

SPEAKING OF FREEDOM...

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

This week is Shabbos HaGadol, the Shabbos in advance of Pesach, and as such, we read a special Haftarah. Shabbos HaGadol is a reminder of the original Shabbos in Egypt, when the Jews took their Pesach lamb in preparation of the fourteenth of Nissan, when they were to slaughter it to be eaten at the Seder that night.

According to the Midrash, this led to many additional miracles, one of which was being protected from the angry Egyptians whose god was being paraded through the streets by "slaves" in advance of its slaughter. Shabbos HaGadol commemorates those miracles, to remind us, in advance of Pesach, how much G-d desires us as His people.

How much does G-d desire us as a people?

To the extent that He "bent" the rules of creation, so-to-speak, when it came time to redeem the Jewish people from Egypt. In other words, even though, when the Plague of Blood began, the Jewish people began their ascent back into the world of spirituality, still, after all ten plagues were complete, the Jewish people had still not been worthy of major redemption.

Nevertheless, G-d provided one anyhow. Normally, we are expected to learn Torah and perform mitzvos down here, and through this, draw light down to the Sefiros, bring about their rectification, and cause redemption. However, in Egypt, G-d did all the work for us, and we simply became the recipients of the high level of spiritual perfection that occurred at that time -- tasting then firsthand what the Final Redemption will be like.

Nevertheless, because we had NOT earned such a high level of G-d's light, we became spiritually vulnerable. Even when G-d bends His own rules, there are some principles that remain immutable. This is why we find G-d, Who created the Satan in the first place, often "fooling" him or "appeasing" him for the sake of the Jewish people, rather than simply ignore him (all for the sake of maintaining a world that can support free-will).

This is why there is such a serious prohibition against chometz during the week of Pesach. Chometz is said to be from the side of Gevuros, to which the side of evil attaches and draws life. They also take "revenge" against people for whom miracles occur when they don't deserve them, but need

them because of their own negligence or shortcomings.

Therefore, since every Pesach is a partial repeat performance of the original Pesach in Egypt, when G-d emanated down to the Jewish people an extremely high level of Divine light regardless of our spiritual level, we, too, have to distance ourselves from the Negative Forces in creation that hold us accountable for miracles we receive but do not earn. We do this by creating a chometz-free environment for the week of Pesach.

However, ridding ourselves of chometz means more than just destroying bread crumbs. Just like someone who immerses in a mikvah with an impure creature in his hand accomplishes nothing in the way of becoming spiritually purified, so, too, one who goes through Pesach destroying only PHYSICAL chometz comes out pretty much the same as he went into Pesach: chometz-infected.

For, chometz represents a bloated reality, an over-emphasis on the physical, materialistic world (and, for that matter, an UNDER-emphasis on spiritual matters). A "chometz-free" environment means waking up to the reality of what really counts in This World, by appreciating what really counts in the World-to-Come, and prioritizing one's life accordingly.

This, then, allows us to becoming fitting "vessels" for the light of G-d. And, when we achieve that, then, the Gevuros of creation no longer have any complaints against us, and the miracles G-d does for us belong to us, as the result of own merits. This is the way it supposed to be, and the way it is GOING to be when the Final Redemption finally comes -- perhaps even this Nissan, the month destined to be the month of geulah shlaimah, b'eZRas Hashem Yisborach.

Shabbos Day:

G-d spoke to Moshe, saying: This is the law of a Metzora when he is purified and brought to the priest. The priest shall go outside the camp, where he shall examine the Metzora (Vayikra 14:1-3)

The Talmud warns:

Rav Yosef said, as did Rebi Chiya: Even though, since the Temple was destroyed, the Sanhedrin was abolished, the four capital punishments were not abolished. They were not abolished? They [the Sanhedrin] abolished them! Rather, the judgment of the four capital punishments was not abolished. Hence, someone who was deserving of stoning either fell from a roof or was torn by a wild animal. Someone deserving of burning either fell into a fire or was bitten by a [poisonous] snake; someone deserving of decapitation either fell into the hands of the government or was attacked by dangerous thieves. Someone who was deserving of strangulation either drowned in a river or died by a sickness of the throat. (Sanhedrin 37b)

Thus, the Talmud is indicating, though history may change, and with it, the means for carrying out

the judgments of Torah, nevertheless, Divine justice goes on without fail. Who suffers from a breakdown in Torah transmission and the abandonment of traditional principles? G-d? The angels?

We do, because, whereas in the past the sufferings of a Torah offender was a warning to all those who survived him, today, they are just viewed as tragedies, and then forgotten. Today, there is a general sense of relaxation when it comes to adherence to Torah law by the vast majority of the Jewish population, and it began when earlier generations transgressed and "lightning did not come down from the sky and punish" as a result.

Someone who was Metzora, and was forced outside the camps of the Jewish people in the desert, or, a walled city once the Jewish people settled the land (Yad Chazakah, Tumas Tzara'as 10:7), couldn't help but take mussar -- constructive criticism. He suffered, his family suffered, and his neighbors took heed when he didn't show up for minyan or for work for an entire week -- or did, and had a blotch on his skin (before he was pronounced a Metzora).

Today, it is a different story, but not because G-d has given up on judging us, as the Talmud warns elsewhere:

Anyone who says that G-d gives up [on judgment] will have his life given up! (Bava Kamma 50a)

But, because Divine justice has gone "underground," so-to-speak, operating in a covert way in order to allow for hester panim -- the hiding of the face of G-d.

However, one can assume that, just as the judgments of the four capital punishments are in effect today, one way or another, ALL Torah judgments are being carried out on some level, in order to bring about rectification for the soul of the transgressor, one way or another. In other words, though the "causes" may be different today, the "effects" may be exactly the same.

For instance, the Metzora had to leave the camp of the Jewish people. There were three "areas" in the desert. There was the place, in the center, within which the Holy Ark was kept; there was the surrounding camp of the Levi'im, and then there was the camp of the rest of the tribes. The Metzora, after being diagnosed by the priest, had to reside outside the entire camp of Israel, or, as mentioned earlier, outside the walls of the city.

It is well known that the camp assembled in the desert corresponded to the Heavenly camp arranged with angels, for, everything on earth mimics that which occurs in Heaven, and specifically, the Sefiros. Likewise, when a person was ejected from the physical camp of Israel, he was ejected, albeit temporarily, from the spiritual "camp" of Israel as well, having ramifications on his physical life Below and his spiritual life Above.

However, today, with no organized physical camp of Israel to speak of, it might seem as if such laws are irrelevant today (and that therefore, speaking loshon hara is "safe"). Not so! The spiritual camp of Israel remains intact Above, and when one speaks loshon hara, and receives Divine warning in some form or another to stop (I usually end up biting my tongue that week, or getting some kind of sore in

my mouth, or getting a "good" teeth cleaning by my dentist, each reminding of the need to watch my mouth), and doesn't desist from speaking more loshon hara, then, their spiritual Below.

According to Kabbalah, this is not theory -- this is FACT. Divine justice is alive and well, and working behind the scenes. However, given historical circumstances today, it may become more overt yet.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

The priest shall order that the bird be slaughtered over fresh spring water in a clay bowl. He shall then take the (other) live bird together with the piece of cedar (Vayikra 14:5-6)

Everything about the purification process that the Metzora underwent was symbolic of something meant to drive home the point about avoiding negative character traits, especially those that lead to loshon hara -- either the speaking of it or the listening to it.

For example, why cedar? Explains Rashi:

"Because the plague comes as a result of a bloated personality." (Rashi)

The Sifsei Chachamim explains, as does the Ramban, that the cedar tree is one of the nicest and tallest of all the trees. The presence of this tree was to remind the Metzora that it was because he held his head too high and was too proud that he spoke loshon hara. And, it was his pride that prevented him from being able to acknowledge the warning signs to do teshuvah, and, which eventually led him to being forced from the camp of the Jewish people and sent out in shame.

There is another story from the Talmud that completes the picture of the role of the cedar tree in the purification process of the Metzora:

Our rabbis taught: A person must at all times be yielding like a reed, and not unbending like a cedar tree. It once happened that Rebi Elazar ben Rebi Shimon left Midal Gedor where his teacher lived, and as he rode leisurely a donkey on the banks of the river, he rejoiced greatly and felt very proud that he had learned much Torah. A person was "prepared" for him (Rashi: Some say it was Eliyahu) who was extremely ugly.

"Peace be unto you, my master!" to which he (Rebi Elazar) did not respond, but instead asked,

"Good-for-nothing! Perhaps all the people of your city are as ugly as you?!"

"I don't know," was his reply, "but why don't you go to the Craftsman (G-d) Who made me, and tell Him how ugly the vessel He made is Š"

From this he (Rebi Elazar) understood that he had sinned, and he got off his donkey and threw himself before him and said,

"I have sinned against you Š forgive me!"

He told him, "Not until you go to the Craftsman and tell Him how ugly the vessel He made is!"

He (Rebi Elazar) followed after all the way to the city, whereupon the people of the city came out to greet him, saying, "Peace be unto you, our rabbi, our rabbi! Our teacher, our teacher!"

He (the "Ugly Person") said to them, "Whom do you call 'teacher'?"

They answered him, "The one who travels after you."

"If so, then, there should not be more like him in Israel!"

"Why not?" they asked.

"Because," he replied, "he did thus and thus to me."

"Nevertheless," they pleaded, "forgive him, because he is an important Torah scholar."

"For your sakes I will forgive him," he told them, "but on the condition that he not do it again."

Immediately following this, Reb Elazar ben Rebi Shimon taught: A person should be soft like a reed and not unbending like a cedar; hence, it is the reed from which a quill is taken to write a Sefer Torah, Tefillin, and Mezuzos. (Ta'anis 20a)

There is much to learn from this Talmudic passage, including from the parts that seem secondary to the story itself. However, it is a perfect link between this week's parshah of Torah, and this week's parshah of life (getting ready for Pesach). For, like the reed, matzah symbolizes humility (Maharal), and like the cedar tree, chometz represents a bloated personality, the "simple you" PLUS the "shtik" you perform to appear thus-and-thus in the eyes of others, be it to "fit in," impress others, or just to feel more secure.

It should be pointed out that cedar trees were used in the construction of the Temple, specifically BECAUSE of their rigidity, teaching, perhaps, the same message but from a different direction: when it comes to doing what is halachically-correct, one must stand tall and be firm. Approaching the limits of Torah, and transgressing them because that is the "fashion" of the time is not a good trait, and results in great spiritual destruction.

One must be zealous in his or her avodas-Hashem (service of G-d), and be willing to withstand social pressures to "bend" with the "winds of change" when they violate the law and spirit of Torah. This, too, is the inherent message of the cedar of purification, and the matzah of education, meant to affect us ALL year round.

MELAVE MALKAH:

It is a fundamental of Torah belief that all of Torah has many levels of meaning, especially when it

comes to TaNaKh -- Torah, Nevi'im (Prophets) and Kesuvim (Writings). Furthermore, even though, over the millennia, the works of the great Torah leaders of the past have come to be viewed only in terms of their simplest message, nevertheless, it is also elementary that they wrote with many messages in mind, ranging from the simple to the esoteric, from pshat to sod.

And finally, it is a fundamental of Torah belief that when they wrote and commented, they did so with Ruach HaKodesh, help from Heaven. This may account for levels of meaning for which even THEY hadn't intended, but which nevertheless needed to be there, often for future generations. Nothing is by accident, the Talmud (Chullin 7b) and Kabbalah reminds us, and even the final order that some work takes is also min HaShamayim -- from Heaven.

For example, it is interesting that the THIRTY-SIXTH tehillah should discuss light, specifically the light of G-d, otherwise known as the "Ohr HaGanuz" -- the Hidden Light of creation:

For with You is the source of life -- by Your light shall we see light. (Tehillim 36:10)

For, as you may recall (at least those who have read "Perceptions" over the years), the number "36" is THE number that symbolizes this light in creation. And, furthermore, the topic of light does not come up that often anywhere in Tehillim!

What's more is that this posuk really sums up the underlying reason for and lesson of Yetzias Mitzrayim -- Redemption from Egypt. There are over four billion people in the world today; trillions have lived since Adam was created. How many paths to happiness and fulfillment have been walked by how many people over the almost six thousand years of history? How many wars have been waged, how much killing has taken place over the six millennia because of these differences of opinion?

The only plague to kill Jews in Egypt was the ninth plague, the Plague of Darkness. The Midrash tells us that 12,000,000 Jews died during the darkness; an astute rabbi after World War II told us of an allusion to Hitler, may his memory and seed be erased, in this very plague (Shemos 10:21; the letter before each of the letters of "vayamaish" -- vav, yud, mem, shin -- spell the word "Hitler" -- heh, tet, lamed, raish).

Why did they die? Because, explain the Kabbalists, they refused to accept that G-d was THE source of life. They rejected G-d's light -- the Torah perspective handed down since Avraham's days -- and therefore could not see Moshe as the redeemer, or the redemption at hand. Measure-for-measure, darkness for darkness, they died in the second LAST plague in Egypt, so close to the exodus from Egypt. So close to the redemption!

For the Conductor, for the servant of G-d, for David Š (36:1)

And that is the other point that didn't sit right with the Jews who died in Egypt, first spiritually and then physically. Leave Egypt? For what? To be a "servant of G-d"? "Who wants to be a servant of G-d?" people ask. "I want to be my own man, do things my way, live life as I see it is meant to be lived."

Is there such an option? If a person is not a servant of G-d, then whose servant is he? His own? No -- he is the servant of the yetzer hara, the evil inclination within man, of Paroah, who, according to Kabbalah, was the human manifestation of this force of evil.

Until a person's dying day, the yetzer hara lives within a man's heart, and, by definition, if it is not being bent in the direction of the will of G-d, then it is bending the person AWAY from the will of G-d. It may feel as if the person is in charge of his own life, doing what he FEELS like doing whenever he FEELS like doing it, this is, in reality, capitulation to instinct, and instinct is the prime tool of the yetzer hara.

There is no dread of G-d before his eyes Š (36:2)

And, how do you know when you are the servant of the yetzer hara? When you feel little or no sense of dread of G-d, of eternal judgment. When a person feels content living a carefree lifestyle and is not concerned about the possibility of answering to G-d during his life, and especially at the end of his life, then he wears the glasses of the yetzer hara, and uses its eyes to view the world.

This was Goliath, whom Dovid HaMelech had to fight and kill, whom many say this psalm is about. "Why was he called 'Golyus'?" asks the Talmud? Because, for forty days (corresponding to the 40 days Moshe was on Mt. Sinai receiving Torah), he stood brazenly (b'gilui panim) before G-d, taunting the Jewish people morning and night with blasphemy (Succah 42b).

However, the word "golyus" is very similar to the word "golios," which means "exiles." It is the very nature of exile to be brazen-faced, and, to taunt the Jewish people in their belief of G-d, uttering blasphemies at us day and night. However, it is precisely that lack of fear of the Jewish G-d, the lack of concern regarding His omnipresence and omnipotence, that spelled the end for Golyus at the hands of Dovid, and, it will spell the end of exile at the hands of his descendant, Moshiach. For, as the Talmud prophesizes:

Rebi Yochanan said: In the generation that Ben Dovid will come, talmidei chachamim will decrease, and the eyes of the remainder will protrude from sighing and sorrow; many chastisements and many evil decrees will be renewed; one will not cease before another begins. (Sanhedrin 97a)

The rabbis taught: The Shmittah period in which Ben Dovid will come the following verse will be fulfilled in the first year, "And I caused it to rain upon one city, and upon another city I caused it not to rain." (Amos 4:7). In the second year, slight famine will be sent. In the third year, a great famine from which men, women, and children, pious and deed-doing people will die, and Torah will be forgotten by those who learned her. In the fourth year, some will be satiated, and others will not be. In the fifth year, there will be great satiation, with eating, drinking, and joy, and Torah will return to those who learned it. In the sixth year, voices [speaking of the Moshiach's imminent arrival] will be heard, and in the seventh year, there will be war [Gog u'Magog]. In the year after the seventh, Ben Dovid will come. Rab Yosef said, "Many Shmittah cycles have come and he did not arrive!" Abaye answered, "Were there voices in the sixth year followed by war in the seventh year? Secondly, did they follow

this order?" (Sanhedrin 97a)

Rebi Yehudah said: The generation in which Ben Dovid will come ... The wisdom of the scribes will be corrupted; men fearing sin will be hated; the leaders of the generation will have the nature of dogs; and truth will be lacking ... He who turns away from evil will be regarded by the public as being foolish. (Sanhedrin 97a)

Rebi Nehorai taught: The generation in which Ben Dovid will come the young will embarrass the old, and the old will rise for the young; a daughter will rebel against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, the leaders of the generation will have the nature of dogs, and a son will feel no shame when criticized by his father. (Sanhedrin 97a)

Reb Nechemiah taught: The generation in which Ben Dovid will come, insolence will increase, respect will be missing ... and all the governments will turn to false beliefs (minnus); criticism will be of no avail. (Sanhedrin 97a)

Ben Dovid will not come until informers increase ... And hope in the redemption is renounced. (Sanhedrin 97a)

It is something to think about, fast, because the Seder is just a few days away.

Have a great Shabbos,
Chag Kosher v'Samayach,
Pinchas Winston
