rashi)

Rashi is referring to the "heh" that appears at the beginning of each name, and the "yud" that comes at the end of each name ("Hachanochi" as opposed to "Chanoch" alone). The letters "yud" and "heh" are the first two letters from G-d's Ineffable Name, which He allowed to be attached to the name of each family to confirm the purity of its lineage.

If you think about it, it is quite remarkable that the Jewish people had been so protected in Egypt. When it comes to all the other nations of history, the Talmud states that Sancheriv successfully "confused" all of them, so that no purebred pre-Sancheriv nation exists today (Brochos 28a). Every nation has cross-populated to the point that it has lost just about all relationship to its founding

population. Except, that is, for the Jewish people (in spite of the high rate of intermarriage throughout the generations).

From this week's parshah, we can understand why. Preservation of the species is not so much a matter of nature, which seems to lead to just the opposite. It seems that preserving a nation has to do with Divine Providence, which arranges for "things to work out" even when, naturally-speaking, they ought not to. Somehow the Jewish people are protected from total extinction.

But not all of the Jewish people, as Rashi also points out in this week's parshah. Apparently, some of the families that left Egypt with the Jewish people did not survive. The question is, why?

Perhaps the answer lies not only in the fact that G-d attached His Name to ours, but also in the fact that our names have to be worthy of G-d's inclusion. In other words, holiness can only attach itself to that which can contain it, and if a family is not striving to grow spiritually, then it ceases to be a "container" for G-d's Holy Light. When this happens, though the physical aspect of the family may live on, the spiritual aspect may, G-d forbid, die off. Eventually we see from this week's parshah that this leads to physical extinction as well.

It is no different than the Bais HaMikdosh (Temple). Tradition tells us that the entire time the Temple stood, the people believed they could sin and be forgiven. It shocked them that non-Jewish hands could even come close to the Temple, let alone destroy it. They failed to understand that the Holy Light that filled the Temple did so as long as the building was holy enough to contain it, which was dependent upon the level of righteousness of the people.

This is what the Midrash means when it says that, at the time of the destruction of the Temple, a voice came out from heaven and told Nebuchadnetzar:

You grind already ground flour; you have killed an already killed people. Eichah Rabbosi 1:43).

In other words, says the Nefesh HaChaim, the Jewish people, through wanton behavior, caused the Temple to become a building that could not longer hold its kedushah, and the result was a vulnerable stone building. It only remained for Nebuchadnetzar to provide the final "hammer blow" and drag us into exile.

Seudos Shlishi:

G-d spoke to Moshe, saying, "To these [families] the land shall be divided as an inheritance ..." (Bamidbar 26:52)

As the nation approached the borders of Eretz Yisroel after 40 years of wandering in the desert, life in the land became a closer reality. As a result, this week's parshah discusses the division of the land

among the many families left to receive their eternal portion of the Holy Land. However, not all of Eretz Yisroel was the same, and some lands were more advantageous than others. Didn't any tribe complain about its portion?

Perhaps they would have ...

Had Not The Holy One, Blessed is He, made each portion find favor in the settlers' eyes, Eretz Yisroel could not have been divided. (Yerushalmi Yoma 20a)

The truth is, the Talmud does record some discontent:

Zevulun said before The Holy One, Blessed is He, "To my brothers you gave fields and vineyards, but to me you gave mountains and valleys; to my brothers you gave land, but to me you gave lakes and rivers!" (Megillah 6a)

Apparently Zevulun was unaffected by the "chayn" of his portion, and thus still found reason to complain. However, G-d's answer, perhaps, answers for the Talmud:

He [G-d] answered him, "Everyone will need you, because of the Chalazon ..."

The Chalazon was a special fish that provided the unique purple-blue die used for the "techeles" thread of tzitzis. It was such a valuable commodity that the tribe of Zevulun became very wealthy selling it to the rest of the tribes. Perhaps, this is what the Talmud is alluding to, which is a lesson not just about inheriting Eretz Yisroel, but about life in general: Don't underestimate the value of what you have.

Very often in life, we tend to value what others possess, especially when we ourselves don't possess it as well. However, as we learn from the division of Eretz Yisroel, every portion has its own unique value, one that is best suited for the tribe meant to inherit it. It's just a question of finding that "chayn" by looking inwards, as opposed to outwards at the portions of other people.

This is true about land, and, concludes the Talmud, it is true about spouses and purchases. Divine Providence pairs husband and wife together early in life, and purchaser and purchasee as well. Each possesses a chayn that is apparent often only to the other spouse or the purchaser, whatever the case may be. It is our job to seek and find that chayn, to hold on to it, and to nurture it. Then we can fulfill the Mishnah's dictum:

Who is a wealthy person? One who is happy with his portion." (Pirkei Avos 4:1)

Melave Malkah:

G-d spoke to Moshe, saying, "Command the Children of Israel, and tell them, "My Offering, My

Bread-Offering for My Fire-Offerings for a pleasing odor to Me, you must offer in its appointed time ..." (Bamidbar 28:1)

Toward the end of the parshah, the discussion turns to sacrifices, beginning with the Korban Tamid, the Continual-Offering. This was a sacrifice that was brought twice daily, once at sunrise and once just before sunset. It was a Korban Olah (Burnt-Offering), that is, a sacrifice that was consumed on the altar and not eaten by the priests.

Of the tragedies that are mourned on the 17th of Tammuz (the fast day that just passed), one is the cessation of this offering during the time of the First Temple, or, according to others, during the time of the Second Temple. There is an account of the latter in the Talmud:

When the House of Chashmonai was at civil war, Hyrkanus was outside [the Temple] and Aristobolus was inside. Each day they would lower money in a basket, and they [Hyrkanus' camp] would send up the two Continual-Offerings. There was an elder there familiar with Greek wisdom, and he hinted to them with Greek wisdom, and told them, "As long as they perform the Temple service, we will not overcome them." The next day, after they lowered down the money, they instead sent up a pig. When it reached half-way up the wall, it dug its nails into the wall, and Eretz Yisroel shook 400 miles. At that time, they cursed the one who raised pigs, and the one who teaches his son Greek wisdom. (Sota 49b)

There are many lessons to be derived from this account, one of which is the underlying basis for Jewish continuity, which the Continual-Offering represented (see this week's parshah for 5757). This is why it was a pig that Hyrkanus sent up to replace the Tamid-Offering, and why it was "Greek wisdom" that led to this.

Though there is no greater symbol of "treif" in the Torah world than the pig, in actuality, the pig has at least one of the two signs that make an animal kosher: split hooves. The Midrash says that "he" uses this to fool Jews into thinking he is kosher, sticking his hoofed feet forward while concealing the fact that he does not chew his cud (the second sign of a kosher animal). Since the latter is internal and the former is external, many people fall for this ruse, and end up eating treif that they believe is in fact, kosher (if this is not true literally, then it is certainly true figuratively).

This, says the holiday of Chanukah, was the problem with Greek wisdom, and by extension, Western thought as well. So much of it is based on "good" ideas and sound thinking, and has led to very positive results, such as social services, etc.; that part can be compared to the "split hooves" of the pig. On the other hand, what is not revealed to many are the many internal moral contradictions that eventually corrupt society and those who adhere to its values, resulting, eventually, in denial of G-d and of true moral values, all of to which history bears testimony.

This is why the hooves of the pig, after hitting the walls of the Temple, caused such a massive earthquake. This was to indicate to the Jews there and all those who would follow that it is either all kosher, or not kosher at all. Half-kosher is both beguiling and ultimately destructive because it is the

biggest threat to Jewish continuity, since Jews pursue it with a false sense of confidence and with little concern for the future of Judaism, and the world for that matter.

As they say, "If you want to make Torah popular, ban it; outlaw it. Then Jews will come from all over asking, 'What is Torah? How can we learn it?' "

In other words, as long as society permits Torah to be learned then countless Jews feel little or no sense of urgency to learn it and preserve it. As long as our hosts' society make us feel "at home," then we Jews tend to become very much at home ... in someone else's house. The result: assimilation, intermarriage, and a complete loss of Jewish identity. It happened in Babylonia, it happened in Spain, it happened in pre-war Europe, and it has already happened in America as well.

However, that is never the end of the story. The conflict between Aristobolus and Hyrkanus was resolved shortly after-by the Romans who came in and slaughtered myriads of Jews. This was all on the way to destroying the Temple, Jerusalem, and the second Jewish Commonwealth.

We're still living out that exile today, and although this lesson is one that we are supposed to contemplate everyday, it is especially important to do so during these three weeks, which began with the fast of the 17th of Tammuz, and which will end with the fast day of Tisha B'Av. Perhaps taking the message seriously will began a wave of national teshuvah, and allow us to merit to be the generation to witness the transformation of these fast days into holidays of joy instead!

Have a wonderful Shabbos,

Pinchas Winston

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