

NOW APPEARING: G-D!

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

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

This is a very crucial parshah. True, all parshios are crucial for their own reasons. However, this week's parshah serves as kind of an introduction to how G-d runs his world - a VERY important event in the history of mankind - first for Moshe, then for the people he will teach over the next forty years, and then for the rest of us who will read about it from that time onward.

Where we last left off, Moshe Rabbeinu was grappling with the "ins" and "outs" of Divine Providence. Sent to make life better for the Jewish people, Moshe exhibited some frustration at having made life even worse for his brothers in bondage, and being associated with change for the worst. However, as the Talmud says:

Why did they (the Men of the Great Assembly) make the seventh blessing (in the Amidah) the one about redemption? Rava said: Because in the future they will be redeemed in the seventh year. But did the master not say: Voices in the sixth year, war in the seventh year, and Motzei Shvi'is the Son of Dovid will come (Sanhedrin 97a)? He answered: War is the beginning of redemption. (Megillah 17b)

That is certainly true if you are the ones waging the war. For example, the Americans went to war against Afghanistan to redeem themselves from terrorism. However, what if you are the one being attacked, as is usually the case with the Jewish people? For us, without war we usually live somewhat as a "redeemed" people because it means that no one is paying attention to us. However, once "they" go to war against us, then we only have oppression to look forward to, G-d forbid.

However, the Talmud was talking about the Jewish people, and is consistent with what the same tractate says elsewhere: Before G-d inflicts the Jewish people, He creates the cure. It may be the "cure" that is the reason for the infliction in the first place!

Sometimes a person can be unwell and think that he is doing just fine. In truth, he needs medication, but in actuality he thinks that he is fine without it. That is, until a full-blown illness results that forces him to admit to his real condition and follow the doctor's orders for survival. How many times have people's lives been saved when one illness "accidentally" revealed a more serious and life-threatening illness?

That is what G-d was telling Moshe Rabbeinu and it is also what the Talmud means. G-d could have easily taken the Egyptian people off the face of the earth, freeing the Jewish people, without even knocking one glass off a shelf. It would have been very convenient for the Jewish people, but not spiritually prudent.

This was because the Jewish people had to undergo some kind of spiritual transformation before they could leave Egypt, and that transformation necessitated increased slavery before the tables could be turned against their Egyptian taskmasters. It was a prerequisite for redemption, whether we accepted it at the time or not.

Hence, whatever troubles befall the Jewish people, they are not out of the blue, though we do not expect them. No matter how difficult they are, they are because we suffer from a more spiritually fatal illness of which we may not have taken notice, one for which we refuse the appropriate "medication." Therefore, we have to undergo a more obvious difficulty to help open our eyes and minds to our need for certain levels of spiritual growth.

The calculations involved may be large, and the execution of the entire thing may be mind-boggling. However, when everything is all said and done, not one person will have ever suffered in a way that didn't somehow lead to his own personal ultimate rectification, and the entire nation will have never experienced anything negative that did not somehow lead us in the direction of our ultimate purpose in creation.

Shabbos Day:

G-d spoke to Moshe saying, "I am Hashem; speak to Paroah, the king of Egypt all that I am telling you." (Shemos 6:29)

The world is made up of many nations, which in turn, are made up of billions of people. Each person and nation has its own strengths and weaknesses, and its own idea about the "pursuit of happiness" and fulfillment. However, they all share one source of energy.

In other words, life is made up of different abilities and traits, but they are divided amongst the nations. This is basically the gist of the following Talmudic statements:

Ten units of beauty descended to the world; nine of them went to Jerusalem and one went to the rest of the world. (Kiddushin 49b)

This is but one of a few such statements the Talmud makes in Kiddushin regarding various different traits that make the world go around.

Often, certain traits are not accessible at all times, but may come and go or become available at

later points in history. It is their "accessibility" or lacking that often "flavors" a particular period of history, and the tapping into of which can empower and direct an entire nation, if not the entire world.

Furthermore, how one relates to that spiritual energy determines its outcome for them, and ultimately, how G-d will relate to them. For example, the same energy that came into the world to fuel the Industrial Revolution or the Enlightenment Era could, when used by Torah Jews, be used to greatly advance the cause of Torah understanding and closeness to G-d.

Thus, the shift in power in Egypt from the Egyptians to the Jewish people was not simply the result of G-d "bullying" the Egyptian bully. This is true even though the plagues that begin in this week's parshah make it seem that way, each one further destroying the Egyptian nation while the Jewish people remained safe and sound in Goshen.

However, what was really going on in Egypt was empowerment, what the Shem M'Shmuel refers to as "hischadshus" - an energy of renewal. The same spiritual energy which, up until this week's parshah had been used (or abused) to greatly advance the Egyptian nation in pagan ways, was being pulled to the side of Torah spirituality.

This is why, as the Pri Tzaddik points out on this week's parshah, every plague that came not only weakened the Egyptian people, but also simultaneously strengthened the Jewish people. A spiritual tug of war was going on, and as the Jewish people learned to tap into the energy that was available at the time, the Egyptian people found themselves increasingly more vulnerable.

It was true then, and it is true today. There is a spiritual tug of war going on in every generation as different sides represented by different cultures fight over the same spiritual energy, each one expending it as they see fit. And, if a nation such as the Jewish people don't recognize this and take advantage of it, then we will only be able to watch the carpet pulled out from under our feet as we fall.

For example, there is a movie today which is sweeping the minds and hearts of young children and adults off the ground around the world, including some Torah Jews. First it was the series of books, and now it is the movie, and the effect is far greater than what might be considered normal given the nature and basis of the story.

As a result, some of the Torah world is up in arms. As a further result, it has brought on an onslaught of articles warning Jewish parents against (further) exposing their children to ideas that really do run contrary to Torah, no matter how good and entertaining the theme of the stories might be.

Warnings, but not alternatives.

When something like this happens, when something so simple takes much of the world by storm, it means that it represents a theme of history in that time period. For better or for worse, it represents a spiritual energy in the world that is up for grabs, and up for abuse if the Jewish people do not tap

into it first for Torah causes.

Why else would Kabbalah be so popular among so many people today who can barely appreciate the commandments upon which it is based? Something is driving people and drawing them out, something spiritual that when used in the right direction can bring people closer to G-d, not further away from him.

The imagination and hearts of Torah Jews need to be "captured" as well, and the rabbis understood this. As it says, "Turn it over, turn it over, because everything is inside of it" (Pirkei Avos 5:26) - the technical and "dry" parts of Torah, and the lively and spiritually "entertaining" parts of it. If we don't show this to our children at school or at home, then how will they ever know that they are there? How will they ever be able to correctly choose between false fulfillment and the true fulfillment found within the four levels of Torah?

SEUDAH SHLISHIS:

Thus said the L-rd Hashem/Elokim: When I gather in the House of Israel from the peoples among whom they were scattered, then I will be sanctified through them in the eyes of the nations, and they will dwell on their land that I gave to My servant Ya'akov. (Yechezkel 28:25-26)

Thus begins this week's Haftarah, which is clearly talking about the Final Redemption and the ingathering of the exiles. How appropriate that it should return as pictures flash across Jewish newspapers showing the newest immigrants from Argentina who fled their country of origin in search of food and prosperity.

It is interesting that G-d should tie the ingathering of the exiles to the sanctification of His Holy Name. Just doing the mitzvos sanctifies G-d's Name. In fact, if every Jew were to keep Torah everywhere in the world, he might find himself in advance of the Final Redemption, and that would result in a tremendous sanctification of G-d's Name, but not the ultimate sanctification of G-d's Name. Somehow, there is something very powerful about seeing all Jews keep all of Torah in one land, and not just any land, but specifically the Land of Israel.

According to the Shem M'Shmuel, Balak understood this and hired Bilaam to help avoid the dilemma. The two of them understood that it was impossible to destroy the Jewish people, and that anyone who tried to do so was destroying themselves in the process. Furthermore, they knew that at that stage of history, it was next to impossible to convince Jews to abandon Torah, in whole or in part. Instead, it had been their plan to keep a portion of the Jewish people out of Eretz Yisroel, which they did by sending the women of Midian in to attract the Jewish males. Even if they keep Torah in other places in the world, their theory went, the sanctification of G-d's Name would be reduced, and therefore evil would still be able to exist.

According to the Pri Tzaddik, the Midianite people represented the negative trait of tiva - physical desire, or rather desire for physical comfort. Interaction with this nation resulted in becoming spiritually infected with this trait, which resulted in the tribes of Reuven, Gad, and Menashe requesting to live outside the land, which according to the Midrash, represented the beginning of the Babylonian Exile - 850 years in advance of its actual occurrence!

According to the Zohar, when the names of Balak and Bilaam are combined, they can spell two words: "Bavel" (Babylonia) and "Amalek" - the antithesis of the Jewish people and the source of Jewish doubt in the involvement of G-d in daily life. How fitting, given their designs and their effect on the Jewish people of that time.

Thus, returning to the land en masse under the banner of Torah completes the circle and rids the world of evil. So, when anti-Semites accuse the Jewish people of being responsible for what goes wrong in the world today, they are not far off from the truth. However, there is a world of difference between hearing that lesson from the Torah and its leaders who say it out of love and concern, and from human beings who say it out of mistaken disgust and blatant anti-Semitism.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Chanukah & The Wonderful World of Thirty-Six

Installment #6, Chapter Six, Part One: The Tribes of Israel

The entire story of Yosef and his brothers can be seen through the eyes of Chanukah and thirty-six. There are not many gematrios to speak of that allude to the wonderful world of thirty-six, perhaps because the entire story itself is such an allusion.

For example, the Midrash teaches:

The tribes were involved with the sale of Yosef; Yosef was immersed in mournful thoughts about his separation from his father; Reuven was involved with mourning over his sin; Ya'akov was mourning for Yosef; Yehudah was busy taking a wife for himself (Tamar); and the Holy One, Blessed is He, was busy creating the light of Moshiach. (Bereishis Rabbah 85:2)

The Midrash is not merely summarizing seemingly disconnected events of the day. Rather, what the Midrash means to indicate is that all the events that occurred in the story of Yosef and his brothers, whether they realized it or not, were min hashamayim - directed by Heaven. These events would make the revelation of the light of Moshiach, the Hidden Light of creation, and the light of the thirty-six candles of Chanukah possible. In fact, according to the B'nei Yisschar, every Chanukah at the time of lighting, the Hidden Light is revealed, and this is the light of Melech Moshiach.

It is like a dreidel that rotates when spun from the top. In fact, according to the work "Ta'amei HaMinhagim" (859), the reason why we play dreidel on Chanukah and use the grager on Purim, is

because the Chanukah miracle was initiated from Above, whereas the Purim miracle was initiated from Below (Mordechai and Esther instituted fasts, sackcloth, and ashes).

Likewise, in the case of the Tribes, the "spinner" was the Master of the Universe, and the body of the dreidel was Yosef and his brothers. However, the brothers seemed to see the events of their lives differently, viewing themselves as the "spinners" - the ones in control. In the end, it was this mistaken perception that was the source of their errors and suffering.

The first such example of error due to misperception was the incident in Shechem (Bereishis 34:1). After Ya'akov's daughter was violated by Shechem, (the son of the ruler of Shechem), the brothers, understandably, were enraged; it had been a gross violation of the sanctity of the family of Ya'akov. However, when Shechem came with his father to Ya'akov's camp to make peace and to marry Deenah, the brothers negotiated a settlement:

They said to them, "We cannot give our sisters to a man who is uncircumcised; this would be disgraceful to us. We can only agree to do this if you become like us and every male circumcise himself." (Bereishis 34:14)

As the Torah reports, the men of Shechem consented. However, to Shimon and Levi, this act was not "compensation" enough for the violation of their sister. On the third day after the milah, the day on which the men of Shechem were at their weakest, the people of Shechem were attacked and wiped out by Shimon and Levi.

Their act of zealousness was not met with approval by their father, who must have been equally, if not more incensed at the violation of his daughter:

Ya'akov said to Shimon and Levi, "You have confounded me and given me a bad reputation among the Canaanites and Perizites who live in the land. I have a small number of men. They can band together and attack me and my family, and I will be wiped out." (Bereishis 34:30)

CONFOUNDED ME: The Canaanites had a tradition that they would be defeated by the sons of Ya'akov, but not until we increased and inherited the land. (Rashi)

However, now they will think that the time has come and attack us [while we are few in number]. (Sifsei Chachamim)

It seemed that Ya'akov and his sons had two different approaches to the crisis. Whereas Shimon and Levi took the initiative to avenge the honor of the family and teach the world a moral lesson, Ya'akov decided to take the matter in stride. What happened to Deenah was min hashamayim. Recognizing and living with this reality was what Ya'akov perceived to be the true challenge of the moment.

However, the brothers did not apply the lesson taught at Shechem. They continued to take matters into their own hands, often taking an initiative that was not theirs to take. It was this boldness that led to their hatred and jealousy of Yosef, which was the catalyst to sell him into slavery.

Yosef was Ya'akov's prodigy for many reasons, none of to which the brothers could relate. In Yosef, Ya'akov saw the continuation of the spiritual legacy begun by Avraham, and further cultivated by his father Yitzchak and himself; the brothers saw spiritual ruination and an instigator. While the brothers saw the "surface" of Yosef that seemed negative, Ya'akov looked beyond and saw only spiritual greatness. For this reason, the brothers conspired to rid Jewish ancestry of this "bad" seed, without first consulting their father.

When Yosef was sent by his father to inquire after the peace of his brothers who were out grazing the herds, he obeyed without a second thought, though he knew how his brothers felt towards him. Upon seeing Yosef coming in the distance, the brothers first thought to kill him. However, Yehudah's mercy prevailed, and instead they threw Yosef into a waterless pit:

The well was empty, there was no water inside it (Bereishis 37:24). From the fact that it says the well was empty, wouldn't it be clear that there was no water inside? Rather, it teaches us that there was no water, but there were snakes and scorpions. (Shabbos 22a)

What makes this midrash fascinating is that it is found in the only gemora that deals with Chanukah, and the author of this statement is the same author who stated just previously:

Chanukah candles placed higher than twenty amos are invalid. (Shabbos 22a)

Perhaps there is another connection between the two Talmudic statements, one that answers another question: Why didn't Yosef's brothers see the miracle that Yosef survived in a pit full of snakes and scorpions? Had they recognized this miracle, perhaps they would have come to the realization that Yosef was more righteous than they had first thought; perhaps they would have changed their plans. The Talmud seems to allude to the fact that Yosef was in fact beyond their eyeshot - twenty amos below the ground, and more deeply, beyond their mind's eyeshot.

As Divine Providence would have it, a wagon train of Midianites passed by at that time, and the brothers decided to sell Yosef into slavery.

The brothers sat down and ate a meal. When they looked up they saw an Arab caravan approaching from Gilead. The camels were carrying gum, balsam, and resin, transporting them to Egypt. (Bereishis 37:25)

THE CAMELS WERE CARRYING: Why does the verse reveal what they were carrying? To make known the reward of the righteous. For it was the way of Arabs to transport kerosene and tar which have a terrible odor, but for this [the sale of Yosef] spices were prepared which do not smell bad (i.e., G-d arranged that they carry spices knowing that Yosef would travel among them). (Rashi)

Thus, even in those days Arabs dealt in oil and oil products, which do not smell all that pleasant. Yet, the day that Yosef was to be sold and to travel in one with them, they uncharacteristically transported pleasant smelling spices! What Divine Providence!

However, this fact too was hidden from the eyes of the brothers, or rather their minds' eyes. They acted with the full conviction believing that they were in the right, while Yosef was in fact on his way to become viceroy of Egypt. This was the beginning of the fulfillment of his dreams; unwittingly, they were all helping in the making of the light of Moshiach.

The Midianites, the Torah relates, sold Yosef to Potiphar, Paroah's chief butcher. It did not take long for Yosef to earn the full respect of his master, who quickly made him responsible over his entire house. The only problem was that Potiphar's wife also took notice of Yosef, for different reasons, but this too was min hashamayim:

Yosef was handsome (Bereishis 39:6).

He saw himself as a ruler, and began to eat and drink [as one of royalty] and he curled his hair. The Holy One, Blessed is He, said, "Your father mourns [for you] and you curl your hair! I will sic a bear on you (i.e., the wife of Potiphar)." (Rashi)

In the meantime, the brother who was Yosef's chief antagonist was faring just as badly. Yehudah had lost the respect of his brothers after they saw the impact that the loss of Yosef had had on their father (it had been Yehudah's decision to sell him). And, as if that was not bad enough, he was made to appear as a fool through the incident of Tamar.

(Continued next week, G-d willing.)

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston

This class is dedicated in honor of Yarden Lav on his 9th birthday, by his family.