

AFTER DEATH - LIFE!

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Parashas Acharei Mos

G-d spoke to Moshe after the death of the two sons of Aharon when they approached G-d and died.
(Vayikra 15:1)

I am warning you from the start that this week's parshah sheet will be more editorial than in the past. However, I feel the present dilemma warrants it.

What is this intended to tell us? Rebi Elazar ben Azariah explained this with a parable about a sick person whom the doctor visited. He told him, "Do not eat cold things or sleep in a damp place so that you do not die as so-and-so died!" This put him on guard more than the former had been, and this is why the Torah states, "after the death of the two sons of Aharon." (Rashi)

Thus begins the parshah that will discuss the laws of Yom Kippur. The opening statement which is intended to provide context to what follows is in itself a warning, Rashi reveals. In a sense, it also sets the tone for what Yom Kippur is all about: learning from past mistakes and committing to avoiding them in the future.

Apparently, we need to hear this. True, the statement is directed towards the kohanim specifically, the only ones who can enter the Kodashim (Sanctuary) and the Kodesh Kodashim (Holy of Holies), but it is directed towards the entire Jewish people in general, who are also called "kohanim" in the philosophical sense of the term (Shemos 19:6).

Even though at first glance the parshah's opening statement seems like a further disgrace to Aharon's family, once again reminding us of their terrible mistake on the happiest day of history, when in reality it accomplishes just the opposite. The death of Nadav and Avihu becomes more meaningful if it serves to save the Jewish people from making similar mistakes in the future, and future carefulness can also act as atonement for the mistake they themselves committed.

This is true not just of Nadav and Avihu, but of all those who have 'erred' throughout Jewish history and whose deaths have served as reminders of what can go wrong when we turn the wrong philosophical corners. History is full of 'fall guys,' people who are the first to make costly mistakes from which they cannot save themselves, and only by learning from their mistakes do we give

meaning to their deaths.

The Jewish people today are in a terrible bind. Just one year ago, as bad as the situation was then, it was far friendlier for the Jewish nation than it is today. No sooner than France's President Chirac claimed that anti-Semitism was non-existence in France, and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres echoed his unbelievable claim, that synagogues were burned and many French Jews have come to fear their situation there.

In Scotland, where anti-Semitism never disappeared, it has certainly become more visible and outspoken. A special mural painted for the church in England portrays you-know-who dying in the arms of his 'mother,' flanked by Roman soldiers on one side and Israel Defense Force soldiers on the other side. The priest who commissioned the mural claimed that it was not to issue an anti-Semitic statement, just to make his followers more aware of the issues of today. That type of crooked thinking makes him a very dangerous man.

On April 4, Finnish police had to evacuate a synagogue and Jewish home for the aged in Helsinki, after a telephone caller, a "soft-spoken, non-Finnish male person" made a bomb threat. In the meantime, also on April 4, neighboring Sweden announced that it is looking to boycott Israel and drag the rest of the Netherlands into their totally misguided action. The Belgian Foreign Minister has expanded this request to include the entire European Community.

In Norway, some members of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee have expressed regret that they awarded Shimon Peres his prize while expressing absolutely nothing negative about Yasser Arafat's, whose own organization, the Al Aqsa Brigade, carries out suicide attacks against Israeli citizens. Does this make sense to you? This is who they support:

"They [the Jews] try to kill the principle of religions with the same mentality that they betrayed Jesus Christ, and the same way they tried to betray and kill the Prophet Mohammed." (Syrian President Bashar Assad at May 5 welcoming ceremony for the Pope, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, May 6, 2001.)

"Have no mercy on the Jews, no matter where they are, in any country. Fight them, wherever you are. Wherever you meet them, kill them. Wherever you are, kill those Jews and those Americans who are like them and those who stand by them. They are all in one trench, against the Arabs and the Muslims because they established Israel here, in the beating heart of the Arab world, in Palestine." (Dr. Ahmad Abu Halabiya, Member of the PA appointed "Fatwa Council" and former acting Rector of the Islamic University in Gaza, October 14, 2000.)

"It is not a mistake that the Koran warns us of the hatred of the Jews and put them at the top of the list of the enemies of Islam. Today the Jews recruit the world against the Muslims and use all kinds of weapons. They are plundering the dearest place to the Muslims, after Mecca and Medina and threaten the place the Muslims have faced at first when they prayed and the third holiest city after Mecca and Medina. They want to erect their temple on that place... The Muslims are ready to

sacrifice their lives and blood to protect the Islamic nature of Jerusalem and El Aksa!" (Sheikh Hian Al-Adrisi, Excerpt of address in the al-Aksa mosque, September 29, 2000.)

"The Jews are Jews, whether Labor or Likud, the Jews are Jews. They do not have any moderates or any advocates of peace. They are all liars. They are the ones who must be butchered and killed. As Allah the Almighty said: 'Fight them.' Allah will torture them by your hands and will humiliate them and will help you to overcome them, and will relieve the minds of the believers . . . (Dr Ahmad Abu-Halabia, a member of the "Fatwa Council" appointed by the Palestinian Authority and the former acting Rector of the Islamic University in Gaza, delivered in the Zayd bin Sultan Nahyan mosque in Gaza on October 13, 2000, the day after the lynching of the Israeli reservists in Ramallah, and carried live on Palestinian television.)

"Thanks to Hitler, blessed memory, who on behalf of the Palestinians, revenged in advance, against the most vile criminals on the face of the earth. Although we do have a complaint against him for his revenge on them was not enough." (Columnist Ahmad Ragab, Al-Akhbar (Egypt), April 18, 2001.)

Minority opinions? Not a chance. And we're supposed to trust these people to make peace? Who are we dealing with here? Who are the leaders of the world today?

(Ironically, the original Zionists who tried to eradicate Torah from the lives of the Israeli Jew, claiming that it was our religious profile, intellectual and physical, that led to anti-Semitism in the past would be hard-pressed to make that kind of connection today. Current anti-Semitism, which has reared its ugly and fanatical head at break-neck speed has everything to do with the secular government's response to the Palestinian issue, and nothing at all to do with Torah belief.)

The American's? It seems to depend upon which direction the political wind is blowing, but the latest headlines have all the top American brass speaking harshly to the Israelis demanding their immediate removal from the very places that the Arabs use to arm themselves against the Israelis.

Continued...

Shabbos Day:

A rare few intellectually mature minds see the dilemma for what it is:

Suicidal Lies

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN, NY Times

The outcome of the war now under way between the Israelis and Palestinians is vital to the security of every American, and indeed, I believe, to all of civilization. Why? Quite simply

because Palestinians are testing out a whole new form of warfare, using suicide bombers - strapped with dynamite and dressed as Israelis - to achieve their political aims. And it is working.

Israelis are terrified. And Palestinians, although this strategy has wrecked their society, feel a rising sense of empowerment. They feel they finally have a weapon that creates a balance of power with Israel, and maybe, in their fantasies, can defeat Israel. As Ismail Haniya, a Hamas leader, said in The Washington Post, Palestinians have Israelis on the run now because they have found their weak spot. Jews, he said, "love life more than any other people, and they prefer not to die." So Palestinian suicide bombers are ideal for dealing with them. That is really sick.

The world must understand that the Palestinians have not chosen suicide bombing out of "desperation" stemming from the Israeli occupation. That is a huge lie. Why? To begin with, a lot of other people in the world are desperate, yet they have not gone around strapping dynamite to themselves. More important, President Clinton offered the Palestinians a peace plan that could have ended their "desperate" occupation, and Yasir Arafat walked away. Still more important, the Palestinians have long had a tactical alternative to suicide: nonviolent resistance, a la Gandhi. A nonviolent Palestinian movement appealing to the conscience of the Israeli silent majority would have delivered a Palestinian state 30 years ago, but they have rejected that strategy, too.

The reason the Palestinians have not adopted these alternatives is because they actually want to win their independence in blood and fire. All they can agree on as a community is what they want to destroy, not what they want to build. Have you ever heard Mr. Arafat talk about what sort of education system or economy he would prefer, what sort of constitution he wants? No, because Mr. Arafat is not interested in the content of a Palestinian state, only the contours.

Let's be very clear: Palestinians have adopted suicide bombing as a strategic choice, not out of desperation. This threatens all civilization because if suicide bombing is allowed to work in Israel, then, like hijacking and airplane bombing, it will be copied and will eventually lead to a bomber strapped with a nuclear device threatening entire nations. That is why the whole world must see this Palestinian suicide strategy defeated.

But how? This kind of terrorism can be curbed only by self-restraint and repudiation by the community itself. No foreign army can stop small groups ready to kill themselves. How do we produce that deterrence among Palestinians? First, Israel needs to deliver a military blow that clearly shows terror will not pay. Second, America needs to make clear that suicide bombing is not Israel's problem alone. To that end, the U.S. should declare that while it respects the legitimacy of Palestinian nationalism, it will have no dealings with the Palestinian leadership

as long as it tolerates suicide bombings. Further, we should make clear that Arab leaders whose media call suicide bombers "martyrs" aren't welcome in the U.S.

Third, Israel must tell the Palestinian people that it is ready to resume talks where they left off with Mr. Clinton, before this intifada. Those talks were 90 percent of the way toward ending the occupation and creating a Palestinian state. Fourth, U.S. or NATO troops must guarantee any Israeli-Palestinian border.

"The Spanish Civil War was the place where the major powers all tested out their new weapons before World War II," said the Israeli political theorist Yaron Ezrahi. "Well, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict today is the Spanish Civil War for the 21st century. A big test is taking place of whether suicide terrorism can succeed as a strategy for liberation. It must be defeated, but that requires more than a military strategy."

The Palestinians are so blinded by their narcissistic rage that they have lost sight of the basic truth civilization is built on: the sacredness of every human life, starting with your own. If America, the only reality check left, doesn't use every ounce of energy to halt this madness and call it by its real name, then it will spread. The Devil is dancing in the Middle East, and he's dancing our way.

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However, regarding the rest of the world which is either Communist, Islamic, or Persian...

Deja vu. As incredulous as we may be about the situation ("Yes, its bad, but not THAT bad yet. Yes, it CAN get worse, but it hasn't YET! Maybe it is leading to something awful for the Jewish people, but maybe it isn't."), we have to realize that just because we ourselves did not go through the Crusades, the Pogroms, or the Holocaust, doesn't mean that we can't learn something from those who did.

If we want to make the deaths of those 'martyrs' more meaningful, we should start by realizing that anti-Semitism does not have any natural roots (Shabbos 89a), and therefore is not subject to the laws of nature. If we try to predict the outcome of all that is happening today based upon 'natural' human tendencies and the so-called natural forces of history, then we will have learned nothing from the deaths of our ancestors who often perished believing the same mistaken concept.

Sit down and read Parashas Bechukosai and Ki Savo - with Rashi - and learn how G-d works in Jewish history. Better yet, read the books of the Prophets, as many of them as fast as possible, and then do it again. Even the religious world has dropped this crucial part of Torah and history from the curriculum, and it has cost us dearly.

The problem with Jews today is that they live their lives severed from the past. We believe that, "what was was" when we may be watching the beginning of "what was IS." Why do you think the Torah went out of its way to emphasize a need to stay in touch with the past in a dynamic way

(Devarim 32:7)? The Torah knew that a Jew devoid of his past is a Jew that is totally absorbed in his present, and very possibly a Jew without a future, G-d forbid.

At the same time, pick up some good Jewish history books about the last couple of thousands of years of Jewish history while living amongst the gentiles. Look for the patterns and the inexplicable history. It will change the way you look at life in this world, and will probably make you verrrry uncomfortable. However, it may also save your life and the life of your family as well, as it has done so for others in the past.

SEUDAH SHLISHIS:

G-d said to Moshe saying, "Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them that they are to be holy because I, G-d your G-d, am holy." (Vayikra 19:1)

There is no neutral ground either. If one is not being holy then one is being unholy. To be holy is to sanctify the Name of G-d, and to be unholy is to profane It. Thus, we make the blessing every morning after rising:

Blessed are you, G-d, Who sanctifies His Name in public.

As a reminder of our mandate in this world, it is our role in history to be holy and in doing so, bring the world around us to a state of holiness - kodesh L'Hashem.

Holy people value holy things and make it their goal to acquire as much of a holy experience as they can. If a person's contentment comes from profane matters, then it means such a person does not mind living a profane existence. If a person is comfortable living in a profane environment, then it means that such a person has little, if any relationship to G-d, for He is holy.

That's the challenging thing about Torah and mitzvos: they don't guarantee holiness. That is why this week's parshah comes after them, in the middle of Sefer Vayikra, as the Ramban points out. They certainly create an ideal environment from which to leap into the world of holiness. However, choosing to live a holy existence requires an additional, special, and separate free-will choice on behalf of the individual.

This is why Eretz Yisroel, called 'Eretz HaKedoshah' - the 'Holy Land' - can become quite secondary to many observant Jews.

The Jewish people today are a real 'tossed salad' in terms of Torah belief and Jewish responsibility. Millions are the products of either no Jewish education, an incomplete Jewish education, or a mistaken Jewish education, and can barely be held responsible for their lack of drive for holiness. Others know better, but seeing that lightning has not come down from the Heaven's to prove them wrong, delude themselves into thinking they're doing just fine in G-d's books too.

For some, it is their overwhelming desire for materialism and status that prevents them from even considering the centrality of traditional Judaism in their lives. Others have just had such a negative experience with it, that they just can't imagine what good it can do anyone today. Amongst the faithful there is quite a spectrum as well.

Yet, objectively speaking, we are all one people with a single Torah and a common mitzvah to live holy lives and to sanctify the Name of G-d. That is certainly the way the gentile nations perceive it and thus, we have very little credibility in their eyes since they see a confused and fractured people. That is certainly the way G-d perceives it, and one way or another, He has always nudged us in that direction.

Now, more than ever, we have to realize this and accept the responsibility. Even if we take baby-steps, we must move in the direction of increased holiness, the Torah's way. If that is the ultimate direction in which G-d and history is leading us, the more we do on our own, the less G-d and history will have to nudge us along our way.

MELAVE MALKAH: Trust and Faith in G-d

"The Jews of the desert (who left Egypt with Moshe) erred in two matters. First, G-d does not play tricks on His creations (Avodah Zarah 3a). Rather, a person has to strengthen himself constantly for "someone who comes to purify himself, They help him" (Shabbos 104a). It says that if a person sanctifies himself a little, then They sanctify him a lot."

The Leshem is explaining that the Jews feared unnecessarily when G-d took them out of Egypt into the desert, a place that is both physically and spiritually dangerous. The first thing a person has to know and believe is that if G-d puts a person into a situation that tests his faith and trust in G-d, he can pass the test. For, the principle is that G-d never gives a person a test that he cannot pass.

On the other hand, if a person puts himself into a situation that is spiritually dangerous, in other words, he had no Torah reason to be there, then G-d may allow him to fail. Only G-d knows our strengths and weaknesses and can custom-design a test for each and every Jew that will never be more than his or her spiritual capabilities, unless G-d has arranged the test as an 'excuse' to inject the person with additional spiritual strength to accomplish even more than he normally could accomplish.

If a person is on a track of spiritual growth, even if he is only 'inching' his way along, Heaven takes note and helps him out. Even if he finds himself in a very difficult situation that is not a result of being spiritually reckless, Heaven will help him out.

The Leshem continues:

"For this reason the entire world was made with evil and good in order that it should be rectified by man, and no person is free to remove himself from this work. As it says in Yechezkel, "As for what enters your minds -- it shall not be! As for what you say, 'We will be like the nations, like the families of the lands, to worship wood and stone,' as I live -- the word of the L-rd -- [I swear that] I will rule over you with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath" (Yechezkel 20:32-33). See Sanhedrin 105a, where it says, "With respect to this the covenant was made," and as it says in Tanchuma in Parashas Nitzavim, 3; and the Sifri at the end of Parashas Shlach."

In other words, G-d purposely made a world that could support evil so that we could use our free-will to eliminate it. In worst-case scenarios, the evil is a way to force the issue and make us become real with what we believe and are committed to. When Shakespeare wrote, "All the world is a stage," he did not realize to the full extent of his words, nor did he understand what they mean to a Jew.

Nor does George Bush, Yasser Arafat, Tony Blair, or the rest of the billions of people who make up this world and who can potentially turn on the Jewish people at a moment's notice. If we live in the world with them, then we can survive them as well - IF, we trust in G-d completely, and no one else.

"The second mistake they made was in their understanding of trust in G-d, for it says in Midrash Tehillim (Mizmor 32): "One who trusts in G-d, chesed will envelope him. Even if an evil person trusts in G-d, kindness will encompass him." . . . The Ramban says in Sefer Emunah v'HaBitachon, Chapter 1: This is what it means when it says, "Trust in G-d and do good." However, it does not say, "Do good and trust in G-d," for trust in G-d is not dependent upon good deeds at all. Rather, trust in G-d whether you are righteous or evil. However, be sure to do teshuvah after, otherwise if you don't, then The Holy One, Blessed is He, will find another time to collect His 'debt'." (Drushei Olam HaTohu, 2:5:4:3)

This is a crucial point. The Leshem is explaining that help from Heaven, even salvation of the highest order, is not necessarily dependent upon a prerequisite of righteousness. The very fact that a person is prepared to trust in G-d the entire way is enough to invoke phenomenal Divine assistance - and I mean PHENOMENAL - in any given situation of difficulty.

Unfortunately, the Jews of Moshe's time who were dependent upon great miracles to survive also knew that they lacked the merit to constantly invoke such miracles. Therefore, they panicked when what they were supposed to have done was abandon themselves to the will of G-d, and work on doing teshuvah along the way.

Torah and mitzvos can lead to miracles. However, the biggest miracles of all are a function of trust in G-d and can lead to an envelopment of Heavenly kindness, even in times of judgment.

Have a great and peaceful Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston