

VISIONS, VISIONARIES, AND HOLY WORDS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

These are the things Moshe told to all of Israel on the east side of the Jordan in the desert, in the plain opposite the Red Sea, between Paran, and Tofel, and Lavan, Chatzerot, and Di-Zahav -- eleven days' journey from Chorev by way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-Barnea. (Devarim 1:1-2)

As Rashi pointed out in Parashas Mattos, the war against Midian and its completion represented the end of Moshe's tenure as leader of the Jewish people. Devarim, therefore, is his farewell speech.

The Kabbalists explain that Moshe's death meant the last person to ever live who could single-handedly bring history to a glorious end with the arrival of Moshiach -- Moshe Rabbeinu himself. Now, after Moshe's death, it would take at least the majority of the people to be able to bring about Messianic times, or, he would have to come when things became so spiritually dark.

Not only this, but, Moshe's departure from Jewish history spelled certain doom, specifically, the destruction of the future first and second Temples much later on in history. This is alluded to by the following posuk:

How (eichah) can I carry you as a burden by myself, with the trouble you cause, and your fighting? (12)

-- which contains the word "eichah," an allusion to the "Eichah" of Yermiyahu read on Tisha B'Av each year, lamenting the destruction of the First Temple and the exile into Babylonia. It was as if Moshe was warning the Jewish people: Watch out -- by becoming such a burden to me, and causing me to have to leave you behind, you have set yourselves up to stray and provoke the A'lmighty. If I could not reign you in and channel your energies, will future leaders be able to? If not, then destruction is imminent.

And, of course, he was right. The Three-Weeks within which we find ourselves now, during which we always read this parshah, testifies to that fact.

Eichah -- how?

How do we make the mistake -- over, and over, and over again? How do we gain such confidence in our ability to elude the hand of G-d, as if we can always stay one step ahead of Him? What is the

essential negative trait within us that allows us to "eat, drink, and be merry" with little or no concern for tomorrow? Is it merely to rebel against G-d?

Someone asked me a question on one of my speaking tours. He wanted to know what to tell his grandfather, a Reform Jew, who was insisting upon cremation after he died. Apparently the message he was getting from the Reform movement was, "Why not?"

So I asked him, "Why yes? I mean why bother? Unless he has this wild desire to be scattered to the wind and to flow with the breezes in all kinds of directions after he leaves this world, why do so in such an undignified manner? The Nazis, may their names be erased, used that very means to destroy countless Jewish bodies after being gassed to death. Why evoke such a memory and continue their legacy?

Torah tradition is against cremation. Not only is it a disrespectful way to deal with the "vessel" that once housed a holy soul, but, there is also the issue of "Techias HaMeisim," Resurrection of the Dead, for which we will need our bodies again -- intact. Who wants to make the angels shlepp all around the universe looking for every last ash of a cremated Jew? Will they go and look?

"Well, if he wants to have a proper burial now, they're going to add on all kinds of costs."

Ahah. So, to save money, he is going to risk an easy transition to Resurrection, and hang his hat on a hook provided by people who reject Torah Judaism out of ignorance and disrespect? People, who in and of themselves are taking a tremendous risk by rejecting Torah Judaism based upon the premise that Western Society -- which is in a moral shambles -- has outrun G-d's word and set of rules?

On principle, or, merely to fit in? To live a more moral life, or, a lesser one? To get ahead spiritually, or, physically?

And, in the meantime, G-d is silent. In the meantime, G-d, if He is indeed there, they question, and even if He is there, if He cares at all about what man does, they speculate, allows it to go on. Such silence is taken as tacit Divine approval of their actions (G-d will let him have himself cremated). They don't understand that those quiet moments are not only NOT signs of Divine approval, but, rather, G-d providing the opportunity to wake up and taste reality -- G-d's reality -- before reality consumes them.

The Three Weeks are a clear reminder of what happens, when that happens.

When Moshe went up that mountain once and for all, we didn't just lose a leader, we lost a light. We didn't just lose our way, we lost our vision. Three thousand, three hundred and twelve years was not only to lament this very unfortunate turn of events, but, it was to give us, Moshe Rabbeinu's followers a chance to rebuild that vision, piece-by-piece, Jew-by-Jew, so that it can be G-d who can ask with wonder:

Eichah? How? How did you do it, rebuild that Torah vision, overcoming your own personal biases,

and building the Kingdom of Heaven, on Earth?! That's a "how" we would all like to be asked.

Shabbos Day:

How can I carry you as a burden (ma'aseichem) by myself, with the trouble (tirchachem) you cause, and your fighting (rivchem)? (Devarim 1:12)

According to the Ramban, the "burden" being referred to here is the responsibility that a leader has to pray on behalf of his community, and to be involved in their needs -- to learn with students, to adjudicate cases. The Chasam Sofer points out that the first letters of each responsibility (mem-raish-tet) spells the word "matar," which means "rain," as if to say, when the people sin, then, the rains will stop.

Being the rav of a community is often a tug of war between the rav himself and the community he leads. It is rarely a homogenius mix, and, the larger the kehillah, the more opinions with which to contend. The emotional battles can be far more draining -- and costly -- than the intellectual ones, even among talmidei chachamim.

And, the deeper into exile we go as a people, the more this is often the case. For this reason, many very qualified rabbis have avoided rabbanos. In fact, the Talmud states that, because Yosef acted with rabbanos, he died far earlier than the rest of his brothers (Sotah 13b).

Sometimes, this can be because the responsibility of taking care of a community can be so taxing that the person ages quickly; sometimes, it can be because the rav compromised so much, TOO MUCH -- even for the right reasons -- that his actions became intolerable to Heaven, and, he lost his merit to lead. We can assume that Yosef HaTzaddik did everything he could to be humble and fair, and yet, his rabbanos did him in.

Yehoshua bin Nun also died somewhat young -- the same age as Yosef, from whom he descended (through Ephraim) -- and it may have also been the result of leading the Jewish people. Rashi writes back in Parashas Pinchas:

G-d spoke to Moshe: Take Yehoshua bin Nun, a man who has spirit, and place your hand upon him. (Bamidbar 27:18)

"Take him, that is, with nice words, telling him, 'Happy are you who is privileged to lead the children of G-d' Š" (Rashi)

As Rashi points out elsewhere, these words are usually necessary when the job being "sold" has drawbacks and inherent dangers. Yehoshua had not been born yesterday; he had been with Moshe Rabbeinu through all of the journeys, and had suffered with his master through all the trials and

tribulations. He must have been awfully anxious about his mission to lead the people into the new land, though, he no longer had to deal with those who had left Egypt, but with their children instead.

The trick is in both choosing a leader with excellent qualifications, good Torah judgment, and plenty of humility, and, in being willing to step out of the way and let him lead. Sometimes, and maybe even most of the time, it is easier to fulfill the first set of requirements than the second set. Sometime, it seems, congregations hire a leader in order to lead him, and not to be led.

This is when rabbanos can do in even a well-qualified rabbi. To be the rabbi of a community -- any kind of community -- is to compromise, but to be a great rabbi is know when to compromise and when to stand firm, when to "mix in" with the tzibur and when to stay apart, and be the shining example of what ought to be.

Even if a rabbi plays his part perfectly, there is no guarantee that the congregation will play theirs, and, many a good rabbi has been sent "packing" because he refused to bend to the whim of the people he was hired to lead. Happy is the rabbi whose membership is more interested in doing the will of G-d than having their own will fulfilled, and, happy is the congregation whose rabbi takes his role as a messenger of G-d in a serious and humble way.

In the end, as we learn from the Talmud, it is the greatness of the people that determines the greatness of the leader:

G-d told Moshe, "Go down! Your people which you brought out of Egypt have corrupted themselves Š (Shemos 32:7)

Rebi Elazar said: The Holy One, Blessed is He, said to Moshe, "Go down from your greatness, which, I only gave to you for the sake of Israel. Now that they have sinned, what do I need you for? (Brochos 32a)

And:

Rebi Yosef said regarding him (Rebi Yochanan ben Zakkai), and some say Rebi Akiva, said it, "He turns the wise backward, and makes their knowledge foolish" (Yeshayahu 44.25) Š (Gittin 56b)

"Š He turns the wisdom of the wisemen backwards Š This means that, because of the sin of people in the city, The Holy One, Blessed is He, turns their wisdom backward so that they have no understanding to return." (Maharshah, Gittin, 56b, q.v. Meishiv Chachamim Š)

If we want greater leaders, we have to want to be greater people. And, if we want the "matar" (rain) to fall in its proper time in the proper way -- also a symbol of earning a good living -- then, we have to let our leaders lead, and they, for their part, have do so in honesty, with fear of G-d, and with great respect for their responsibility.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

I commanded Yehoshua at that time, saying, "Your eyes have seen all that G-d, your G-d, has done to these two kings. This will G-d do to all the kingdoms that you will encounter. Do not be afraid of them, because it is G-d, your G-d, who fights for you." (Devarim 3:21)

Always, or just then? As the Jewish people slip into a very murky period of Jewish history, however close we may be to Messianic times, can we apply this verse and use it as our spiritual steering wheel?

Absolutely yes. With a catch, that is. This is because, not only does G-d fight FOR us, but, He fights AGAINST us, when we turn our back on Him. The trouble is not that He wants us and loves, but, that He wants us and loves us on HIS terms, because, it is His terms that bring the best out in all of us, and, which make creation purposeful.

This is why the Jewish people live with what can often be viewed as a harsh double standard, on which the Talmud is very aware:

Š Maybe it is different for the non-Jews, upon whom judgment is not visited. (Sotah 21a)

"Heavenly judgment is not swift to be visited for their (the non-Jews) sins in This World. However, with respect to Israel, judgment is swift and exacting in This World." (Rashi, q.v. d'lo mafkid dina Š)

As the Talmud is pointing out, and Rashi is explaining, this is that double standard, one which many Jews would rather do without. For, just as Hashgochah Pratis -- personal Divine Providence -- is the source of many a great story, it has been also the source of many a tragic encounters in the history of the Jewish people, whom, we learn, G-d judges to a hairsbreadth.

However, like everything in life, the greater the potential risk, the greater the potential gain. The Jewish people are here today because of Hashgochah Pratis, which has made sure that no enemy has ever been able to completely obliterate us from the face of the earth. On the other hand, the means by which this promise has been made to come true have rarely been pleasant means. And, though WE may choose to turn our back on Hashgochah Pratis, Hashgochah Pratis NEVER turns its back on us, and usually "heads us off at the pass."

Life is an intricate and ongoing test to see the hand of G-d in all that happens. On the surface, the Jewish nation saw the land of Canaan before them, promised to them by G-d, but, they also saw the Canaanite nations in-between that inheritance and themselves. They understood that these hostile and immoral nations would not give up the land without a fight, and therefore, they saw war before them as well.

Why didn't G-d just wipe them away? Why didn't G-d just take care of them one night while the

Jewish people slept, just as He took care of Balak and Bilaam while the Jewish nation took care of their daily lives in the camp below? How nice it would have been to wake up and find a vacant "house" just waiting for the new tenant to move in.

The answer is, that, none of the drama is absolutely necessary -- NONE OF IT. You don't have to go to war to make peace. You don't have to have contention at all! What you have to have is a clear vision that "There is none other than Him" (Devarim 4:35), and, that it is He who made this world, sustains this world, and maintains this world. War becomes an inevitable reality when we, the Jewish people, give too much credibility to the powers that SEEM TO be.

When we view G-d as the only REAL Force in creation, then, that Force works on our behalf, and clears the path before we even get there. If not, then, we are forced to work through conventional means to accomplish our goals, often becoming vulnerable to dangerous predicaments in order to turn our hearts back to G-d. It is for this that we are judged, and for which the non-Jewish nations are NOT judged.

However, it is for coming to this intellectual and spiritual clarity that we are rewarded, in This World, AND, the in World-to-Come. And, this alone makes our special relationship with G-d worth it in the end, and if we're really astute, during our lifetimes as well.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Halleluy'ah! Praise the Name of G-d! Praise you servants of G-d, who stand in the House of G-d, in the courtyards of the House of our G-d; praise G-d, for G-d is good! Sing to His Name, for It is pleasant!
(Tehillim 135:1-3)

This psalm is a veritable history lesson of the Jewish people's rise from single individuals to a fledgling nation, to a people who witnessed the systematic destruction of the mightiest nations of the time:

G-d selected Ya'akov for His own, Israel as His treasure. (4)

Why not Avraham? Was it not Avraham who chose G-d against society, and therefore, was chosen by Him as a "society" unto himself? Yes, but to choose Avraham as the "treasured nation" was to choose ALL of Avraham's descendants, which included Yishmael and the children of Keturah as well.

What about Yitzchak and his children? Yitzchak is the symbol of sacrifice for G-d, and he never strayed from the service of the A'lmighty. However, HIS children also included Eisav, and Eisav did not possess the merit to be called His "treasured nation," not Eisav himself or any of his many descendants.

Only Ya'akov fathered "Shivtei Kah" -- "Tribes of G-d," and only they merited to be called "Am Segulaso" -- "His Treasured People."

For, I know that G-d is greater than all heavenly powers. (5)

This is one of the central characteristics of a Jew -- to believe in no other powers but G-d, and, to know that He is the Force behind all forces, no matter how much creation appears to the contrary.

All that G-d wanted, He did -- in heaven and on earth; in the seas and all the depths Š It was He who smote the firstborn of Egypt, from man to beast. (6 - 8)

Lest you forget: He does it all. Lest you reject: we are "here" today because of Him, and, we will continue to be "here" because of Him. Here's the best part:

The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the handiwork of man. They have mouths, but cannot speak Š (15 - 16)

Š True, money DOES seem to talk, but whose language? Is that really called "speaking," from the Creator's point of view? The Talmud defines true "speaking" in the following way:

R' Elazar said: Every man was created to toil, as it says, "Because man was made to toil ..." (Iyov 5:7). Now, I do not know if that means to toil through speech, or in actual labor; however, once it says, "A toiling soul toils for him, for his mouth compels him." (Mishlei 16:26), I know that a person was created to toil with his mouth. I do not know, though, if this means to toil in Torah or just in regular conversation. However, once it says, "This Torah should not leave your mouth ..." (Yehoshua 1: 8), I know that man was created to toil in Torah [through speech]. (Sanhedrin 99b)

No wonder the Talmud admonishes:

Rava said: Anyone who speaks of non-holy matters (Rashi: childishly and light-headedly) has transgressed a positive commandment, as it says, "... And speak of them ..." (Devarim 6:7) -- them (Rashi: words of Torah), and not other words. (Yoma 19b)

In fact, tradition teaches that, after it is all said and done, and we stand before the King of kings on that Awesome Day of Judgment, a person's mitzvos will literally speak up on behalf of the person, or, in the case of sins, against the person.

Š they have eyes, but cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there any breath in their mouths. (16 - 17)

And, here is the most important and frightening point of all:

Like them shall their fabricators become -- all who trust in them. (18)

It is the ultimate middah-k'neged-middah -- measure-for-measure: You will become like that which you believe in, and be abandoned by what you trusted. Unless, of course, you heed the cry:

House of Israel, bless G-d! House of Aharon, bless G-d! House of Levi, bless G-d! Those who fear Him, bless G-d! Blessed is G-d from Tzion, He Who dwells in Yerushalayim. Halleluy'ah! (19 - 21)

Tzion -- that is, a Torah nation living within the borders of Eretz Yisroel, uncontested by ANY nation. Tzion -- the ultimate state of the Jewish people that the prophets dreamed of, and, as this week's Haftarah -- for which this Shabbos is named -- finishes:

Tzion -- through judgment will be redeemed, and, her captives, through charity. (Yeshayahu 1:)

It is at this time, during the Three Weeks, especially in advance of Tisha B'Av, and, at this crucial juncture in Jewish history, that we must recall that is then, and only then, that He, and we, can finally dwell in Yerushalayim, permanently and in peace.

Have a meaningful Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston
