

BABY STEPS TO REDEMPTION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d told Moshe, "Go to Pharaoh ..." (Shemos 10:1)

Parashas Bo represents a major turning point in Jewish history. After 210 years in Egypt, the last 116 of which were spent in demoralizing and physically destructive slavery, the Jewish people finally stand on the threshold of freedom in this week's parshah. Yetzios Mitzrayim -- "Exodus from Egypt" - has already become a reality.

What was accomplished in the end? Was life in Egypt only about suffering? Was it only meant as a means to "weed out" four-fifths of the Jewish people? What did the "Fiery Furnace" of Jewish history do specifically to mold us into a nation?

To answer this question, I am going to resort to a gematria that was told over to me last week. It is a such a remarkable gematria, not just because of the way it works out, but, because of the insight to which it points. And, if it appears that this entire d'var Torah has been written around it, as if an excuse to write it up this numerical revelation, then, it is not such a mistaken perception. For, that is just how profound a gematria it really is, as simple as it may appear to be.

This gematria emerges from the ages of the Avos: Avraham: 175 years; Yitzchak: 180 years; Ya'akov: 147 years. Now, if you factor each of these numbers, you arrive at:

$$175 = 25 \times 7$$

$$180 = 36 \times 5$$

$$147 = 49 \times 3$$

You will notice that the first factors are 25, 36, and 49, three very significant numbers in Kabbalah. Twenty-five (as I have discussed on a number of occasions) represents the "Hidden Light" of creation before revealed through the thoughts, words, or actions of man. The twenty-fifth word in the Torah happens to be the word "ohr," or, "light."

This fits nicely with the Midrash that paraphrases the Torah to praise the greatness of Avraham:

G-d said, "Let there be light ..." (Bereishis 1:3); "light" refers to Avraham (Bereishis Rabbah 2:3)

The Hebrew word for "let there be" is "yehi," which has a gematria of "twenty-five," which makes the

posuk now read, "twenty-five is Avraham," and indeed, it is.

The number thirty-six represents the Hidden Light after it has been revealed through man, symbolized by the thirty-six righteous people holding up the world in every generation, the thirty-six tractates of the Babylonian Talmud, and the thirty-six candles we light during the eight days of Chanukah.

The message of this light is that we Jews believe that G-d is alive and well, and running the world. Our self-sacrifice for Torah and its way of life projects this message to the world around us; no one symbolizes that willingness of sacrifice FOR TORAH better than Yitzchak Avinu himself, a true representation of the light in its stage of thirty-six.

Forty-nine, as we learn from Sefiros HaOmer (and elsewhere), is a number that represents the conquering of This World, since seven is a number that symbolizes physicality. The choice of a human being is to conquer This World or to be conquered by it -- to use the physical for spiritual purposes, thereby sanctifying it, or, to use it for purely physical reasons, and thereby defile it and become defiled through it.

"Im Lavan Garti ..." (Bereishis 32:4) -- "I lived with Lavan," Ya'akov Avinu declared to his brother Eisav, the symbol of the latter attitude toward life. Says Rashi on this posuk:

"The word 'garti' has the numerical value of 'taryag' (613), as if to say, 'Though I lived with Lavan, I still observed the 613 mitzvos and did not learn from his ways!'" (Rashi)

-- that is, I was not overtaken by the physical world, and instead sanctified it and myself.

However, not only are the second factors of each string odd numbers in descending order, but, if you factor 25, 36, and 49, you arrive at:

$$175 = 25 \times 7 = 5 \times 5 \times 7$$

$$180 = 36 \times 5 = 6 \times 6 \times 5$$

$$147 = 49 \times 3 = 7 \times 7 \times 3$$

-- with 5, 6, and 7 representing an ascension from Avraham to Ya'akov. More importantly, if you now add them up, this is what results:

$$175 = 25 \times 7 = 5 \times 5 \times 7 = 17$$

$$180 = 36 \times 5 = 6 \times 6 \times 5 = 17$$

$$147 = 49 \times 3 = 7 \times 7 \times 3 = 17$$

Amazing, no? Even more amazing is the fact that "seventeen" is the gematria of the word "tov" -- good -- and the first time this word is used is with respect to the original, Hidden Light of creation (Bereishis 1:4)!

This indicates that each path taken by the Forefathers, though different in approach was similar in

essence, each being a revelation of the light of creation. This is, perhaps, verified by adding up the gematria of all three names:

Avraham = 248

Yitzchak = 208

Ya'akov = 182

-- for a total of 638, which is equal to: $6 + 3 + 8 = 17$.

This is what exile in Egypt was all about: shaping a people that could carry on the legacy of the Avos, and bring the Hidden Light of creation out into the open and reveal it to the world. The fiery furnace of Egypt was meant to fashion an eternal candle that could illuminate a darkened world, which is why four-fifths of the population at that time, whom, apparently were not fit for the task, died in the Plague of DARKNESS.

And Rava said: It will be likewise in the time of Moshiach. (Sanhedrin 111a)

It doesn't have to be, because negative prophecies do not necessarily have to come true, and won't come true, if we spread the light of Torah, and of the Avos, first to ourselves, and then to the world in general.

Shabbos Day:

"Even if G-d is with you when I send you, evil will confront you!" answered Pharaoh. "You must realize that evil is before your face ..." (Shemos 10:10)

Such a statement from someone as powerful as Pharaoh in his land could be enough to shake anyone's confidence. And, even though intellectually, a person can say to himself, "They're just words ... Nothing REALLY to worry about ..." still, on some emotional level, it is hard not to fear them - as if saying them gave them some form reality.

How much more so is this the case when one believes that everything is "min HaShamayim" -- Heaven-sent. "This man would not be able to say those words to me if Heaven didn't want me to hear them," such a person believes. "What should I do about them ... I just can't ignore them?"

Correct, they are not to be ignored. This is because, if Heaven didn't want something from Moshe, then he would never have been subjected to Pharaoh or what he had to say. However, this does not mean that the words were to be taken at face value, as if Pharaoh really knew the future and was forewarning Moshe about upcoming evil based upon his own knowledge. So, then, what was the Divine message to Moshe, and perhaps, even the Jewish people?

First of all, such words can be a test, to see how much a person trusts in G-d more than he fears

man's will and devices. It is PLEASANT when we are able to fulfill the will of G-d without obstacles and antagonists, but, it also LIMITING. When the going gets tough, the tough start to asking themselves hard questions like, "Can this person harm me if G-d doesn't want him to?"

As the Talmud teaches, "All is in the hands of Heaven except for fear of Heaven" (Brochos 33b), which, as we have noted on a number of occasions, refers to the "seeing" of G-d's hand in everyday life. Obstacles and negative experiences can be a way for G-d to reveal to us how real we are with such concepts, forcing the issue and strengthening our sense of trust in G-d and His master plan.

Such words can also be a warning from G-d regarding something of which we may presently be unaware. Often, if nature is allowed to run its course, disaster can ensue. Man is not always bright enough or quick enough to solve each and every problem before it results in a catastrophe, and we usually require Divine assistance as well.

However, for G-d to step in and solve the problem outright can result in a suspension of free-will by all those who witness the miracle -- a no-no for creation. Therefore, Heaven compromises, by putting us through situations that open our eyes without revealing too much about G-d's involvement. The result is increased sensitization without decreased free-will; we have been prepared to detect the real problem coming up.

(Perhaps, Pharaoh's words were a warning to Moshe from Heaven regarding the erev Rav which left with the Jewish people, and caused so much destruction along the way. This is why it was "before Moshe's face," since it was Moshe who pleaded with G-d to let them go out with the Jewish people.)

This is a very important lesson regarding Hashgochah Pratis -- Divine Providence -- how G-d interacts and communicates with the Jewish people. G-d is always leading us toward the redemption, whether it is to come one year later, one-hundred years later, or one-thousand years later. Every step in Jewish history is another step along the way to redemption.

We tend to stray. As a nation, historically, we tend to lose sight of the ULTIMATE goals of the Jewish people and creation, and become overly involved in the here-and-now at the cost of the there-and-then. Sometimes out of anger, usually out of love, but always without sacrificing free-will, G-d brings us back.

Or, at least He tries to.

The commentators explain that one of Yonah the prophet's (c. 3055/706 BCE) main fears of going to Nineveh and warning them about impending doom if they don't do teshuvah was that he might succeed. Yonah suspected that, if he went to the great NON-JEWISH city of Nineveh, walked from side-to-side yelling out, "Repent, or Nineveh" will be destroyed," the people might take him seriously and repent, and thereby avoid destruction.

(Some say that the king of Nineveh at that time was the same Pharaoh who had escaped death at the Red Sea while his entire army drowned before the fleeing Jewish nation. Unable to return to

Egypt, he fled for his life to Babylonia. Hence, when THIS king heard Yonah's warning of Divine destruction, he could tell his people with certainty, "Repent quick! Trust me, if G-d says He is going to do something, He means it!")

But what did Yonah have against non-Jews that made success undesirable? Nothing -- he was worried instead about being sent to the Jewish people later with a similar message, and then being mocked out of the city. "Right, Yonah," the Jews might say, "just like in Nineveh! Was Nineveh destroyed like you promised? NO! Admit it Yonah, you're a false prophet, G-d's not angry, and we're in no danger either!"

Yes, one COULD draw that conclusion, and take away any sense of urgency to do teshuvah. And the Jews of that time in Eretz Yisroel did -- and the result was the Assyrian exile of the Ten Tribes, the destruction of the First Temple, and, the exile of the remaining tribes of the Jewish people to Babylonia. They would have done well to learn from Yonah's words, and the positive message of Nineveh's survival.

And WE would do well to learn from their mistake.

What do I mean? Like so many others, I was exceedingly grateful to wake up Shabbos morning and find my lights still on and my hot plate still working. I was very thankful to go to shul Shabbos morning and not have to be subjected to sirens that would have meant something very bad had happened. I was ecstatic to open my computer Motzei Shabbos, and to be able to access everything as well as I have been able to any other Motzei Shabbos in the past.

In other words, thank G-d, January 1, 2000 had come and gone without a glitch -- for me, and for so many millions of people around the globe.

It came at a cost, a tremendous cost. Estimates are somewhere between three-hundred and six-hundred BILLION dollars spent to avoid rollover disaster. Two zeroes resulted in "eleven-zero" spending -- quite a significant notion, and, we may not yet be finished since the full extent of Y2K may not be known for months to come.

So, "Nineveh" did not fall, again; in spite of its superficial repentance, it survived a Divine warning. But, in truth, Nineveh was never meant to fall; it was meant to serve as a Divine example of how G-d will be merciful to those who do teshuvah -- the deeper the teshuvah, the greater the mercy.

To the nations of the world it WAS "Y2K" -- to the Jewish people, it IS "yabok" (y = yud; 2 = bais; k = kuf), a word synonymous with human perfection, with redemption of the Jewish people, and with becoming a full-fledged "Yisroel." "Y2K" may be over, but "yabok" is an ongoing reality for the Jewish people. Yabok is our point of departure from the rest of the world.

After all, ten million Jews still remain either unaffiliated or only loosely affiliated with anything Jewish, and inter-marriage is alive and well, and ending Jewish lineage in many a family. Very recently, an orthodox monthly magazine was forced to re-print double the amount of its regular

subscriptions within the month because its topic was so timely and widespread. What was the topic? Teen-age drop-outs from the yeshivah system in unprecedented numbers -- a catastrophic crisis for the Jewish people as a whole. The Dulberg sisters are not home yet.

Can we afford to be complacent, and laugh off the millennium bug like our non-Jewish hosts? Statements like this one from last week's parshah make it difficult to do so:

"... Such is the trait of The Holy One, Blessed is He: He brings punishment upon the nations so that Israel may hear of it and fear Him, as it says, 'I have cut off nations, their corners are desolate ... I said: Certainly you will fear Me, you will take the reproach.' (Tzechaniah 3:6-7)." (Rashi, Shemos 7:3)

Nineveh did not fall, again, thank G-d. However, let's heed the warning and reap the benefits of their success, by doing our own teshuvah, Torah-style, and fix our own internal "bugs."

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

G-d said to Moshe, "Get up early in the morning and confront Pharaoh when he goes out to the water. Say to him, 'This is what G-d says, "Let my people leave and serve Me. If you do not let My people leave, I will send swarms of harmful creatures!" (Shemos 8:16-17)

The fourth plague was that of wild beasts. Now, every plague the Egyptians had to suffer was middah-keneged-middah -- measure-for-measure for the way they treated the Jews. However, what affliction did the Jews suffer at the hands of the Egyptians that resulted in THIS plague?

The Midrash provides two explanations. Firstly, when the Egyptians realized that the Jewish people's building days were over after the plague of lice, they sent them out to the fields instead to catch wild animals, in the hope that they would be killed in the process. So, G-d told Moshe to tell the Jewish people, "Go to the fields, turn to the beasts and say, 'So says G-d: Tomorrow you must join together and invade Egypt and destroy it. This is the task for which you were created!'" (Shemos Rabbah 11:4).

The second reason for this plague, says the Midrash, is, because, the Egyptians used to view the Jewish people as a "baby-sitting" service at their disposal, forcing them to carry four Egyptian children at one time -- two on their shoulders and two under their arms. Once the plague of wild beasts began, animals came and snatched away the children, leaving the Jew alive and well (Midrash HaGadol 8:17), making the point quite clear at whom the plague was aimed. Even domesticated animals turned on their masters once this plague began.

However, one major middah-keneged-middah in this plague was against one of the biggest misconceptions man suffers from, and that is, the belief that nature is fixed and undoable. Pharaoh believed (as does Western man) that nature is consistent, and that any changes that take place in nature do so over time, and usually in a controlled fashion. This, man believes, is what gives him the

upper hand in life, allowing him to determine his own destiny, always leaving him time to prepare and adjust for the change.

Tell that to Turkey. Or, tell it to Venezuela, or to France, or to Germany, or any of the other European nations hit SUDDENLY by Hurricane-speed winds.

The Kabbalists teach that miracles happening throughout history were built in to creation at the beginning of time, waiting for the right moment in time to do the will of G-d. Nature seems quite fixed and stable, but for how long? G-d, Who is outside of time, knew who we were going to be long before we came to be it -- and what it would take to wake us up to the purpose of creation.

It is a mistake, as Pharaoh and Egypt learned the hard way, to live complacently because nature itself seems complacent. Today's calm weather can give way to tomorrow's hurricane, or earthquake, or rain storm. We may not be able to hear it so well, but there is a spiritual time-clock ticking away in creation, waiting for the right moment to perform the right miracle.

Let it be a positive one.

MELAVE MALKAH:

A song of thanksgiving. Call out to G-d, all the earth. Serve G-d with joy, come before Him with joyous song. (Tehillim 100:1-2)

This tehillah is the first complete one of the weekly Pesukei D'Zimrei -- Introductory Psalms. In Temple times, it was recited by the Levi'im as the Korban Todah (Thanksgiving Offering) was being offered, which was brought by someone who survived a great danger. In the order of Tehillim, it is the last one of a section that deals with the coming of the days of Moshiach (Hirsch).

According to tradition, Psalm 100 is the last of the eleven psalms that Moshe contributed to Sefer Tehillim, and, as I have elaborated upon before, eleven is a number that symbolizes G-dly knowledge. As well, this tehillah is dedicated to Asher, the tribe that was blessed with an abundance of oil and became very wealthy through it, and therefore always had plenty of reason to give thanks to G-d.

It is also a fitting tehillah for this week's parshah, because, after being in Egypt for 210 years, and enslaved for 116 of those years, the Jewish had miraculously survived and good reason to give praise to G-d. And, if they had had any doubts before about G-d being with them, in this week's parshah, it becomes clear indeed -- albeit a little late -- that Jewish survival had been supernatural, and that even at the worst moments, G-d had suffered along with them.

A friend of mine recently suffered a setback, but with a twist. Rather than mope around the house, like many would do after hearing the disappointing news, he instead recited the tradition, "This too is

for the good ... All that G-d does is for the good," but with a sincere smile.

So, I asked him, "How can you be so happy after hearing such disappointing news? I'm not asking you to cry if you don't want to, but, at least explain to me the source of your joy!"

He answered me, "First of all, it is a mitzvah to serve G-d with joy. If it was so easy to do so at all times, would we have to be told to do it? Obviously my disappointing news is a test to see how I would respond: with sadness, or with trust in G-d that all will be fine in the end. Secondly, do you know how many times I took a negative situation as the end of the story, only to find Divine salvation coming from another place? This time, when G-d helps me out and brings me what I need, I want to be able to say, 'I knew He would, and I trusted in Him!'"

Guess what happened? One way or another, the situation did improve, as it usually does, and not always the way that we plan it to. That is the difference between Divine wisdom and human understanding: we see only a portion of the puzzle, while G-d takes into account the BIG PICTURE. Recognizing this allows us to continue to serve G-d with confident joy, not just when the situation works out the way that we relate to be "good," but, even during the moments that seem less than happy to us.

Have a great Shabbos,
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