

THE LONGEST JOURNEY EVER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

"However, if her husband annuls them on the day he hears them, then whatever she verbally vows to bind herself will become null and void. Since her husband has voided them, G-d will not hold her responsible." (Bamidbar 30:13)

Parashas Mattos begins with a discussion about nedarim (oaths), a fitting way to end a book that emphasizes the power of the mouth to create and direct reality. As we mentioned at the beginning of this sefer, the word for "desert" (midbar) itself, with only a slight vowel change, spells the word "medabehr," which means "speaking being." It is the Kabbalistic term for man, since, as Onkeles points out, it was speech that man gained when G-d breathed a soul into him (Bereishis 2:7).

The word for "oath" itself -- neder -- says a tremendous amount. Neder is spelled: nun-dalet-raish, which can be read: nun-dar, which means "nun lives there." Of course, whenever we see a nun, we see a reference to the "Nun Sha'arei Binah," the "Fifty Gates of Understanding," the ultimate goal of man with which he can view creation through the eyes of G-d, and become a full partner with the Creator in bringing creation to fruition.

One of the halachos of nedarim has to do with the annulment by a husband of vows made by his wife, as the posuk above explains. The Talmud explains this verse as follows:

To what does this verse refer? To a woman whose husband annulled them for her without her knowing. The verse is teaching that she needs atonement and forgiveness [from Heaven] "(Nazir 23a)

In other words, in such a case when a woman breaks a vow that she believes is still in effect, even though her husband has already annulled it, she requires forgiveness from G-d. Why? Because she thought that she was sinning by committing the act she previously vowed not to do, and for that lack of self-control and perhaps, for her rebelliousness, she requires atonement.

The Talmud follows this up by adding:

When Rebi Akiva reached this verse, he would cry: If one who thought to pick up treif meat instead lifted up kosher meat still needs atonement and forgiveness, how much more so one who intends to take treif meat and indeed, takes treif meat!

In other words, if G-d is so "strict" about an intended sin that ends up not being a sin, how much more so must He take notice and punish intended sins that actually do result in sin! Or, perhaps, maybe Rebi Akiva cried because we can assume from the posuk that, if G-d punishes only for the intention to sin, then, how much more so must He punish for an intended sin that is actually carried out as planned.

However, is this really true? Elsewhere, the Talmud seems to say just the opposite, namely that G-d does not punish a Jew for intending to sin until it becomes reality (Kiddushin 39b). So, why does Rebi Akiva make this inference and cry as a result?

Then again, the question is not for Rebi Akiva, but for the Talmud. After all, Rebi Akiva is only speaking out what is implied by the posuk in this week's parshah, regarding the wife who thinks her vow is still operative. The Torah is implying that intention to sin is enough to require atonement and forgiveness, so, then, how can the Talmud say otherwise?

According to some, G-d does count the intention to sin as reality, even for a Jew, if it is inevitable that the Jew will commit the sin when not prevented. Hence, to use Rebi Akiva's analogy, the very fact that we see the person pick up meat he thinks is treif to consume proves that he would have done the sin, had not circumstances prevented him. Hence, from G-d's point of view, it is as if the sin was done, even if, in reality, it was not.

Thus, for the woman who breaks a vow that her husband annulled, all along thinking that it is still in effect proves to us that she intended to do the sin. Therefore, from G-d's perspective, it is as if she has in fact committed the act, and she requires atonement for this. Rebi Akiva cried because he saw how intention alone can count as a separate sin, apart from the act itself -- a double whammy, as they say.

However, there might be an added dimension to this discussion. Perhaps the distinction to be made is between two concepts: Hashgochah Klallis, and, Hashgochah Pratis -- General Divine Providence and, Specific Divine Providence. According to tradition, the former applies to all of creation, whereas the latter, only to the Jewish people.

Therefore, when something happens in the life of a Jew, it is called "Hashgochah Pratis." It is not merely his destiny playing out, making what has happened to him more random. It is G-d "personally" acting within this person's life, based upon merits and demerits of the person himself, or, his ancestors. This is a fundamental of Torah philosophy (Avodah Zarah 3a).

Hence, the reason why the person did not pick up the treif meat was not simply "good luck," as in the case with other nations the Talmud is implying, but, Hashgochah Pratis. There was a merit involved in this mini-redemption, and therefore, the person is not held responsible for what could have been a sin, but wasn't.

However, the attitude and intention behind the act is a here-and-now reality, a blemish in the

person's relationship with G-d. Something like that previous merits can't simply cause G-d to look the "other way"; for THAT a person is going to need atonement and forgiveness -- not for an act that wasn't done, but, for the lack of concern for closeness to G-d that the would-be sinner exhibited by contemplating transgression.

That is something that we ALL suffer from at some point in time, on some level, and for that it is worth crying about, at least a little.

Shabbos Day:

Moshe sent them -- 1,000 from each tribe to the army, as well as Pinchas son of Elazar the kohen to the army, and the holy vessels, and with him the trumpets to blow. They waged war against Midian, as G-d had commanded Moshe, killing every male. They killed the kings of Midian; among the dead was Evi, Rekem, Tzur, Chur, and Reva -- the five kings of Midian; and Bilaam son of Peor they killed with the sword. (Bamidbar 31:6-8)

In this week's parshah, Divinely-sanctioned revenge against Midian and Bilaam finally occurs. As Rashi points out, it was an ignoble ending for what was an illustrious career as a contract-curser. It just goes to show you how you can fool some of the people some of the time, but you can fool G-d NONE of the time; in one fell swoop, G-d can turn a lifetime of glory into nothingness if a person acts dishonorably.

The question remains, how could Bilaam dare do it? How could he dare take on a people, better yet, G-d, Who, up until now, has turned the world upside down to save and protect the His "treasured nation"? It was bound to be suicide, and, unless Bilaam was prepared to go down with the Jewish people, his willingness to accept Balak's offer baffles the mind.

The answer to this question lies somewhere else. It says in the Talmud that:

Rebi Avahu son of Zutresi said in the name of Rav Yehudah son of Zvida: They wanted to put Parashas Balak into the recitation of the Shema. Why didn't they put it in? Because of the imposition on the people " (Brochos 12b)

Can you imagine that? Parashas Balak in the Shema, twice a day? Why in the world would the rabbis want to insert such a parshah -- of all parshios -- in the holy Shema? The answer: Hashgochah Pratis -- Divine Providence -- personalized Divine Providence.

It is a well-established fact that G-d deals differently with the Jewish people than with the rest of the nations of the world. As nice as that sounds, the truth is, it is a distinction that many Jews throughout the ages, and especially today, wished they could walk away from. Indeed, they try to all the time!

As we spoke about above, there are two levels of Providence when it comes to mankind: Hashgochah Klallis, and, Hashgochah Pratis -- General Providence, and, Specific Providence. According to tradition, and history, it is the former that G-d applies to the non-Jewish nations, and, the latter, DIRECT Divine Providence that G-d uses with the Jewish people.

The result is that the non-Jewish nations can get away with murder, literally, while the Jewish people get away with just about nothing, at least not in the long run. Hashgochah Pratis, as Rashi points out in numerous places, and Kabbalah reiterates all over the place, means that G-d pays attention and responds to even the minutiae of the lives of the Jewish people -- even we don't, and can't.

This is why the rabbis wanted to insert this parshah into the Shema. For, whereas the words of the Shema testify to the reality of G-d as Creator and Sustainer, it is Parashas Bilaam that testifies to the extent which G-d is willing to protect His people and get involved in their destiny.

Hence, while Balak and Bilaam were running around up in the hills above the Jewish camp trying to curse them, G-d stuck up for the Jewish people, totally unbeknownst to them. It was Hashgochah Pratis at its best -- G-d working on behalf of the Jewish people to such a point that He even controlled the mouth of Bilaam, a man who, up until then, had complete control over his own mouth.

And, this is why Bilaam even tried to hurt the Jewish people in the first place. For, Bilaam wasn't used to it. Even as an advisor to Pharaoh, he had not come into direct conflict with the Jewish people and G-d. He had previously worked only in the world of Hashgochah Klallis, where, it seemed, he had been able to have it his way, as Balak pointed out:

"I am aware that the one you bless is blessed, and the one you curse will be cursed." (Bamidbar 22:6)

However, when Bilaam accepted Balak's offer to curse the Jewish people, he entered a whole new realm of Hashgochah, one that, until that time, he had only "experienced" from the outside. It was kind of a Providential "Twilight Zone" for Bilaam, and this is why even our worst and most dangerous enemies have acknowledged the special Providence the Jewish people just before launching their own attack on the Jewish nation!

Why? Because, until you experience Hashgochah Pratis first-hand, you don't exactly know what it is like, and to what extent it goes. Very often, people only find this out after testing its limits, and then deeply regret that they ever did.

"But," you will interrupt, "true as that may be, STILL, Bilaam caused the death of 176,000 Jews, and, other anti-Semites, millions of Jews! Yes, they may get it in the end, but it is WE, the JEWISH PEOPLE, who get it in the beginning and in the middle! Where is the Divine Providence in all of that?!"

That is only true when we as a people choose not to live with such Divine Providence, and it was Bilaam's advice to try and "drag" us out of it. That was what the role of the Midianite women in the

end, to create a scenario where the Divine Presence would reject the Jewish people, which it did, until Pinchas turned the events around. When we are drawn to immodesty and the world of materialism, we allow ourselves to surrender Hashgochah Pratis in favor of Hashgochah Klallis.

This is what the Torah warns:

"If you will not change from what I do, because of these occurrences, but continue to walk contrary to Me, then I will also walk contrary to you, and will punish you another seven times for your mistakes." (Vayikra 26:23-24)

"Oh good!" some may shout out. "That is exactly what we wanted!"

However, as history proves over, and over again -- it is a temporary situation: Hashgochah Klallis always gives way to Hashgochah Pratis in the end. And, when it does, those who lived with it the entire time can revel in their clairvoyance and patience in the Divine hand working behind the scenes of Jewish history. Those who did not, sadly, are often over run by it, and suffer Bilaam's fate, done it by the very Hashgochah Pratis they thought to undermine.

The nations may deal with Israel with Hashgochah Klallis, but G-d, Master of the Universe, deals with Israel with nothing but Hashgochah Pratis.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

These are the journeys of the Children of Israel, who left Egypt as a nation under the leadership of Moshe and Aharon ... (Bamidbar 33:1-2)

These opening words of this week's parshah, the last sedrah in Sefer Bamidbar, are talking about the forty years of wandering in the desert since leaving Egypt. However, they could easily be the concluding words of ALL of Jewish history, which has been one long passage from Egypt until the Final Redemption, the final "camp," so-to-speak, for the Jewish people after over 3,300 years trying to settle down.

I chose to focus on Eretz Yisroel for all the parshios of this sefer, because, as I mentioned back at the beginning, Sefer Bamidbar represents the spiritual preparation for life in Eretz Yisroel, for all the generations. (In truth, Sefer Bamidbar is just echoing similar themes from all of Torah, though, they come to the fore in this book.) I think, and many readers confirmed this along the way, given the historical reality of what is going in and over Eretz Yisroel, it was an appropriate theme to focus us.

Still, so many people just don't get it. It is as if they live in two different worlds, the Torah one to which they adhere, and, that of everyday life, which includes everyone and all that is happening. It's as if they're watching life from the "outside," believing they are only indirectly affected by the events of current Jewish history.

They ought to know better, but act as if they don't, as if the current crises facing the Jewish people have nothing to do with the Jewish people and their future; as if their lack of appreciation of the gift of the LAND and the Kosel (Western Wall) has nothing to do with the fact that it is being ripped out of our very hands before our very eyes. They just can't relate to the Hashgochah Pratis of present-day Jewish history.

Let's refer, once again, to that wonderful repository of Heavenly concepts and Torah attitudes to see how one ought to feel about the land. This comes at the tail end of a discussion about Eretz Yisroel, at the tail end of a tractate -- Kesuvos -- that deals with the relationship of the husband and wife, and, the obligations of each to the other. It says:

Rav Abba used to kiss the banks of Acco; Rebi Chanina used to fix the pot holes (Kesuvos 112a)

"He used to smooth out the obstacles of the city because of his love of the land, and so those returning [from Eretz Yisroel] should not speak badly about its roads." (Rashi)

Rav Ashi would get up from the sun and move to the shade, and from the shade, and move to the sun

"When the sun reached the place they were sitting and learning and beat down upon them, they would move to the shade; in colder days, they moved from the shade to the sun so that they would have no reason to complain about settling in Eretz Yisroel." (Rashi)

" Rebi Chiyah son of Gamda used to roll in the dust, as it says, "For Your servants have cherished her stones, and favor her dust." (Tehillim 102:15)

Well, at least once they did. And, that was even during the times of Roman persecution which made physical and spiritual life almost impossible on the land, for a time. The Talmud also says:

When Rebi Zera went up to Eretz Yisroel, he could not find a bridge to cross over, so, he used a rope and crossed. A certain Tzaduki said to him, "Hasty people, who put their mouths before their ears !" He told him, "Who says that I will merit to enter the place that Moshe and Aharon didn't merit to enter?!" (Kesuvos 112a)

This is love of Eretz Yisroel. It is a love that is above politics, above enemy occupation, above gashmius (materialism). It is love of a place that is tied together with Torah and the World-to-Come (Brochos 5a). It is a love born out of a yearning to end the "journey," to bring the Jewish people to their final place of encampment, in order to re-build and enhance their relationship with their Creator. It is a love of rising above time and space, and moving closer to the Gates of Heaven, in order to be at "home" with the Divine Presence.

It is such a yearning, such an understanding, such a love that protects us from relinquishing and losing the "gift" that G-d has been waiting thousands of years now to give to us, His treasured nation.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Whoever sits in the refuge of the Most High, he shall dwell in the shadow of the A'lmighty. (Tehillim 91:1)

This is a very fitting tehillah with which to finish off this sefer of the Torah, this parshah sheet, and, for this perilous period of history. According to the Talmud (Shavuos 15b), this psalm is called the "Song of the Plagues," because, one who says it and trusts in G-d -- one who takes refuge in the shadow of the A'lmighty -- will be saved in times of danger.

I will say of G-d, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my G-d, and I will trust in Him." (2)

According to the Radak, Moshe Rabbeinu dedicated this tehillah to the Levi'im, who spent their days in the insulated environment of the Temple -- a true "fortress" of G-d. It was composed the day that the Mishkan was completed, and the Divine Glory descended to envelope it, into which Moshe entered to receive communication from G-d.

With His pinion He will cover you, and beneath His wings you will be protected; His truth will be shield and armor. (4)

According to the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 12:3), this refers to Torah, which was given with G-d's right arm, so-to-speak (a pinion is like a protecting arm). Furthermore, according to the Divrei Shlomo, the gematria of the word "b'evraso" (pinion) is equal to 611 -- the same gematria of the word Torah. It is also the number of mitzvos the Jewish people receive through Moshe Rabbeinu, and not directly from the mouth of G-d (Makkos 23b), hinting to the fact that it is belief in the Oral Tradition as passed down through Moshe that saves the Jewish people and makes them worthy of Divine protection.

You shall not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day. Nor the plague that walks in gloom, nor the destroyer who destroys at noon. A thousand will fall at your side, and a myriad at your right hand, but to you it shall not approach. (5 - 7)

This is the theme of the entire psalm -- indeed of ALL of Jewish history. The Talmud says that, just as only ONE-FIFTH survived of the Jewish people to leave Egypt, so, too, will only ONE-FIFTH survive the days of during which Moshiach will establish his reign and rid the world of evil, once and for all (Sanhedrin 111a). Does this mean that four-fifths will die in the process, just as they did during the ninth plague, the plague of darkness in Egypt? The Talmud doesn't clarify this point.

However, "survival" from a Torah perspective doesn't always mean physical survival, especially in light of the concept of an eternal World-to-Come. Indeed, survival means, for the most part, SPIRITUAL survival, which, in this case means leaving this world, or greeting Moshiach -- whichever comes first -- with one's relationship with G-d intact. It is THIS, and NOTHING ELSE, that determines one's eternal portion in the World-to-Come -- one's ETERNAL SURVIVAL.

A Jew is given many choices in life, but they all come down to one essential choice: trust in G-d, or something else, G-d forbid. In the short run, the "something else" can create the illusion that results are happening. But, it is a short-lived illusion once illusion gives way to reality. Besides, only G-d can promise:

I will satisfy him with long life and how him My salvation. (16)

Amen. It should only be in our lifetime, and through peaceful means. May we witness the peaceful and glorious end of the age-old journey of the wandering Jew.

Chazak!

Have a great Shabbos,
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