

WHY 2K AND YISRO

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Yisro, the priest of Midian, Moshe's father-in-law, heard of all that G-d had done for Moshe and Israel, His people, and that G-d had brought Israel out of Egypt ... Yisro, Moshe's father-in-law came with his [Moshe's] sons and his wife to Moshe in the desert, where he camped at the mountain of G-d ... (Shemos 18:1-5)

They must have laughed long and hard at Yisro. They must have laughed at him when he got up and left Midian to become a convert in the desert where the Jewish people had camped. They probably told him, "Why bother? Their time will come and go. It won't be very long before they'll be stepped on again, and rejected by the rest of the world ... You want to join THAT?" However, in spite of the ribbing, Yisro went anyway, and became a full-fledged member of the Jewish people.

And you can just imagine all the people who today would have told him "I told you so." After all, the glory of Mt. Sinai has come and gone, and anti-Semitism has yet to let up. Even many from the Jewish people themselves reject their Jewish heritage today. So, in the end, shouldn't Yisro have?

Yisro would have answered a resounding "NO!" He might even have added as a warning, "He who laughs first laughs last," or, perhaps never again. Why? Because Yisro didn't come out of the comfort of Midian because he thought that, at that moment in time, the redemption had come. On the contrary, he even went back to Midian after he converted.

No, Yisro's conversion had been because of what he "heard," and more importantly, what he "saw" in what he heard. Yisro was one of the few individuals who not only saw the "writing on the wall," but he knew how to read it as well. And the "writing" he read and understood went like this:

"G-d has separated out the Jewish people, and they are going to receive His Torah NOW, and they are going to be rewarded with eternal life LATER. Though they may not look important NOW, they will be important LATER."

There is an important lesson to learn from Yisro, especially since the Ten Commandments were given in "his" parshah. It is a great compliment to have your name associated with the giving of Torah, and we might learn something from Yisro's greatness and apply it to today.

"How?" you ask?

I have spent some time over the last few weeks looking into the Y2K thing (the "Millennium Bug"). Or, should I say, it has been looking into me, since I am being sent articles from all over.

So far, and it is still early in the year, the conclusion I am drawing from all the various different sources is that, at best, there is uncertainty. There is no question that many sectors of the population have been 100% successful at either resolving the problem (I am skeptical about the 100% part), or reducing it. There is also no question that many sectors of the population around the world--including Russia and the developing countries--have not, and are unlikely to resolve their problems by January 1, 2000. And it seems that their failures can end up being shared, even by those who have taken the time, spent the money, and have been successful in killing their portion of the "Millennium Bug."

But that is not what makes me think. What troubles me is, what if the time for the redemption has come? I want to know WHY "2K" in the first place. After all, it wouldn't be the first world-wide catastrophe that had humble beginnings, only to become a monstrous crisis it should NEVER have become, but did anyways.

First of all, there are Midrashic hints "floating" around that 5760/2000 will be an important year. One reputable source (hundreds of years old) predicted a world-wide "cleansing" flood in the year 5760. As we know from other rabbinic literature, not all "floods" have to be with water, and we probably won't understand what this means until it happens, if it happens.

Yes, I know ... I know very well that many years have been targeted for Moshiach's arrival (including most recently the year 1990), and they've already come and gone. And guess what? No Moshiach. Well, at least that's the way it appears to be ... However, perhaps if one takes a step back, then the "writing" on the wall may begin to form words, then sentences, and, for some, perhaps even paragraphs.

"What writing," you ask?

Let's face it, even according to the optimists, the Oslo Peace Accords are not quite working out as "they" had hoped. In which direction will they go, and what will be the reactions of the parties involved? Most of the time, at least according to those of us who live in Eretz Yisroel, it just seems like a Catch-22 for the Jewish People.

And let us not forget that the year 2000 has been a long-anticipated repeat engagement of the founding member of the Christian religion. Right now, they are building hotels all around Jerusalem (though tourism is at its lowest), to house the tens of thousands of faithful that have already begun strolling in. That promises to add confusion to confusion over the next year-and-a-half. Will we see false messiahs on every corner proclaiming their personal kingdom of Heaven on earth?

The papers are expecting an increase in terrorism over the next year, all around the world. What

terrorist wouldn't see the potential confusion of the upcoming year as an opportunity to wreak havoc?

Furthermore, there is the tension building up on both sides of the ocean among the various factions of the Jewish people over issues such as marriage, divorce, and conversion to Judaism. We have to remember that, when the sanctity of the Jewish people is reduced, so too is that of ALL of creation, as the Talmud teaches:

... And it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day. (Bereishis 1:31)

The sixth day ... The letter "heh" [preceding the word "sixth"] is extra ... to say that [G-d] made a condition with them [creation]: "If the Jewish people accept the Five Books of the Torah, [then it is good; if not, then you will resort back to null and void]." (Shabbos 88a)

In other words, the letter "heh" which represents the number five is an allusion to the Five Books of the Torah; the "sixth day" is also an allusion to the sixth day of Sivan, 2,448 years later at Mt. Sinai when the Torah was destined be given. Without the Jewish people keeping Torah, the world is destined to descend into chaos.

That's right, CHAOS.

Yet, the latest statistics about assimilation and inter-marriage indicate that there is still plenty of cause for concern. And, amidst all of this lurks Y2K, capable of "submerging" much of the civilized world's computer network.

Let's not forget that when the Tower of Babel was destroyed, only ONE part was completely destroyed. One part was only partly submerged, and one part even survived. But the result was enough to change the face of mankind forever. And why did it happen in the first place? Says the Torah: because they all spoke ONE language!

"Naaaaahhhh, they'll fix the problem," you and I are saying, "if they haven't already."

Maybe they will, and maybe they won't.

However, as I have already said, what I want to know is NOT whether or not we have the smarts or technology to keep the "floodgates" closed (and the masses from panicking). I want to know if this is one of those tests again.

After all, four-fifths of the Jewish people died in the Plague of Darkness because they refused to read the writing on the wall and accept that the redemption had come. Then, there were the Jews who were exiled into Babylonian after the destruction of the First Temple, because they refused to believe the warnings signs--and there had been plenty. And then there were those--the masses--who didn't come home after the Purim miracle, and cost us the Third and Final Temple, and all the exiles that have resulted since then.

After them, there were the descendants of the Chashmonaim who virtually gave over the Second Commonwealth into the hands of the Romans, later to regret it. We're still regretting it. And can we forget the Jews of Spain in the 1400's, and countless other places before and after that, who should have left while Golden Era was still golden, but didn't?

Have we forgotten Europe in the 1930's already?

I tell my students, "You know, if you were to feed the entire Tanach (Torah, Prophets, and Writings) into a computer, and then Jewish history, and add some current political trends for "seasoning," what do you think it would advise the Jewish people?"

At that point, even the disbelievers among the group seem to get a little bit antsy. The more open-minded in the group usually wonder aloud why we don't see the pattern and "do teshuvah, FAST!"

That is the Jewish way. I asked an important rabbi about the situation, and he told me that it won't be time to start pulling money out of the banks, or stockpiling food until the greatest Torah rabbis of the generation tell us it is time. However, he also said we can't be ostriches either--if it's happening, it means something to us. It means we should pray for the redemption, believe it can come, do serious teshuvah, and take life seriously.

We're not a nation given to panic, but we are a people trained to read the writing on the wall, and to know that if a potential crisis can occur, it is a message to the Jewish people as well, and in some cases, specifically. One thing we know for sure is, it never hurts to pray for Divine mercy.

I would also like to add one more thing. It also never hurts to become less attached to our host societies. After all, according to the commentators, matzah--"Poor Man's Bread"--adorns a Seder Table set for kings, queens, and princes, to warn us: Don't become too attached to the physical world. Live with the flexibility of a poor person, who, lacking belongings, is free to roam wherever he pleases, whenever he pleases, and in some unfortunate circumstances, when he is forced to.

How many Jews could do this today?

I did not write this so you could label me an "alarmist," and accuse me of instilling false panic and a premature sense of impending redemption. I did this because the Talmud says that, in the "End-of-Days," one of the questions they will ask us on that great "Exam-in-the-Sky" is, "Did you anticipate the redemption?" (Shabbos 31a). It would seem to me that people who look forward to THE redemption are people who constantly read the events of history, with the hope of seeing the hand of G-d bringing about redemption. I would like to believe that I can be one of those people who can say then, "Yes, I DID look forward to the Final Redemption."

Even if, G-d forbid, the Redemption does NOT come next year (and we all end up laughing at ourselves, which is much better than not taking it seriously, and being caught unprepared)--because I'm sure they will still say, "Well, it was nice to see that at least you were looking forward to the redemption, and took the potential seriously." Who knows? Maybe that will be the merit to actually

witness the real redemption, when it finally comes.

Besides, how could I not say something--Yisro made me do it.

Shabbos Day:

In the third month after Israel left Egypt, they arrived in the Sinai desert. They had traveled from Refidim, had come to the Sinai desert, and camped there, opposite the mountain. (Shemos 19:1-2)

Rav Chisda and Rabbah the son of Rav Huna both said: Why is it called "Sinai"? Because it is the mountain from which hatred (Hebrew: sinah) came down to the Nations-of-the-World ... (Shabbos 89a)

That is not what one would expect to read about Torah from Sinai. Torah was given to bring peace to the world, and if anything at all, elevate the Jewish people in the eyes of the nations of the world. The Talmud seems to imply that more peace would have resulted if Torah had not been given! Even Rashi's reason for this midrash, which seems to implicate the evil trait of jealousy, does not answer all the questions:

"Because they didn't receive Torah on it." (Rashi)

Would they have wanted to? The Midrash says no. In fact, the Midrash says that G-d even asked the nations if they wanted the Torah, and none wanted to commit themselves to the mitzvos, especially those that undermined their way of life (Sifri). If not, then to what is the Midrash referring? To answer this question, we need to understand the anti-Semite himself, and the quintessential anti-Semite is Amalek-

... a "punishing strap" for Israel, always ready for punishment. (Rashi, Bamidbar 21:1)

Memuchan was Haman (who descended from Amalek); why was Haman called Memuchan (ifunn)? Because he was set aside for punishment (,uhbgrupk ifun). (Megillah 12b)

Rashi and the Talmud are indicating what is at the core of anti-Semitism. Whatever the motivation of the anti-Semite, it doesn't make a difference ultimately. Anti-Semitism, and Amalek in specific, is the "effect" of a "cause" that we seem to create, as the Torah forewarns in Parashas Bechukosai first, and reiterates later in Parashas Ki Savo, and as the following indicates:

Rebi Yochanan ben Zakkai was once riding on a donkey outside of Jerusalem, and his disciples had followed him. He saw a young woman picking barley out of dung of an Arabian's cattle. As soon as she observed him, she covered herself with her hair, stood up and said to him, "Rabbi! Help me!" He answered, "Whose daughter are you?" She said, "I am the daughter of Nakdimon ben Guryon" (a previously wealthy man for whom miracles had occurred; see Ta'anis 19b). "My daughter!" he said,

"What has become of your father's house?" "Is there not a saying in Jerusalem, 'The salt of wealth (i.e., that which preserves it) is its diminution (i.e., charitable deeds) and some say through benevolence?' was her answer. "And what about your father-in-law's house?" he continued. "Ah," she answered, "one destroyed the other." Then she asked him, "Rabbi, do you remember signing my marriage contract?" "I remember," he said, turning to his students, "When I signed her marriage contract, I read in it that her father gave her a dowry of one million golden denars besides that of her father-in-law's!" Rebi Yochanan ben Zakkai then burst into tears, and said, "Happy are you, Israel. As long as you perform the will of G-d, no nation or people can rule over you. But when you fail to perform the will of G-d, you are delivered into the hands of a humiliating nation; and not only the hands of a humiliating nation, but also into the hands of the beasts of the humiliating nation." (Kesuvos 66b)

Hence, anti-Semitism is not a natural phenomenon, but the chaos that results when the "light" of the Jewish people ceases to illuminate the minds of the nations, when the Jewish people stop acting as a "light unto nations," as Rashi indicates elsewhere:

"I have separated you from the peoples that you should be Mine." (Vayikra 20:26)

If you hold yourselves apart from them, then you will be Mine, but if not, you will become subject to Nebuchadnetzar and others like him ... (Rashi)

Anti-Semitism is *tohu* at its worse, and it is all-consuming.

(Excerpted from "The Big Picture: Thirty-Six Sessions to Intellectual and Spiritual Clarity," Session Twenty-Five: Sinai and Anti-Semitism; www.thirtysix.org)

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

They had traveled from Refidim, had come to the Sinai desert, and camped there, opposite the mountain. (Shemos 19:1-2)

"Why does the Torah mention again where they came from? ... To make a comparison between their journey from Rephidim to their arrival in the Sinai Desert. How did they arrive in the Sinai Desert? They were in a state of teshuvah, so too was their travel from Sinai in a state of teshuvah." (Rashi)

Why? Because they had been attacked by Amalek, which had been a very humbling experience. And the ironic thing was that humility was crucial for receiving Torah from G-d, as we have mentioned before. For, humility is indicative of objectivity, and without objectivity, it is impossible to receive Torah without distorting it. There is no comparison between Torah that is viewed through the eyes of the Yetzer Tov (Good Inclination), and Torah that is learned through the eyes of the Yetzer Hara (Evil Inclination).

In this subtle point is a very important piece of information about Divine Providence. Actually, it is a

very Kabbalistic idea.

Normally, in the everyday world of "revealed" Torah, bad events are simply bad events; hester panim is hester panim. However, in the more esoteric world of Torah, the expression is just the opposite: Hester panim? Zeh gilui panim! The "hiding of G-d's Face"--that is the revealing of G-d's face!

In other words, because G-d has promised the Jewish people that there shall always be a remnant of the Seed of Avraham, it means that just when things hit "rock bottom" for the Jewish people they must turn around and get better once again. Every negative in Jewish history must yield to a positive event. Indeed, it may be that the bad event was a kind of spiritual threshold to get to the positive, "other side." That is why Jews are supposed to always say,

"All that G-d does, He does for the good."

That is another reason why the verse repeats what occurred in Rephidim, right before the giving of the Torah. Though G-d would rather not make us suffer in any way, sometimes we make the suffering inevitable. However, if G-d is going to have to let us go through some form of spiritual "refinement" process, in the end, it is sure to result in something good; it is clear it is meant to be a step up the mountain.

Melave Malkah:

On the third day in the morning, there was thunder and lightning, and heavy cloud upon the mountain, and the voice of the shofar was very strong. The people in the camp trembled. Moshe directed the people out of the camp towards G-d, and they placed themselves at the foot of the mountain ... (Shemos 19:16-17)

There is an interesting midrash on this posuk that enhances one's appreciation of yeshivos (and might make a good fund-raising pitch). The Midrash says:

You should know that there is no yeshivah below that does not have a corresponding yeshivah Above, and every student has a corresponding "Potential" and "Shadow" Above ... And what they learn Below is what they learn Above, because there is only one Torah for all of them. All of the rabbis of the Tannaitic and Amoraic Era, their students, and their students' students were all at Har Sinai when the entire nation stood there. Before the Torah was given, they were all Above and many times the entire Torah passed through their lips ... (Midrash Pliyah)

This is one of the many remarkable midrashim that illuminate our eyes as to just supernatural the whole event of Mattan Torah--the Giving of Torah--was. It also enhances our appreciation of how important it is to remain attached to the Sinaitic Tradition of Torah, and to remain entranced by its holy words.

We should learn from a baby something important. I am always amazed at how you can present a toy to a crying baby, who will stop crying when his amazement and curiosity overwhelm his sense of boredom. That's not the amazing part. What makes me smile is how he looks at this toy as if it is the first time he has seen it ... though he just played with it 15 minutes ago. Either a baby's memory is that short, or, his sense of fascination is that strong, or both.

Our memories may not be so short, but why must our sense of fascination with Torah be? The first step to understanding Torah and its sea of commentaries is to be awed by Torah. As King David said, Secrets to those who fear Him ... (Tehillim 25:14)

And fearing Him also means being awed by His Torah. Without this awe, Torah is just another book, Judaism is just another religion, and we are just another people--not the "Nation of Priests" we were taken to Sinai to become.

Have a great Shabbos,

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