

THE FINAL APPROACH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Yosef said to his brothers, "I am Yosef, is my father still alive?" (Bereishis 45:3)

This statement of Yosef to his brothers in this week's parshah is a classic in drama. There is nothing like standing before your mortal enemy in enemy territory, caught with the "goods" that can easily mean a torturous end to one's precious life, pleading against hope to achieve some level of mercy. Then, at the moment's lowest point, from the deepest of the depths of despair not only does salvation come, but from the very source from which destruction was supposed to have hailed!

You can't beat that for real life drama.

The question is, who needs it? Can't we just forget the drama and get on with plain, mediocre lives with occasional moments of excitement? Apparently, as history has proven over and over again, Heaven says no, and it is important to understand why.

One of the most beautiful statements I have ever read (of its type) comes in the very last paragraph of Sefer Sha'ar HaGilgulim, which I have quoted often in these pages. It is in an addendum to the book, which was based upon the teachings of the Ari HaKodesh and transcribed by Rabbi Chaim Vital, the Ari's foremost student.

However, his son, Rabbi Shmuel Vital, who often added his own comments and notations throughout the book, brought much of the work to publication. The last section is even more than this, it is an actual incident that he himself personally experienced and wrote about.

Without going into detail, it took place in Egypt in the year 5426 from creation (1665), and it is an account of how Rav Shmuel was called in to help rectify and remove an errant spirit that had entered the body of young woman. Over the course of two pages, Rav Shmuel recounts the process that led to his success in the freeing of the soul and the recovery of the young girl.

The question is why did he see fit to include this story in the book in the first place? Most of us might immediately answer, "Because it is so fascinating to read about such spiritual encounters." However, Rav Shmuel's final words did not include that at all, but rather, he said:

"I have done this to let it be known that there is a G-d in Israel."

Now, what did he mean by that? He meant simply, that what he and the others with him witnessed revealed the reality of the soul, verified the reward and punishment process of Heaven and the power of Torah to rectify souls and heal spiritual illnesses, all of which is a gift of the G-d Who gave Torah to His people. It was all a function of Divine Providence. It was a revelation of the hand of G-d in everyday life.

A number of years ago before Chanukah, I believe we witnessed another example of such Divine Providence, which revealed that, in these dark times, G-d is very much amongst the Jewish people and orchestrating the events of history, PERSONALLY. What am I talking about? Allow me to tell you.

There was a horrible, terribly malicious terrorist attack on Ben Yehudah Street on Motzei Shabbos, which killed, maimed, and wounded so many young people who were out enjoying themselves on this pedestrian thoroughfare. The next day, there were two more such attacks, which increased the death toll.

Prime Minster Sharon's response to the attack came as no surprise, given his leaning to the political right. The American response to the situation did come as a surprise, as it greatly undermined Yasser Arafat's political credibility after the Americans had stood by him for the longest time. An even greater surprise was Center-Left leader Shimon Peres' response: 12 hours to round up 36 terrorists, or else.

How quickly G-d shifts the winds of world history. One day Peres is using the Americans to leverage himself against Sharon's policies, and the next day the Americans are giving Sharon the green light to do what he must to rid himself of the terrorist virus, and Shimon Peres, who has stuck with Arafat to our bitter end, is instead forced to give him an ultimatum - while at the same time forcing "neutral" Canada to enter the fray by freezing Hamas assets and drawing Russia in to buoy Arafat in order to keep his political career alive!

However, all of that can be an essay in itself, and will be, G-d willing. What I want to focus on here is the numbers to which Peres referred, one week in advance of Chanukah: 12 and 36, for not only are they "Chanukah-numbers," but numbers of the Final Redemption.

Twelve is the number of tribes - the sons of Ya'akov - that must be unified in order to bring the redemption, or it will happen as a result of the Final Redemption. Thirty-six is the number that symbolizes the Supernal and Holy Light of G-d that will be used to do this, and to bring the redemption, not to mention rectification to the entire universe: physical and spiritual.

This is why, according to tradition, we light thirty-six candles over the course of eight days of Chanukah, and why the miracle of Chanukah occurred in the year 3597, in the thirty-sixth century from creation. This is only the BEGINNING of all the twelves, twenty-fives, and thirty-sixes of history, all of which reveal a different piece of the Chanukah story.

Did Peres know what he was alluding to? Of course not! However, he doesn't have to know. All that

has to happen is for G-d to arrange the events of history in such a way as to "force" people to say things at the right moment that seem to be the best things to say, even though twenty-four hours earlier they would not have ever dreamed of saying them.

Why? To know that G-d is with the Jewish people, even at this very difficult and dark time, and to encourage us to hang on until the end. If we do, we will witness, G-d willing it should happen speedily in our time, salvation from what we thought was to have been the very source of our own destruction. For, there IS a G-d in Israel.

Shabbos Day:

To his father he (Yosef) sent ten male donkeys carrying from the best of Egypt, and ten female donkeys carrying grain, bread, and food for the way. (Bereishis 45:23)

Given the fact that Fed Ex and UPS were not around in those days, and that air travel was too dangerous at the time, using donkeys to transport goods from Egypt to Canaan was a logical choice. However, according to the Zohar, the most important part of the wagon train may not have been what they were carrying, but the donkeys themselves:

When Yosef was taken from his father, he knew the "Upper Wisdom," the Mystery of the Holy Upper Crowns." When he was in Egypt, he learned their wisdom, that of the "Lower Crowns, and how to unify the left and the right - ten of the right and ten of the left, male donkeys and female donkeys. For this reason, he hinted to his father about what he learned there, as it says, "To his father he sent ten male donkeys, etc." (Zohar, Balak 207a)

In other words, what Yosef was indicating to his father by sending specifically donkeys, and even more specifically, male and female donkeys, was that he had withstood the great test of being in Egypt, remaining righteous and holy as before, in spite of what he had been exposed to. For, Egypt represented the opposite moral extreme of Yosef's family: The ten Sefiros on the side of spiritual impurity that mirror the ten Sefiros on the side of Holiness and the source of Torah and its way of life.

In other words, Yosef had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and had not only survived, but had thrived. For, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is just another way of describing anything that is a mixture of good and evil, of spiritual purity and spiritual impurity, combined in one entity. Yosef, seemingly, had succeeded where Adam HaRishon and others had failed.

How?

The difference is basic but fundamental: Who put you there? In other words, did you take a spiritual

risk yourself, or did you happen to find yourself in a spiritually precarious position?

It works like this. Adam HaRishon had been the greatest man to ever live. However, explain the rabbis, his greatness had been a gift with which he was created, and not one that he had earned through his own efforts. Nevertheless, he had assumed, it did not make a difference: greatness is greatness, and with all the right intentions, he took on the reality of evil embodied in the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in order to rid creation of all its potential evil.

Did G-d tell him to do it? Did he just happen to find himself in the midst of the test? No. He took on the tree of his own volition, assuming that he had the spiritual fortitude to withstand its temptations and effects. Our history is living proof of just how wrong he had been.

However, Yosef had been quite happy living at home and learning Torah from the mouth of his beloved father. He had gone down to Shechem to check on the welfare of his brothers not because he had been looking for trouble, but because he had been looking to fulfill a mitzvah of honoring his father, who had asked him to go. Certainly he had not chosen Egypt or the house of Potiphar as a place of sojourn away from home.

Yet, that is where he ended up, because that is where Divine Providence had sent him. And, since it was G-d Who had sent him there, it was a test that Heaven had arranged for him, and not he himself. Therefore, he COULD pass it, because G-d NEVER gives a test to a person that he cannot withstand.

However, He will not necessarily save a person from a test that the person gives to himself, as Adam HaRishon had by putting himself into a spiritually dangerous predicament, one that he could have avoided had he chosen to do the moral thing - the TRULY moral thing.

What is the moral of the story? Only G-d truly knows our strengths and weaknesses, and therefore, He can custom design spiritual tests for us that we can succeed at. However, we can underestimate our strengths, and all too often, over-estimate them, and therefore we can enter situations that are spiritually damaging, and not survive them intact. If we leave the tests to G-d, then He will leave us to pass them.

SEUDAH SHLISHIS:

Chanukah & The Wonderful World of Thirty-Six

Installment #4, Part 1: Chapter Four: Avraham & Light

Avraham was ninety-nine years old when G-d appeared to him and said to him, "I am E'l-Shadd'ai - walk before Me and be complete!" (Bereishis 17:1)

NOACH WALKED WITH G-D: Regarding Avraham it says, "walk before Me;" Noach depended upon G-d, whereas Avraham pursued righteousness independently. (Rashi, Bereishis 6:9).

Noach, for all of his righteousness and chayn still did not reach the level of Avraham, who epitomized the trait of chesed. While Noach was a reflection of the Hidden Light of creation, Avraham was more, as it says:

G-d said, "Let there be light!" And there was light. (Bereishis 1:3).

"Light" -- This was Avraham. (Bereishis Rabbah 2:3)

There can be no greater compliment than to be called "light," specifically the Original Light of creation. All that Avraham accomplished and represented was, in the end, a complete expression of the concept of the Hidden Light of creation and all that is alluded to in the number "thirty-six."

How did Avraham accomplish so much? Through the tremendous acts of chesed and loving kindness that Avraham performed every chance he could. For, as Dovid HaMelech wrote and recorded for all time:

A world of chesed You created. (Tehillim 89:3).

Hence, after twenty long generations since G-d asked Adam the fateful question, "Aiyekah?" Avraham finally answered it through his devotion to performing acts of chesed, like his Creator. For doing so, he merited to father a nation that would be eternally bound to the Hidden Light of creation, as signified through the covenant of Bris Milah:

This is My covenant which they will keep between Me and you and your seed after you; they will circumcise every male . . . A son of eight days you will circumcise. (Bereishis 17:10-12)

Eight? Now that is a familiar number. In fact, the holiday of thirty-six lights is eight days long, which is why:

The eight days of Milah are the eight days of Chanukah. (Tikunei Zohar 13)

However, this is only the beginning of the connection between Bris Milah and the holy holiday of Chanukah, as the Tikunei Zohar continues:

The eight days of Milah are the eight days of Chanukah which follow the twenty-four letters of "Boruch Shem k'vod Malchuso l'olam va'ed" - Blessed be the Name of His glorious Kingdom forever - and are the letters of unity in the Shema (which has twenty-five letters). (ibid.)

Fascinatingly, if you combine the first letters of each of these six words (bais-shin-chof-mem-lamed-vav), they spell: b'Shechem lamed-vav, "in Shechem thirty-six!"

This is quite significant since Shechem was the place in Israel whose inhabitants all performed Bris Milah in order to marry the descendants of Ya'akov. (Bereishis 34:24) Furthermore, as Rashi points out, Shechem is a very unique place in history, for "it is a place set aside for punishment" (Rashi, Bereishis 37:14), being the place that Dinah was violated, Yosef was sold into slavery by his brothers, and the kingdom of Dovid would one day divide into two separate kingdoms.

And, as the Zohar points out:

"Many camps will arise in Land of the Galil, because that is where Moshiach is going to be revealed, since it is part of Yosef's territory. It will be the first place to be destroyed. It will begin there ahead of all other places, and then spread to the nations." (Zohar, Vayakhel 220a)

That is, in the area of Shechem, the location of Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eival, the place where the Jewish people took their oath to be loyal to G-d and Torah. (Rashi, Devarim 11:26) The destruction of Shechem will signal the beginning of the Final Redemption, because that is really when the exile began, as we will see in the next chapter, G-d willing.

(Continued in the next d'var Torah.)

MELAVE MALKAH:

Chanukah & The Wonderful World of Thirty-Six

Installment #4, Part 2: Chapter Four: Avraham & Light

Returning to Avraham and his connection to the Hidden Light of thirty-six, it was the eight days of Milah - and Chanukah - that lead Avraham right to chof-heh - whose gematria is twenty-five - and a supernatural relationship with G-d:

Avraham rose up early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two young men with him and Yitzchak his son; [he] split wood for the offering and got up and left for the place about which G-d had told him. On the third day, Avraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. Avraham said to the young men, "You stay here (peh-heh) with the donkey, and I and the young man (Yitzchak) will go over there (chof-heh), bow down, and return." (Bereishis 22:3-5)

Comments the Midrash on this:

On the third day, Avraham noticed a mountain bathed in the light of a fire that reached from earth to the Heaven with the Cloud of Glory resting above the mountain. "What do you see," he asked Yitzchak. "I see the Divine Presence on the mountain," Yitzchak answered. "What do you see," he asked Yishmael and Eliezer. "We see nothing," they answered. "Since you see nothing and the donkey also sees nothing, you belong here with the donkey," said Avraham. (Bereishis Rabbah 56:2)

Thus, the chof-heh to which Avraham and Yitzchak journeyed to complete the tenth and final test, is associated with being able to see the hand of G-d in creation, a function of the light which is identified with the number twenty-five. Chanukah means "dedication of twenty-five."

However, in another form of gematria called "Gematria Kollel," "peh-heh" is equal to eighty-six, the numerical value of G-d's Name which alludes to the aspect of Him that works through nature:

Elokim. "Chof-heh," on the other hand, in gematria kollel is equal to twenty-six, the numerical value of the Ineffable Name of G-d, the Tetragrammaton, which alludes to the supernatural revelation of G-d.

It is also the gematria of the "Mispar Katan" (Small Number) of the letters of Chanukah:

Ches-nun-vav-chof-heh = $8 + 50 + 6 + 20 + 5$, or in Mispar Katan, $8 + 5 + 6 + 2 + 5 = 26$

This was Avraham's message to Yishmael and Eliezer: Since you cannot see the miracle, it is clear that you are subject to the laws of nature, as is the donkey. Your relationship to G-d is through nature. However, since G-d has made us privy to His supernatural manifestation, it is on this level that we will now relate to Him.

This is the message of both Bris Milah and Chanukah, both of which are associated with the number eight, the number that represents rising above the natural world which was created in seven days. The letters of "Milah" itself are "mem-yud-lamed-heh," which when arranged spell: mem-lamed Yud-Heh, a way of referring to the holy light that is released through Bris Milah (Otzros HaChaim) - the same light that the thirty-six candles of Chanukah are said to reveal.

The Midrash concludes: Light - This was Avraham. Thus, the greatest act of chesed that Avraham performed was to take upon himself and his descendants, the mitzvah of Bris Milah - the one mitzvah the Greeks so vehemently opposed. For, through it, the Holy Light of creation is able to break forth and illuminate the world, and nowhere will this be clearer than through the story of Avraham's descendants, Ya'akov and his twelve sons.

Have a great Shabbos,
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