NOT FOR APPEARANCE SAKE ONLY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d spoke to Moshe and said to him: I am Hashem ... (Shemos 6:2)

This seemingly simple statement says everything, two Hebrew words (Ani Hashem) that literally say it all.

For those who have forgotten, last week's parshah ended with Moshe's question to G-d (paraphrasing a bit ...),

"You call THIS redemption?! Since I went to Pharaoh, the suffering of the Jewish people has increased, not decreased!"

To which, G-d retorted,

"Now you will see what I will do! You want to see redemption? You will see redemption, and then you will regret that you ever questioned My actions, for (thus begins this week's parshah), I AM HASHEM!"

What did G-d mean by this statement? Why did G-d chastise Moshe by invoking His holy four-letter Name? The same thing He as ALWAYS meant by this statement, namely: Beware, "Capital R Reality" is about to come head on with "Small R Reality," and the result is going to be the elevation of good, and the destruction of evil! Biblical Reality is about to overtake man's everyday reality, with very, VERY dramatic results.

Let me explain what I mean.

When it comes to belief in Tanach (Torah, Prophets, and Writings), there are basically three groups (with some shades of gray in-between). One group believes that the events of the Torah never occurred, that it is a mythical collection of writings with no real basis in reality. "No Torah, no G-d, no Objective Truth," is this group's motto, and therefore, they feel free to guide history as they FEEL fit.

A second group believes (somewhat) that the Tanach is about real events that once occurred, more or less. Its wisdom is appropriate for all generations, but not without some kind of tweaking to bring Biblical-thinking in line with modern-day thinking. The Torah, this group holds, must stay "with it" -- "it" being wherever society is going at any given moment in history.

The third group, it seems, is biding its time, and often appears, in the eyes of the Western World, as social misfits. They don't seem anxious to integrate whole-heartedly into Western Society. True, they may become involved in everyday life and "play the game" to some degree, but, something about this group gives one the impression that it believes more in Biblical times than current ones.

The difference between each group is like the difference between night and day. The first group only knows "Small R Reality" -- their own personalized version of life -- and never look back. Life is for living, they preach, and living is for maximizing pleasure in THIS WORLD, because, they believe (and hope they're not wrong) that there's nothing worthwhile coming up after it!

The second group walks with each foot in a different world. While struggling to maintain a firm and beneficial position in This World, they also try to remain connected to a higher and more spiritual plane. It is a tiring act, and one that comes with plenty of compromises; so many, in fact, that one from this group often loses clarity about what is compromise and what is truly the honest path to follow. "Small R Reality" is strong here as well.

The third group struggles to remain clear about "Capital R Reality" -- G-d's reality. They know that we are only "passing through" This World, and only become involved in "it" up until the point that their clarity of G-d's reality becomes weakened, and that they stand to lose their spiritual footing. These are called the "G-d-fearing" of society.

All three groups can prosper in everyday life -- until G-d has had enough. The goal is for all of mankind to see reality as G-d sees it, and to live consistent with that vision. Creation is only worth it to G-d when mankind is fulfilling its reason to exist, which means fulfilling man's reason to exist. Otherwise, G-d steps into history and "rectifies" history -- that is, He does something dramatic, something VERY dramatic, to bring man's thinking in line with His own.

That is all implied in the words, "I AM HASHEM" that G-d used with Moshe Rabbeinu. The name of G-d, "Hashem," is another name for G-d's vision of reality, and invoking it here with Moshe was another way of revealing to him what was coming up, as if to say,

"Moshe, you are complaining only because you look at the world through the eyes of your own personal, subjective reality. However, this is HASHEM working here -- "Capital R Reality" about to overtake everyone else's "Small R Reality." And when it does, WATCH OUT! The result is going to be a freed Jewish nation, and a decimated Egyptian oppressor.

And, to quote the Talmud: So will it be the case in the days of Moshiach as well (Sanhedrin 111a).

Shabbos Day:

Aharon took Elisheva, the daughter of Aminadav, sister of Nachshon, as a wife ... (Shemos 6:23)

Being the wife of the Kohen Gadol, the first one and most famous of all, is an unbelievable merit. Being the brother of the head of the tribe of Yehudah, the famous Nachshon ben Aminadav who exhibited unbelievable trust in G-d when he walked into the sea to make it split is another incredible merit. From all sides, Elisheva had special merits, as the Talmud points out:

Five extra joys Elisheva had [at the time the Mishkan was set up] over other daughters of Israel. She was the sister-in-law of the king (Moshe Rabbeinu), the wife of the Kohen Gadol, her son (Elazar) was the administrative kohen, her grandson (Pinchas) was anointed for war, and her brother (Nachshon) was a prince of a tribe ... (Zevachim 102a)

On the other hand, the Talmud (and the Midrash) reminds us: she had to mourn the loss of her two sons -- Nadav and Avihu, who died on the same day, on the eighth day of the inauguration of the Mishkan.

In fact, the Midrash uses Elisheva and her "simchos" as an example of the idea that Hashem will delight in the actions of the righteous in the "Time-to-Come" (Vayikra Rabbah 20:2). This means that events can happen -- negative events -- to the righteous, even though they themselves don't deserve such consequences. That is a function of this side of history.

The Midrash on Tehillim says that the following verse applies to Elisheva:

I said to the roisters, "Do not be wasteful ..." (Tehillim 75:5)

-- because she enjoyed four joys in one day, and then, in the end, had to mourn the loss of two sons that very day. Hence, King David advises: don't take too much pleasure in This World; it is fleeting and can go as fast as it comes.

Shlomo HaMelech, Dovid's son echoed the same thought in Koheles when he wrote:

Vanity of vanities -- it is all vanity.

-- except, for fear of G-d, Koheles ends off. Things, events, and even people do not last forever, and may be taken away from us before we are prepared to give them up. But that's life ... in This World at least. And, Elisheva's rise to the heights of prominence, and then her sudden drop to a state of mourning makes this point quite clear.

Another lesson learned out from Elisheva is from the fact that her relationship to Nachshon is mentioned. From here the Talmud finds a source for the idea of investigating the brothers of a potential bride. Says the Talmud: most girls are very similar in nature to their brothers, and therefore, looking at the brothers can provide crucial insight into the nature of a potential wife. (Bava Basra 110a).

It may not be absolutely true. However, it does show, once again, that a posuk that seems to have little to teach can be, in fact, a source of tremendous wisdom and insight.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

G-d told Moshe and Aharon, "When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, 'Show a wonder,' then tell Aharon, 'Take your staff, and throw it down before Pharaoh,' and it will become a serpent." Moshe and Aharon went to Pharaoh, and they did as G-d had commanded. Aharon threw down his staff before Pharaoh and his servants and it became a serpent. Pharaoh called the wise men and the sorcerers, and the engravers of Egypt; they also did the same thing using their secret arts. Each one threw down his staff, and it became a serpent ... (Shemos 7:8-12)

Talk about being upstaged! Here Moshe comes and does a fantastic miracle in the midst of Pharaoh's court by having Aharon's staff become a serpent, and Pharaoh's own people do the same thing! In fact, the Midrash says that among the crowd making snakes were school children, as if to make the point: Big deal Moshe!

True, only Aharon's snake was able to become a staff again -- a limitation of black magic -- and swallow up the other snakes. However, that part of the miracle was lost somewhat among the laughter and mocking of Moshe by Pharaoh and his royal court.

But not for Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe left Pharaoh unfazed, because, he was warned by G-d in advance that Pharaoh wouldn't buy into his plan for Jewish freedom. No, this was not going to be an overnight job, Moshe understood, and while Pharaoh and his court probably thought that they had just had the last laugh, Moshe simply and calmly turned to Aharon, his brother and assistance, and said, "Phase one complete, my brother. We can go now."

Moshe had learned from the beginning of the parshah that the geulah (redemption) of G-d comes in phases, for the sake of free-will. The purpose of creation is to provide mankind with the chance to make free-will decisions; there has to be a phenomenally important reason for G-d to come right out and suspend free-will with an obvious miracle.

This is why, back in last week's parshah, the following came up:

[G-d then] said, "Put your hand into your chest again." He [Moshe] put his hand into his chest again, and brought it out -- it returned like the rest of his skin. "If they will not believe you, nor listen to the first sign, they will believe the latter sign." (Shemos 4:7-8)

An obvious question: Why not just skip the first sign and perform the second sign, a sure bet? If G-d already knows that the first sign might not work (read: G-d KNOWS that it will not work), then why bother going through the motions of the first sign?

A less than obvious answer: Because, the first sign, being less miraculous, was a sign from G-d that redemption was coming, but not too miraculous that free-will would be suspended or reduced significantly. There WERE Jews who would believe in the first sign and know that redemption was coming, and prepare for it. However, the bulk of the nation would not be impressed by the first miracle, and would still require the second, more obvious miracle to make the point -- at the cost of reward in the World-to-Come.

Yet, even the second sign, apparently, was not enough for four-fifths of the population, who remained unconvinced that the redemption from Egyptian oppression was at hand. Not even eight plagues was enough to convince these millions, and by the ninth plague, the Plague of Darkness, it was too late. The very redemption that saved their brothers became the very source of their own deaths.

And that is the way it has always been, and will always be for each and every redemption. May we learn from our past, and save our future, and see the "signs" clearly, and early.

MELAVE MALKAH:

G-d will have ruled, He will have worn grandeur; G-d will have worn might and girded Himself; even established the world that it should not fall. (Tehillim 93:1-2)

This is the last tehillah of Kabbalos Shabbos each week, and, as Rashi explains, it refers to the time of Moshiach when all men will recognize that G-d has been, is, and will always be King of creation. This is also why this tehillah is the "Psalm of the Day" for Friday, the day on which G-d finished creating all of nature, which He wears, so-to-speak, like a mantle of grandeur.

As we testify each day in the "Shema," G-d runs the worlds -- the Upper World and the Lower World. In the Upper World, this is never in doubt, and hence the angels continuously sing praises to G-d to affirm this immutable reality. In the Lower World, it is easy to become deluded, since the gift of nature can also become the curse of nature, when man uses its consistency as an excuse to disregard G-d's ownership of everything.

This is why, as Kabbalah explains, we whisper the second posuk of the Shema, "Boruch Shem Kevod ..." The first verse refers to G-d's rulership over the Upper World, which is clear as day. However, with the exception of certain unique times in history when G-d made His Presence manifest to man, it is possible NOT to feel G-d in everyday life, as if His being here is a "secret." This is why we whisper the second verse -- except on Yom Kippur when we become like angels and see everyday life through their eyes.

However, the "secret" may be ending before our very eyes. A neighbor of ours told us that her mother was in Venezuela at the time of the catastrophic mud slides which have caused the death of

over THIRTY-THOUSAND PEOPLE! She related how, at that time, there was supposed to have been an election, and how unexpected rains were dampening people's voting spirit. So, one of the men running for office (strangely, his name is "Shabbos"), in order to inspire the voters to come out said something like:

"We will have the election and people will vote, and we will win, and not even G-d will stop us!" (Seemingly, he forgot how the people of the Titanic strung a banner across the deck before setting sail, which read, "A ship even G-d can't sink!")

Well, He did stop him -- big time! That night, the rains came down in a torrential downfall (during the dry season yet!), and the mud slides began, and with them, the tragedy of horrible deaths. Remarkably, especially for this day-and-age, the politician who brazenly "challenged" G-d the day before went on national radio, and sincerely apologized to G-d.

It is not that G-d goes around killing innocent victims just to make a point; there are other reasons involved in such major decisions. However, when nature and our attitude toward it interferes with our acceptance of the King of Kings as our unique ruler, then, nature itself becomes His vehicle to turn our opinion around. It is, according to the Talmud, a condition built into creation itself.

However, only up until the time that Moshiach comes, because then, the reality of G-d becomes the same for one-and-all; evil will cease to exist with the death of the yetzer hara, and the veil of nature will be no more, and all will recite the second posuk of the Shema loudly, with love, and with fervor. G-d will then appear to US, as He did to our Forefathers: with perfect clarity (Shemos 6:3; Sanhedrin 111a).

Have a great Shabbos,
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