

IT DEFIES BELIEF

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Moshe asked them, "Have you allowed the women to survive? They were the very ones who enticed the Children of Israel, on Bilaam's advice, to commit idolatry against G-d through Peor, which caused a plague amongst the Assembly of G-d! (Bamidbar 31:15-16)

There are some things in life that defy belief. Sometimes it may be that someone great has done something below his dignity and level of intelligence. Sometimes it may be that an ordinary person has done something phenomenally dumb. And sometimes, it can even be that great people have done something considered ridiculous even for ordinary people, as in the case of the possukim above.

What was Moshe worried about? Why did he get so angry that even the Divine Presence temporarily left him?

He was worried about what this catastrophic mistake represented for the future of the Jewish people. For, it was one thing to recognize one's mistake and to even commit oneself not to repeat the sin in the future. However, it is another level altogether for a person to be disgusted by the sin; that is COMPLETE teshuvah.

For example, there are people who, after having led 'happy' secular lives, have returned to Torah. Becoming a 'Torah Jew' means that certain activities that by secular standards were 'normal' are now off-bounds, which the person accepts.

However, what about the memories? True, the 'Ba'al Teshuvah' would not consider performing such acts today as a Torah-abiding Jew. However, when the acts were committed, the person had yet to learn about Torah, and therefore performed them with a certain amount of 'innocence.' This seems to make many a sin a little less despicable, and therefore more of fond memory.

True, there are different levels of sin, ranging from accidental to out-and-out rebellion against G-d and Torah. However, that has to do with the perpetrator's culpability regarding the sin he committed. As far as the act itself is concerned, it has to be repulsive and reprehensible no matter what the intention was of those who committed it. If that is not the case, then it means that a certain spiritual insensitivity exists that can, and often does, lead to the performance of such sins and others in the

future.

For the Ba'al Teshuvah, that is often the litmus test of just how far he or she has come in the direction of Torah. To hate evil is easy to do; there are many secular people who, without the help of Torah, can define evil and become disgusted by it. Rather, it is more surprising how many people can actually overlook evil and live side-by-side with it - and even support it.

However, there are things in life that seem perfectly 'natural' from man's perspective, but which are considered to be detestable from G-d's point of view. Stage one of teshuvah is learning that; stage two of teshuvah is accepting that. However, stage three of teshuvah is 'buying' into G-d's perspective, and feeling as He does about it. Had the Jewish army that Moshe sent to take revenge against Midian done that, they never would have brought back a single Midianite female.

In other words, the battle against Midian had been more than just the revenge of holiness against a spiritually decrepit people. It was also a test for the Jewish people to see just how serious the wound inflicted by Bilaam and the Midianite women on the spiritual fiber of the Jewish people had been. From the results of the war and from Moshe's reaction, the diagnosis and prognosis was not good, as the episode that follows on the heels of this one confirms.

Shabbos Day:

The descendants of Reuven and Gad had a lot of cattle, and saw that the land of Ya'azer and Gilad was a good place for cattle. The descendants of Gad and Reuven approached Moshe, Elazar the kohen, and the princes of the congregation, and asked, "Atarot, Divon, Ya'azer, Nimrah, Cheshbon, El'aleh, Sevam, Nebo, and Beon, in the land which G-d struck before the Children of Israel is a land for cattle, and we have cattle. Therefore, if it is good for you, allow us to take it. Do not require us to cross the Jordan." (Bamidbar 32:1-5)

Nothing like wandering in the desert for 40 years, thirty-nine of which were payment for rejecting the gift of Eretz Yisroel, and begging not to enter the Land after finally reaching the end of the journey. And for what? For some cattle? For a little extra pasture land? Is that all Eretz Yisroel came down to for the tribes of Gad and Reuven?

The answer is, it depended. It depended upon when you asked the people of Reuven and Gad - before or after the episode with Bilaam. Before the Jewish people had any interaction with the Midianite women, whom the Pri Tzaddik says represented 'K'lipas Ta'avah' - the trait of intense materialistic desire - they would have yearned to live in Eretz Yisroel, the palace of the Divine Presence.

However, after the introduction of Midian and their trait into the lives and hearts of the Jewish

people, priorities became shuffled as materialism took on an added importance it previously did not have.

And that's the way it has remained for thousands of years, until this very day.

When the spies rejected Eretz Yisroel, it must have made sense at the time. These were people who witnessed the Ten Plagues and systematic destruction of the most powerful nation on the face of the earth at the time. They had seen the sea split and how it drowned the pursuing Egyptian army. They collected the manna that fell from Heaven daily, and drank from a mysterious well that followed them through the desert for forty years.

The people who rejected Eretz Yisroel had been those who had personally stood at Mt. Sinai and had actually heard G-d speak the first two of the Ten Commandments. They had seen the lightning, heard the thunder and the shofar, and witnessed the instantaneous and miraculous recovery of all the infirmed. They had been led by a glorious cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

They had learned Torah from the mouth of Moshe Rabbeinu and had enjoyed the guidance of Aharon HaKohen. They lived with the likes of Pinchas ben Elazar HaKohen, and rubbed elbows with greats like Yehoshua bin Nun. They had built the Mishkan and lived with its daily miracles, among many other spectacular spiritual experiences.

What learning, what Torah experience do we have today that can even compare to this, capable of creating as much connection to G-d and faith in His guidance as that of the 'Dor HaDayah' - the 'Generation of Knowledge'?

Yet they erred. In spite of all the experiences, in spite of all the learning, in spite of all the leadership, they erred. BIG TIME!

And, what about us?

The Talmud says: Any generation within which the Temple is not rebuilt, it is as if it was destroyed then. (Source)

A very simple, but very powerful statement. In modern terms, it has often been said as follows: If you are not part of the solution, then you are part of the problem. The Talmud is just adding extra teeth by saying that, from Heaven's perspective, being part of the problem is tantamount to causing all the destruction that comes as a result of it, even if physically-speaking it is not true.

Well, last I checked (I was at the Kotel last Wednesday afternoon for Minchah), not only was the Temple NOT where it once was and, G-d willing, will soon be again, but the mosques were still up there and calling Arab worshippers to prayer. So, it seems, we are still destroying the Temple and making the same ugly mistakes our ancestors did, which, coincidentally, has been intimately bound up with the sin of the spies. (Ta'anis 29a)

And you're okay with that?

We're not talking about secular Jews, who do not know what Torah is, and if they do know what Torah is, do not believe that it is from G-d. How can they be expected to care even a little about a past Temple, let alone a future one? Just the opposite! They are terrified that even hinting at a future Jewish Temple in the place of the occupying mosque might lead to further instability in the Middle-East.

We are talking about Jews who leave over an area of wall unfinished, 'zecher l'Mikdosh' - to remember that life is not complete without a Jewish Temple and its service. While a few holy Jews around the world awaken at midnight and cry and pray over the destroyed Temples, maybe even donning sackcloth and ashes, while the rest of us sleep soundly as we would be expected to do - WHEN the Temple is in existence!

Even after we awaken, we still sleep, but this time with our eyes wide open.

Remember Yonah? Last week we mentioned that he was Moshiach Ben Yosef, according to Sha'ar HaGilgulim. Apparently he also liked to sleep. In fact, while the sea raged all about the ship he was escaping on, causing the gentile sailors to panic on deck, Yonah was sound asleep downstairs in the hold. Until they woke him, that is...

SEUDAH SHLISHIS:

The ship's master approached him, and said to him, "How can you sleep so soundly? Arise! Call to your G-d! Perhaps G-d will think of us and we will not perish." (Yonah 1:6)

The world is a ship and history is a sea, which you may recall, can become so turbulent at times that it can even threaten to destroy the ship and all its passengers. In fact, there haven't been too many calm waters throughout the thousands of years of history that man has lived.

We seem to be approaching difficult waters these days as well. The Middle-East conflict. A war against terrorism. Countries with nuclear capability playing with fire. Economic uncertainty. Increased anti-Semitism. We have known calmer times and there is certainly reason for concern.

All punishment comes to the world because of the Jewish people. (Yevamos 62a)

He (Yonah) said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea and the sea will calm down for you; for, I know that it is because of me that this great tempest is upon you." (Yonah 1:12)

Interestingly enough, 'yonah' is the name of the one bird that symbolizes the Jewish nation (Brochos 53b). In the story of Noach, it was the bird that flew all the way to Eretz Yisroel, by-passing all the tall trees along the way in order to bring back an olive branch in its mouth, just to teach Noach and the new world that he was about to begin: Better my food be bitter but from the hand of G-d, than sweet and from the hand of man. (Rashi, Bereishis 8:11)

Assuming that the dove was not a masochist or an esthetic, his message must have been: The sweetest food of all is from the hand of G-d, even if physically it would not seem so. Just like Shabbos adds a special flavor to the food you can't create with all the spices in the world, so too does easily recognizable Divine Providence make life taste sweeter, even it appears physically less secure.

It is the reverse philosophy of the spies who rejected Eretz Yisroel, even the great Torah scholars amongst them. It was the opposite trait of the nation of Midian that came and spiritually infected the Jewish people, leading to their insensitivity to higher spiritual priorities. And, it is the philosophy upon which the Temple is built, without which it can only crumble and fall in complete destruction.

Everything changed once Yonah woke up. He still had what to learn and change, but overall, his situation got progressively better as he consciously dealt with his responsibility as a prophet of G-d. Perhaps that is the main point and process of Moshiach Ben Yosef, to wake the Jewish people up from their slumber so that they can respond adequately to the tempest that rages all about, and because of them.

MELAVE MALKAH: Parashas Massei & The Three Weeks

G-d told Moshe in the Plains of Moav, by the Jordan near Yericho, "Speak to the Children of Israel, and tell them that when you are about to cross the Jordan into Canaan..." (Bamidbar 33:50-51)

Lo and behold! The end of Sefer Bamidbar is about Eretz Yisroel. We have made many journeys, nationally and personally, but they all lead to Eretz Yisroel, which in turn leads to the Temple, the final one. That's what these three weeks are all about, and if you can't feel that, then you should pay close attention to the following:

Rebi Elazer said: Anyone who has dayah, it is as if the Temple was built in his days; 'dayah' is between two letters ("For, G-d is the G-d of thoughts"; I Shmuel 2:3), and 'Temple' is between two letters ("...G-d, have made - the Sanctuary, my L-rd"; Shemos 15:17). (Brochos 33a)

It is what you would call a 'technical drash.' In the original Hebrew, the word 'dayah,' which in its context means 'thoughts,' is placed between two Names of G-d. Likewise, in a totally unrelated verse, the word 'mikdosh' is also found between two Names of G-d, providing a technical basis for Rebi Elazar's drash.

As is well-known in the world of Kabbalah, the main damage caused by Adam HaRishon's sin was to the 'Da'as' (literally, 'knowledge'), a specific level in the Sefiros. Hence, his whole challenge and test centered around a tree called the 'Aitz HaDA'AS Tov v' Rah,' the 'Tree of KNOWLEDGE of Good and

Evil.'

However, Da'as is not just any knowledge, and not only knowledge itself. It is the knowledge, and organization of which, that elevates a person to a level from which he can see the world and history as G-d does. It is to this specific knowledge that Shlomo HaMelech alluded when he wrote:

"If you want it like money and seek it like buried treasures, then you will understand fear of G-d and find Da'as Elokim (G-dly Knowledge)." (Mishlei 2:4-5)

Dayah, therefore, is not simply factual information. It is specific factual information that allows a person to construct a comprehensive Torah outlook that goes past the basic needs of everyday life. It is the knowledge within Torah that acts as the sinews to pull together all the disparate parts of Torah learning and Jewish history - the Torah's version of the 'Big Picture.'

Which is, in effect, the Temple. For, that is what the Temple embodied: Da'as Elokim. Like the Mishkan before it, it was a microcosm of the entire world, and every detail, even the most minute detail, reflected G-d's purpose in making creation and His outlook on man and history. To understand and relate to the Temple was to understand and relate to life, and more importantly, to maintain a heightened sensitivity to what mattered most in life, from the Torah's perspective.

The Vilna Gaon says that one of the prime objectives of Moshiach ben Yosef will be to reveal the mysteries of Torah, just like his great ancestor, Yosef ben Ya'akov. For many learned and practicing Jews today, that may sound like no big deal.

However, they will be surprised - very surprised to find out that it was precisely the lack of this knowledge that allowed them to become desensitized to what counts most to the Jewish people, in spite of their learning and mitzvos. They will be surprised to find out how crucial such knowledge was to being able to mourn over the loss of the Temple, and in doing so, begin the process to return it.

You can't mourn for something if you don't feel you have lost it.

As the spies found out the hard way. And, as we have been finding out the hard way all through the generations. When the story of our lives is written after it is all said and done, let it not be said of us, that we were the people who acted ridiculously by ignoring opportunities and situations that any awake person would have taken more seriously.

Chazak! Chazak! V'Nischazeik! (Boy, can we use it.)

Have a good Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston