

STATUTES OF LIMITATIONS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

If you will follow My statutes and guard My mitzvos and do them, then, I will give your rains in their times (Vayikra 26:3-4)

Here we go again. Brace yourself Š it is time for the blessings and the curses. However, before discussing the curses, it is worthwhile to look at what appears to be a secondary message that emerges from these lines of blessing, which Rashi points out:

Five of you will pursue one hundred, and one hundred will pursue ten thousand. (8)

"According to the calculation (a ration of 1:20), it should only have said "one hundred will pursue two thousand"! Thus, there is no comparison between when a few perform Torah and many perform Torah!" (Rashi)

In other words, Rashi (and the Sifra) is teaching, the more people learning and living by Torah, the greater our national leverage becomes. Our success does not increase proportionally, but rather, exponentially. In the Torah's example, the ration improved from 1:20 to 1:100 -- a very significant increase, indeed.

But why should that be? If more of the nation keeps the Torah, how does that affect our spiritual "firepower."

As the Talmud points, the Jewish nation specifically is called "Adam," whereas the rest of the nations of the world are referred to as "Nations of the World" (Yevamos 61a). What does that mean? Among other things, it means that the Jewish people, regardless of our remarkable propensity to differ from one other, are to be viewed as a single "body," a unified whole which suffers when parts of that whole are out-of-step with the rest.

Take an athlete, for example. Even though an athlete runs with his legs, his performance is hampered when his finger is sore, or he has a headache. A runner just needs to be able to place the right foot in the right place at the right time. However, an olympic runner needs to function like a "well-oiled," smooth-running, well-integrated collection of parts.

It is no different with the Jewish people. After years of spiring with one another, and, in some cases,

conspiring against one another, we have come to feel so distant from one another that it would not be difficult for some to say, "Why needs you anyway?!" And, to feel it as well.

The answer is, we all do -- we all need each other.

Now, it is true there is "Erev Rav" among us, elements that may appear to be Jewish by birth (or even conversion) who go out of their way to limit the influence of Torah; the Torah, the Midrash, the Zohar, and rabbis of yesterday (such as the Vilna Gaon) predicted that this would be so. However, they are far from being the majority of the Jewish population, and, besides, who can know who is whom?

Thus, we have no choice but to care for one another, regardless of whether or not we can influence one another. We may find it next to impossible to resolve our differences at this stage of our history, but, at the very least, we have to hold on to the understanding that we must dream of doing so, and whenever possible, endeavor to do so. If we don't, then our national defense system can only weaken, and then all of us will find ourselves becoming increasingly vulnerable to even greater anti-Torah, anti-Semitic forces.

Shabbos Day:

"But if you will not listen to Me and will not perform My commandments then I will do the same to you I will" (Vayikra 26:14-16)

The other day, in the midst of a conversation with someone about the present spiritual status of the Jewish people, the person complained about how, within fifty short years, we returned back to the problems of pre-war Europe. Assimilation, intermarriage are rampant, and, materialism seems to affect Jews on all levels. It was certainly making it very difficult to marry off her child, since, the family is neither fabulously wealthy nor fabulously famous in Torah circles. However, the child is fabulously devoted to a sincere Torah lifestyle, and is today, literally, one-in-a-million.

However, what concerned this person most was not the difficulty of finding a worthy shidduch, because that, the person knows, is G-d's business, and He will come through, eventually (Sotah 2a). What concerned the person was how materialism was distracting good Jews from good service of G-d, and how the gap between rich and poor was increasing, as was the gap between heart and mind. "My brother calls the Holocaust 'The Great Equalizer'," the person told me. "By 1942, most of Europe was poor and broken."

As I watched a religious CD Rom produced to portray the level of self-sacrifice by Jews during the Holocaust to maintain a level of Torah-observance -- indeed, just to keep from losing their beards and "paos" -- I was amazed, again, by the extent to which Hitler (yemach shemo v'zichro!) went to cause the Jews suffering and to exterminate them. As I watched actual footage of the Nazi Genocide

Machine systematically wrap its noose around the Jewish neck of that time and tighten it, a little voice inside of me kept asking questions:

"How? How did we ever let it go so far? How did we get caught? Why didn't we leave? Why didn't we change? How were they able to become so barbaric? How could they hate us THAT much, to even derive pleasure and a sense of purpose from what they did to decent, upstanding (if not by Torah standards, certainly by German standards), mature adults and so many innocent and helpless children?"

How?

I have, in my library at home, a book called, "Anti-Semitism: The Causes and Effects of a Prejudice." What it is, basically, is a listing of every KNOWN anti-Semitic event since the time of the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE), until the time of the book was published in recent times. Details of the cruelty of the attacks are provided when available, and sometimes they are more barbaric than one can stomach even from the "distance."

However, that book begins where the Talmud leaves off, and the Talmud begins pretty much where "Tanach" leaves off. All-in-all, Jewish history, when viewed from this perspective, makes the Jewish people appear like a person whom, upon hitting a wall and falling down, gets up again only to walk into the same wall all over again.

Judging from the present spiritual status of the Jewish people today, it would appear that we have fallen, gotten up again, and are walking full stride, right back into that wall. Brace yourself.

My Rosh HaYeshivah used to cajole us by warning, "It is either program or pogrom." His intention was clear: If we don't at least show G-d that we are concerned about ourselves and our brethren in terms of our Torah connection, and, most important of all, look for ways to reunite G-d and His children, then, G-d Himself will implement His own "program." As our history proves over-and-over again, His is not always the most pleasant form of spiritual wake-up call.

In the beginning, when my Rosh HaYeshivah used to use the term, "Spiritual Holocaust," he was heavily criticized. "How can you compare," the outraged outraged. However, that was about fifteen years ago; now I have found that the term is used by just about everyone in the field of Torah outreach.

Just yesterday, someone told me (in the name of Berel Wein) that, some twenty years ago, there were about 6,000,000 Jews living in America. By even conservative estimates and projections, those 6,000,000 Jews should have grown into 20,000,000 by Year 2000. However, how many Jews are known to live in the United States today? About 6,000,000. And where did the projected 14,000,000 "other Jews" go? "They went the way of total assimilation and rampant inter-marriage," complained Rabbi Wein, "and no is saying ANYTHING about them!"

Here comes that wall again.

Israeli secular society. I don't want to go into details, but, let us just say that it shows very, very little concern for the warnings explicitly expressed in this week's parshah. We're talking Ultra-Secularism. Now there's a term I haven't seen used in the newspapers yet Š

"Wait Š Is that a wall I see coming up?"

I have always known that there are people who believe in Torah, and people who do not. However, I did not appreciate the fact that another category of Jew exists -- he who "believes" in Torah, but, does not in Parashas BeChukosai. I don't mean that they have removed that section from their Sifrei Toros, G-d forbid! They BELIEVE that G-d gave every word of this week's parshah to Moshe Rabbeinu just as He dictated every other word of Torah to him as well. They just don't believe, or take seriously, the notion that what this week's parshah is warning even OUR generation.

Did someone mention a "statute of limitations" on this week's parshah? It seems as if, at least in the minds of many Jews today, Jewish history has entered some kind of historical "black hole," within which the "physics" of Torah no longer apply. What can G-d expect from us inside a historical black hole?

However, the Torah has another name for that so-called spiritual black hole:

Š And I will also act toward you with indifference, and will bring you to the land of your enemies, and perhaps then the foreskin of your heart will be humbled, and you will atone for your sins. (Vayikra 26:41)

G-d's indifference to us and our uncircumcised heart.

In fact, the only REAL reason why so many Jews do not feel compelled to allow Torah to guide their lives (besides ignorance and lack of inspiration) is because they have avoided Torah for so long, and, they HAVE BEEN GETTING AWAY WITH IT. However, they misread the signs. They are judging today's weather by looking straight up and not at the storm brewing on the horizon, threatening to ruin their "picnic."

The Holocaust made "Ba'alei Teshuvos" as well. Old survivors who, before the war did NOT wear Tefillin, now do, and will continue to do so until their dying day. When asked, "Why the change?" they often roll up their sleeves and show you that eerie number permanently tattooed into their skin, courtesy of the Nazis.

"You know," they may say in a humbled voice, "it says in the Torah that a Jewish male above the age of 13 must wear Tefillin. The Torah calls Tefillin a 'sign upon your arm.' Before the war, I had no such 'sign' upon my arm, not since I forgot my Tefillin back at my Bar Mitzvah. Now I have a sign upon my arm Š this number here Š So, after the war, it occurred to me to cover upon THIS sign with THAT sign (pointing at Tefillin) Š"

I have heard and read similar stories.

Where I live in Telzstone, the view of the Judean Hills is wonderfully relaxing. From my front lawn, where I often sit and learn, I can't help but look up and take in the scene, especially when the sun gracefully sets in the distance. Sometimes it is so quiet and peaceful, it seems as if I am the only one in the whole world.

It is then that my mind has to jump in and remind me that, only a few miles away, live 150,000,000 Arabs who probably would like to see me move and abandon my house. Many of them, very likely, given the opportunity would probably do me terrible harm; on occasion, they have told us so. At that point, a cold shiver often goes up and down my spine.

But then I am overtaken once again by the present peace of my immediate physical view, and it becomes as if my Arab neighbors in all directions have picked up and moved to another part of the world, far, far away. Out of sight, out of mind. I quietly go back to my present way of life, as if by doing so, all threats become imaginary, though, in reality, they remain to exist in full force.

It's that uncircumcised heart again, blocking my view and the view of the rest of my people. This phenomenon is symptomatic of the "End of Days," and why the Torah has to say:

"Hashem, your G-d, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, to love Hashem, your G-d Š" (Devarim 30:6)

In other words, the Torah is telling us that at the end of history, spiritual barriers will exist that will prevent us from being able to take Torah seriously -- some to become observant, and others to become more observant. Either way, it will be -- it is -- hard for us to see reality as it REALLY exists, as G-d sees it, to take it as seriously as it ought to be taken.

Hard yes, but, impossible, no. The truth will not be handed to us on a silver platter, at least not at this stage of history. We have to work for it, and hard. However, to not work for it is to force the hand of G-d, G-d forbid, to introduce His own "program" of reJEW'venation. Parashas BeChukosai is here to help us gain clarity and perspective.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

G-d spoke to Moshe saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and tell them that, when a person makes a vow regarding the value of his life (Vayikra 27:1)

The purpose of the vow being a commitment to bring a certain amount of money to the Temple as an obligation.

What makes this mitzvah unusual is not so much its details as much as where it occurs in the Torah - right after the curses of destruction for disobedience. It is like describing the effects of a terribly destructive occurrence and then, in the very next breath, discussing the stock market! It would seem

somewhat insensitive.

However, we can assume that G-d is not insensitive, and that is why it is such anomalies that often lead to insights that we would not otherwise have noticed. And, even though the Ramban gives a very technical answer, we can assume that there is also a philosophical reason as well for the connection, and there is.

From the beginning of the curses until the end of the curses, it is a discussion of effect and not cause. Each and every curse is a reaction to our sins and our failure to turn ourselves around and wake up and smell the Divine Providence. Human indifference leads to Divine indifference, and Divine indifference leads to disaster. But what leads to sin in the first place?

It's all an issue of self-worth, of what you mean to yourself.

We know, because the Torah has told us, that we were created in the "image of G-d." However one interprets that phrase, it will always lead to the conclusion that man comes from noble stock, and is capable of reaching tremendous spiritual heights, but not without effort. Life has provided many such examples of people who have reached for the stars and who have achieved greatness.

On the other hand, at the far left extreme, man is barely distinguishable from the most savage animals. He is very capable of debasing others and himself, and can even do so without conscience. History is replete with examples of this reality. The rest of mankind scuttles around between these two extremes, the majority of which, perhaps, are content to find their version of a "happy medium."

The only question is, who does it make happy?

One of the most disastrous events in the history of the Jewish people was the building of the golden calf. As a result of that sin, Moshe Rabbeinu broke the first set of Tablets, condemning the Jewish people to go through thousands of years of history vulnerable to the whims and outrageous plans of the non-Jewish nations (and "enemies" from within).

But, according to the Midrash, with the exception of a few weak individuals, the Jewish people didn't even participate in the building of the calf; it was the Erev Rav! If so, then why are we still paying such a high price for a mistake we barely made?

Because, we didn't stop the building of the calf, either. Intimidated, and afraid of the consequences for standing up for truth (Chur was murdered by the Erev Rav for doing so), we stayed home in our tents, huddled at the back, closed our eyes, and prayed that things wouldn't get too out of hand.

They did. We can see from G-d's and then Moshe's reaction to the crisis in the camp below just how much the "happy medium" makes G-d happy! In This World, G-d is not interested in "fence-sitters," people who don't take a stand and responsibility for the world around them, and do what they can -- as limited as that may be -- to make things better. G-d likes zealots for truth.

I said zealots, not fanatics. What is the difference? A zealot is someone who aspires to live in the

image of G-d, and, as a result, is driven to live and act godly. A zealot is someone with a strong sense of self-worth, which allows him to put important issues ahead of his own, and often petty concerns. He doesn't need to prove himself to anyone; he just needs to be godly.

A fanatic, on the other hand, is someone with little self-worth. His extremism is in order to compensate for a lack of self-worth, which, as we well know, can be damaging to him and society as a whole. A "good cause" is just a "good reason" to do something that will make him feel heroic.

Low self-worth and spiritual mediocrity are the ills of a person and of society as whole. They may seem harmless on the surface, but, in fact, they represent the slide of mankind in the direction of spiritual decay and moral destruction. What can follow at that point if not Divine response to such irresponsibility.

Therefore, concludes the parshah after a lengthy review and warning of the curses: maintain your godly image, and maintain the peace of the world.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Not for our sake, G-d, not for our sake, but for Your Name's sake give glory, for Your kindness and for Your truth! Why should the nations say, "Where is their G-d now?" (Tehillim 115:1-2)

This is the third paragraph of Hallel, and the first half (1 - 11) of it is one of the two sections that are omitted on Rosh Chodesh and the last six days of Pesach. The omission signifies that there is something missing from these days to make them completely joyous days. In the case of the last six days of Pesach, it is the fact the Egyptians -- creations of G-d -- were destroyed at the Red Sea, and, in the case of Rosh Chodesh, it is the fact that the light of the moon has yet to be restored to its former glory.

We have made the point before, which is found in Nefesh HaChaim, that when Jews suffer, it is a profanation of G-d's Name. It gives the impression to those weak in faith in G-d that He has abandoned His people in their hour of need, and therefore, it undermines the disbeliever's belief in Divine Providence (and doesn't help the believing Jews faith much as well). Hence, the term "Chillul Hashem" -- Profanation of G-d's Name] -- comes from the word "challal," which means "void," referring to the spiritual void sin leaves in its wake.

Therefore, says the Nefesh HaChaim, praying for another's recovery is not for the unwell person's sake, for, who knows how much atonement the suffering is bringing? We want Jews to remain well and successful to reveal to the world that there is a G-d, and that He cares about His people, and that He is actively involved in their affairs, and the affairs of all mankind, and that history is HIS story, not some random string of events.

True, we would benefit from a world that has little if any doubt about G-d and His Torah. How nice it would be for the world to flip-flop and, rather than mock and condemn Torah Jewry, instead hold them in high esteem and seek their guidance. How nice it would be for yeshivas to be able to focus on the learning of holy books, rather than on maintaining accounting books. Dreaming of such a reality makes one yearn for Moshiach all that much more.

However, says this psalm, the real reason for that yearning has to be:

Not for our sake, G-d, not for our sake, but for Your Name's sake give glory, for Your kindness and for Your truth!

-- and let personal gain take a back-seat to the amplification of truth for its own sake.

Š Our G-d is in Heaven; He does what He desires. (3)

That's funny, all kinds of people seem to be doing all kinds of things that G-d can't POSSIBLY enjoy! Therefore, people draw the conclusion: Maybe in Heaven G-d does what He wants, but down here on earth, it's a human's world!

Well, it certainly seems so, but that is only a projection of the curse mentioned in this week's parshah. All that apparent freedom we seem to have to do whatever we want whenever we want to do it is an illusion, and will come at a cost. G-d is just playing the role, for the time being, of a parent who is watching His children act foolishly from a vantage point that allows Him to see us, but not for us to see Him, unless we spiritually "squint" and look real carefully. Hester panim only means G-d is "hiding," not missing.

Š Their idols are silver and gold, the handiwork of man. They have a mouth, but they cannot speak; they have eyes, but cannot see Š (4 - 5)

Once upon a time, there was a boy who made a stone god. He said to it, "I shall call you, "god of the weather," and I will bring you offerings each day and pray to you so that the weather shall always be fair." One day, during an intense lightning storm, the boy worried that maybe his god was angry, and that maybe he had been a poor servant, and that this was why his god was causing such a terrible storm. Therefore, he quickly took from his possessions all sorts of valuable and burned them before the stone idol.

"Here Š this is for you Š" he told the stone, "perhaps you can make the weather clear up once again for me." But, as he spoke, the weather only became worse, and lightning ignited the evening sky like never before. Afraid that maybe his god required an even bigger offering, he began to turn to run for more valuables. Just then, a bolt of lightning came hurling out of the sky and hit its mark -- the stone idol shattered to millions of tiny pieces in all directions.

The boy just stood in his spot, completely stunned by what he had just witnessed. He didn't even notice that the storm was passing, and that calm was being restored.

"How Š how Š" he began to wonder, "can a god be destroyed by the very storm he created?"

And then he recalled, "I built that statue, and I imbued it with powers it did not have, and I became afraid of those powers that I believed it had, and, eventually, I became victimized by the very powers I gave it, but, it never really had." This is what it says:

Š Those who make them should become like them, whoever trusts in them! (8)

And they do: they become like stone and metal, unable to speak the objective truth, or to see it, or to hear it.

Israel, trust in G-d; He is their help and shield! House of Aharon, trust in G-d; He is their help and shield. Those who fear G-d, trust in G-d; He is their help and shield. (9 - 11)

And those who do, shall become like HIM, speaking, seeing, and hearing the truth, living in the image of G-d, and rising above the mundane moments of a godless society, into the realm of an eternal Father in Heaven.

CHAZAK!

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston
