

AN EAR FOR TESHUVAH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

The corruption: it is not His; the blemish is His children a crooked and twisted generation. (Devarim 32:5)

When I was young, I had a dog. He was a Miniature Schnauzer, who never grew higher than 18 inches off the ground. One day I took him to the park and removed his leash to give him some long desired running room. No sooner was the leash off my dog than he ran like the wind away from me, across the huge park.

I was delighted to see him enjoy his freedom, until a massive dog, about four times his size, casually strolled across the same park. I expected my dog to put his tail between his legs and high-tail it back to me. However, instead, he ran right for the big dog, which could have consumed my dog for breakfast.

In astonishment, I watched my dog first sniff noses with the big dog, and then if you can believe it, stand up and put his paws on the big dog's head. I don't remember what I thought then, but, it was probably along the lines of, "Okay, what kind of dog would I like to get next?" because, I thought this dog would make cat food out of my mine.

Instead, though, this big brute of dog, having no patience for a Miniature Schnauzer's antics, simply flung his big head down and up, and, it was enough to toss my dog on his side for a roll in the grass. As my dog recovered himself and prepared for a new run at this dog, I frantically called for my dog and chased after him with my leash. I didn't catch him, but it was enough to force him in a different direction, away from the bigger dog.

Now, some twenty-five years later, I wonder if that story is, in fact, a good analogy for the Jewish people, who seem to have more self-confidence than is good for us. We seem to have no problem having more belief in the incomplete, and often mistaken, philosophies of man, than in the possibility that G-d is REALLY there, and, that His Torah is REALLY true.

Is it stiff-neckedness?

Take on G-d? Is itchutzpah?

When all He has to do is shake His head, so to speak, and send us flying in all directions? Is it sheer

stupidity?

Imagine the following dialogue:

Angry Secular Person: I hate religious Jews!

Rabbi: Wow, that's a strong statement! Why do you feel so strongly?

ASP: Because, they're always imposing their ways on others, and, they think that anyone who is not as religious as them is not as Jewish as them!

Rabbi: That's not quite accurate. They will be the first to tell you that anyone born from a Jewish mother is as "Jewish" as the next person who is born from a Jewish mother, or, who has converted according to halachah, for that matter. I think what you mean is that they consider a person who does not practice Torah "less observant."

ASP: Whatever! It still amounts to the same thing. They look down on others, and, they want every Jew to be like them and, they make a big deal and interfere politically if we're not. They're holding us back from being like the rest of the world in this modern era!

Rabbi: Do you think for one second that they would do any of that if they didn't believe that Torah applies to ALL Jews, and that until ALL Jews uphold Torah, redemption for the world cannot come?

ASP: I don't care! They can believe in whatever fantasies they want, but they can't impose their dreams on people like me! What right have they to impose their values on me?!

Rabbi: Because, they believe it's what G-D wants.

ASP: What do they know about G-d? I'm not even sure He exists, and, even if He does exist, I can't believe that He thinks too highly of people who can't even integrate into society. I mean, what value can there be in people who sit around learning all day and dress in black!

Rabbi: I see. So, you think that modern man has all the answers is the wisest man has ever been, and knows what's best for the future of the world?

ASP: Well, not all of the answers. But look at what we've accomplished with technology! We may not have ALL the answers, but, a lot of them far more than people who keep their hands stuck in ancient texts and still believe in myths

Rabbi: You mean, G-d giving the Torah at Mt. Sinai? You believe that it is only a myth?

ASP: What else can it be, if not a myth?

Rabbi: It can be TRUE. Why do you insist that it is a myth?

ASP: Because, there is no archeological evidence to support the claim.

Rabbi: Yet. There is no archeological evidence YET. And, even that is not necessarily true. Anyhow,

what is lacking archeologically can be made up for from other areas of thought. Would you like to discuss some of those?

ASP: Yea, well, if they're right, how come so few people follow their ways?

Rabbi: What do you mean? The world's biggest religions are based upon the Torah being true, and, even the American Constitution is based upon many Torah ideas.

ASP: Well, what about the Holocaust?

Rabbi: There is an answer for that as well. The answers existed in the Torah and its commentaries long before the Holocaust ever occurred. I can't tell you why the Holocaust happened when it did and where it did, and why this person died while this person survived. But, the general rules that govern this universe and our history are laid down in detail. We know a little about the cause-and-effect relationship in history. You want to learn what we know and understand it?

ASP: So, what's wrong with technology?

Rabbi: What do you mean?

ASP: Why can't Orthodox Jews use technology, and get involved in the business world?

Rabbi: Well, many do. But think about it for a moment. Imagine for a second that G-d is really there, and, He really gave the Torah. Let's say the Torah contains the axioms of creation, and, that G-d has told us that He values its study above and beyond anything else. Let's even say that the learning of it in detail is so exhilarating, even more than a good novel that you can't put it down.

ASP: I learned a little bit of the Bible. I didn't find it exciting at all!

Rabbi: Did you learn the Jewish version? Did you learn it with Rashi, and the Ramban.

ASP: Who?

Rabbi: Famous Torah commentators. Did you ever learn Talmud with Rishonim? Did you ever taste the sweetness of Kabbalah? Did you even meditate on the profundity of the words of the Zohar?

ASP: Ah, well, of course not. It's not for me Š I have a wife and family to support. I have to be a responsible member of society.

Rabbi: Of course you do. The Torah says so. And, the Torah tells you how to do it. You know, societies come and go. What was right in one secular society becomes wrong in the next. Torah is timeless. It is the undercurrent to history, it runs through history, and, it rises above it. Could it be that those people whose backwardness you hate are just living in a different realm, sailing the undertow of history? Could they know something you have yet to learn, and, because you have yet to learn it, you have difficulty relating to their way of life?

ASP: I find that hard to believe.

Rabbi: I also did, until I stumbled into Torah Judaism myself

ASP: You were once like me?

Rabbi: Not only was I once secular, but, I was an ANGRY secular person like you, espousing the same gripe against the Orthodox community. I'm even a Harvard graduate in business administration.

ASP: I don't believe you. No one walks away from a future like that.

Rabbi: Unless they see something more important to believe in a higher value to pursue.

ASP: I still find it hard to believe that so few people who seem to know so little about this world can be so right, with so little evidence to support their point of view. And, if we're all wrong, then, why doesn't G-d say something already?

Rabbi: Funny you should ask. Both your questions are answered in one verse from the Torah. In Parashas Nitzavim, the posuk said: G-d, your G-d, will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your descendants, so you may love G-d, your G-d with all your heart, and with all your soul, in order that you may live. (Devarim 30:6). Now, the Hebrew for the words, "your heart and the heart" is: es levavecha v'es l'vav. The Torah commentator, the Ba'al HaTurim, points out that, if you take the first letter of these four words, they spell the word "Elul," the name of the month that precedes Rosh Hashanah. This, says the Ba'al HaTurim, is an allusion to the need to begin saying Selichos (special prayers and liturgy designed to prepare us for the atmosphere of the Aseres Yemai Teshuvah, the Ten Days of Repentance) early in the morning from Rosh Chodesh Elul on, as the Sephardim indeed do (Ashkenazim begin the week before Rosh Hashanah only). You see, there is something, be it psychological, be it emotion, be it spiritual, that is blocking our clarity of vision. If we take Torah seriously, and look once again in the direction of G-d, and humble ourselves a little bit, then, Torah begins to make more sense to us. This is what the verse, "The corruption: it is not His; the blemish is His children a crooked and twisted generation." (Devarim 32:5), means. The explanations are all there, well, at least for the most part. We have to stop making assumptions, and start pursuing truth.

Secular Person: It sounds good in theory. But, there are people harder to reach than me. How are you going to get to THEM?

Rabbi: The Ba'al HaTurim answers that question too. He adds that "es levavecha v'es" has total numerical value of that which is equal to "this is (the period of) the days of Moshiach, in Hebrew, of course.

SP: You really believe all that stuff?

Rabbi: I really believe all that "stuff." You want to find out why?

Some answer yes, but most answer no, and, as the Ba'al HaTurim points out, it may take Moshiach to tip the scales in the opposite direction. Fortunate is the one with an ear for teshuvah.

Shabbos Day:

Remember the days of old, understand the many generations that have passed. Ask your father, and he will tell you; your elders, and they will say it to you. (Devarim 32:7)

Memory is a phenomenal device. It places such a major role in making life meaningful; without memory, the moments of our lives do not connect, life becomes meaningless, and, we cease to accomplish.

It is memory that we drive into the "mountain" of life, that we use to secure our present position before moving up the steep cliff of life. It is upon memory that we stand in the present and build for the future. The beauty and power of a computer is not its speed, but, rather, its capacity to remember. The fastest computer in the world with poor memory can go only in circles, albeit quickly.

Mankind, too. Our collective short-term memory seems to always work just fine; we remember just what it is that we need to get ahead in life. However, our collective long-term memory seems to falter, and badly. We're fast, we have the speed, but, we tend to go in circles, quickly.

I remember December of 1999. Y2K was still a hotly debated topic, and, much doubt remained about the effect, if any, that it would have on the world's economies and peace. If Y2K did anything at all, besides cost 66 billion dollars to fix, it exposed our dependency on modern technology to make life "work," and therefore, our inherent vulnerability to collapse when, if ever, it does.

For the first time that I can remember, articles began to appear which questioned the prudence of blindly pushing at lightning speeds into the realm of technological achievement. Until Y2K became a reality, mankind seemed to assume that you can't have too much technology, and, advancement can't come fast enough. Now, at a moment in history when philosophy came head on with technological achievement, people were beginning to wonder if unbridled technological advancement was so safe after all.

Yea, but that was over nine months ago. Y2K is a distant reality now. We passed the test and solved the problems. Y2K was an obstacle, a technological hurdle to be sprinted over, and we did just that. The path is clear from here on in, and now it is only a question of steam.

"Y2K? Wasn't that a fiction novel from decades ago?"

The world is filled with many problems, and, the Jewish people suffer from far too many physical and spiritual maladies during one of the most peaceful times in current history. Why? If we can understand the cause, then, in time, we can deal with the symptoms.

However, there is one symptom that is overlooked almost always, but, one which the Torah holds up

and waves banners around, as if to say,

"THIS IS IT! THIS IS THE CAUSE OF ALL YOUR OTHER PROBLEMS!! IF YOU'D ONLY REMEMBER WHAT HAS HAPPENED ANY WHY, THEN, YOU WOULD RECONSIDER YOUR PRESENT COURSE OF LIFE, AND ALL WOULD GO WELL FOR YOU "

The Torah is telling us a crucial point: The key to success in This World lies not in the future, but, in the past. It is the ultimate "archeological dig," and "find," for, it now only verifies the past, but, it also validates the future.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Return Israel until G-d, your G-d, for, you have stumbled in your sin. (Hoshea 14:1)

This year, Parashios Nitzavim and Vayailech were read on the same Shabbos, so, therefore, HaAzinu is the parshah that falls on Shabbos Shuvah -- the Shabbos between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; during the Aseres Yemai Teshuvah. Hence, we read the Haftarah, "Shuvah Yisroel" from Hoshea.

The Malbim explains the above verse as follows:

"For, you have stumbled in your sin You have not sinned in rebellion, but, rather, you have been misled by the kings of Shomron; you have done so unwittingly and through duress, and, therefore you can be rectified. Return UNTIL G-d: The word "until" is to indicate that G-d stands off in the "distance," and that they need to go to Him until they reach Him. In other words, they must abandon their previous sins and regret what was done in error in the past, and desire a path back to G-d." (Malbim)

This sounds like just the opposite of what we have been told about this period of the year. Elul, the Rabbis have encouraged us, stands for "I am for my Beloved, and, my Beloved is for me." Elul and the Ten Days of Repentance are a time that G-d approaches us, supposedly, as if to meet us "half-way," to make our return "home" easier and less humiliating.

Why are we talking about G-d "standing off in the distance."

The Malbim, seemingly anticipating this question, writes:

"In other words, they must abandon their previous sins and regret what was done in error in the past, and desire a path back to G-d."

What the Malbim is telling us is that, in spite of the fact that G-d has gone out of His way, so to speak, to create an atmosphere that encourages teshuvah, still, there is some distances He will not traverse, for our own good. He could demand that we love Him. He could demand that we return in

complete repentance. On occasion, He has done just that.

However, it is not His way. He wants our love and He derives untold satisfaction from seeing us do teshuvah, because WE want to, because WE desire it. He wants to reward us for all of our free-will efforts, every last one, no matter how big or how small. Like a parent who desires his child's independence, and, in spite of the fact that he yearns to run and support his toddler's newly found footsteps, instead, stands off in the distance and lets the child fight for himself, so, too, does G-d stand off in the "distance" until we find our teshuvah-feet.

But, that same father who stands off in the distance also calls out with enthusiasm, encouragement, and with love, "Come my son! Walk to me! You can do it! Beautiful Very nice, very nice, You're almost there, See my hands, walk to my hands"

Never was something so far away so close.

And, when the child proudly falls into his father's arms, gloating from the great sense of accomplishment of having walked to his father on his own, the father deeply hugs and cries tears of joy over his son's desire to walk, his will to take the necessary steps, and, his success of having done so.

If you listen carefully, especially at this time of year, you can hear your Father in Heaven calling out to you too, encouraging you with words of belief and tones of love, and with outstretched arms with which to catch you and reward your efforts in the end. All we have to do is walk in His direction, do the teshuvah, and yearn to go home.

MELAVE MALKAH: *A Song of Ascents. To You I raised my eyes, O You Who dwell in the heavens.*
(Tehillim 123:1)

This short tehillah is about our long exiles. Exile, for the Jew, is at best perilous, and, at worst, completely destructive. The majority of exile for the Jewish people has been painful, filled with much suffering and very difficult choices, often resulting in physically torturous deaths, just for being Jewish. Sometimes, exile for the Jew has been spiritually torturous, where the world of the host nation has invaded the Jewish camp and tempted many to leave it behind for the path of the non-Jew.

No matter how you look at it, exile is spiritually degrading, especially for Torah and those who adhere to it, and, sometimes the worse jeering comes from within the ranks of world Jewry itself. Dovid HaMelech was sensitive to all of this, and he tried to make us understand that, even if we become desensitized to it, we have to fight to return to G-d. Step one is to raise our sights, and to look up to G-d for help.

Behold, like the eyes of servants to their master's hand, like the eyes of a maid to her mistress' hand, so are our eyes to G-d, our G-d, until He will favor us. (2)

Well, at least that is the way it ought to be. One of the most deceiving aspects of exile is parnassa -- livelihood. When the Jewish people live in Eretz Yisroel, according to Torah, and all is as it should be, it was easy to see that G-d's hand was the one that sustained ours. However, in exile, G-d goes undercover, and works through nature to support us.

To the onlooker, the Jew goes to work like the rest of the non-Jewish world around him, puts in the same hours, and draws a paycheck like everyone else. He seems to be, for the most, absorbed into the system of automated providence, with very little to distinguish him from the rest.

However, in truth, it is G-d Who has created the environment that has made possible the survival of the Jew in every society, and, Who uses the "system" to support him and his family. Both the Jew and the non-Jew may use the same system of earning a living, but, for the Jew, it is still the hand of G-d that signs that paycheck each time.

Favor us, G-d, favor us, for we are fully sated with derision. Our soul is full with the scorn of the tranquil, and with the concept of the arrogant. (3-4)

Very little irritates a servant more than watching his derisive master enjoy life with tranquility, especially at the servant's expense. Nothing seems more unjust in life than the prosperity of the evil, of those who lack appreciation and who are unfair to others.

For the Jew in exile, it is a double pain. Not only are we denied the opportunity to learn Torah and do the mitzvos as we would like to, but, we are forced to watch our "captors" enjoy a level of tranquility that should be reserved for those who are loyal to G-d. It is the ultimate in hester panim -- the hiding of G-d's face -- and takes the concept of exile to an extreme. We can only handle so much of it.

Well, the truth of it is, G-d can handle even less of it, because, it is not the way the world is meant to run. However, how long exile is prolonged depends upon us. If we seem able to handle the exile, with all its perils and inherent dangers, or, at least give the impression that we are handling it, then, G-d sees little reason to end it. But, if we recognize the true, and often subtle damage of exile, and, decide we have had enough of it, and turn to G-d to end it, then, He does exactly that.

This is true on a national level, and, a personal level. And, every Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are asked to come to terms with our own personal exile as well, the one that interferes with our close relationship with G-d. At this time of year, we're supposed to take stock of the damage that exile has had on us, our loved ones, and, the nation as whole. Then, we're supposed to turn Heavenward, and say to G-d:

Dear G-d, enough is enough! All these sins of mine and my inability to properly atone for them shows us both the toll exile has taken on me, and, Your people. Bring an end to our exile, and our degradation, and the disgrace of Your Holy Torah. And with that, bring the Final Redemption, and

Moshiach to lead us back to You, so that we can all live together in peace and tranquility, and, oneness with our Creator.

It should be so, in our time. Amen.

Good Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston

L'Shannah Tovah ... v'Chasivah v'Chasimah Tovah.

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