

GEVUROS AND HISTORY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

In the sixth-hundredth year of Noach's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all of the fountains of the great deep burst forth; and the windows of the heavens were opened. And the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights. (Bereishis 7:11-12)

It took 1,656 years, but mankind finally succeeded in provoking G-d to the point of their own annihilation. Aside from Noach's immediately family, everyone else was wiped away, forcing history to almost begin all over again from scratch.

Not that it made a real difference in the end, for in 340 years time, mankind once again rebelled against G-d with the Tower of Babel, bringing upon itself, once again, more Divine retribution. And so the pattern continues until this very day, as we now 'await' more Divine intervention for all the corruption of modern day society.

Another pattern that seems to dominate history is the rise and fall of the evil. There is no way to measure the destruction that creation has suffered at the hands of the thoroughly evil. However, in spite of their plans for world domination and all the evil they have been able to inflict, they still seem to topple at some point in time, allowing history to recover somewhat, at least for a brief period of time.

The explanation for these two patterns we will see is also the reason why history has continued on for so long. We know that the Final Redemption, for which we anxiously await for over 3,000 years, could have come early. Indeed, it almost occurred in King Chizkiah's time, after only 3,213 years since creation, after the Assyrian general, Sancheriv, laid siege to Jerusalem. (Sanhedrin 94a)

However, in the end it didn't occur, and many other opportunities have come and gone all the way to 5763, some of which may have included the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91, and last year after the terrorist attack in the Netanyahu hotel on Seder night. In the end, we are still here as history seems to grind onward, hopefully forward, allowing evil to still do its damage - all for a Kabbalistic reason.

Dovid HaMelech, of course, understood all of this, and wrote:

Grant not, G-d, the desires of the wicked one; do not cause his conspiracy to be carried out, for them to be exalted, Selah. (Tehillim 140:9)

Regarding this verse, the Talmud writes:

Rebi Yitzchak said, "Why is it written, 'Grant not, G-d, the desires of the wicked one; do not cause his conspiracy to be carried out, for them to be exalted, Selah.' (Tehillim 140:9)?" Ya'akov said before The Holy One, Blessed is He, "Master of the World! Do not give to Eisav the desires of his heart - do not cause his conspiracy to be carried out." This refers to Germamia of Edom, because if they were to go out they would destroy the world! (Megillah 6a)

As Rashi points out, Germamia was the name of a particular kingdom from the tribes of Edom, from Eisav. However, as one of the commentators (long before WWII) at the back of the Talmud explains, Germamia is really a reference to Germania, which of course, refers to Germany, whose contribution to the destruction of mankind and creation may be unparalleled in history.

However, even what the Nazis, may their names be erased, perpetrated was only part of an elaborate system of world rectification which must be understood, if the pieces of the greatest puzzle of all history are to find their proper places in the minds of men.

SHABBOS DAY:

All in whose nostrils was the breath of the spirit of life, of everything that was on dry land, died. (Bereishis 7:22)

Man was created good. Yet, man sins in one of two ways, either by doing that which is forbidden, or by not performing that which was commanded. At the time of sin, there is a 'force' drawing him in the direction of that which is forbidden, or putting up a resistance to that which was commanded.

This, of course, is what makes free-will possible, or rather, useable. It takes 'will' to resist temptation and it takes 'will' to overcome laziness. It is for such choices that creation was made, and for which man exists and is rewarded in the World-to-Come.

The 'force' has a name: Gevuros. The word 'Gevurah' itself means 'strength,' referring to the nature of this 'light' to constrict and control, either for good or for evil.

It can be compared to a stallion that has yet to be broken in. Until such time as a bit is put into the mouth of the stallion to facilitate human control over it, the horse is a powerhouse of fury, capable of damaging and even killing. It is unbridled Gevuros, and does very little to serve the advancement of mankind and history. That is why Ya'akov, according to Rashi, was really asking G-d not to remove the bit from Eisav's mouth.

However, when a person uses the power of Gevuros to resist sin, the Gevuros are said to have been 'sweetened,' like the power of the stallion that has been channeled according to the will of his master. This refined Gevuros is the basis of a person's reward in the World-to-Come, the goal of creation on its long journey towards complete holiness, and the true purpose of history.

Punishment, too, is a function of Gevuros, which is the way that creation guarantees that if the Gevuros are not rectified through the free-will of man, they will be rectified through the punishment

he undergoes for having sinned through them. The very Gevuros used to sin, after the sin is completed, turn around and become the sin of the transgressor's punishment (if he doesn't do teshuvah in time).

Thus, if history continues and Moshiach has yet to arrive, it is because the Gevuros remain unrectified as a result of the increase of sin and the lack of mitzvos and teshuvah. However, since there is a limit to how much temptation mankind can handle at one time, and how much punishment he can bear in a short span of time, G-d regulates the amount of Gevuros within creation at any one moment in time, as the Leshem explains:

All punishment, whether in this world or in the Soul World, is never the final amount possible, but rather it is only a specific measured amount. Likewise, any evil that causes transgression and sin is reigned in, in order that it should not come out in full force. The Holy One, Blessed is He, in His mercy constantly watches over us for good. He holds onto the root of every strong Gevuros and keeps it under His control, disallowing it from being able to fully exercise its strength at one time. Therefore, by necessity, much time will have to pass from the sin of Adam HaRishon until Moshiach's arrival, at the final time. Should G-d let Gevuros emanate out over a short time through sin and punishment, creation could not withstand it all and would be destroyed as in the manner of the Flood, and S'dom and Amorah. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 204)

In other words, evil never prevails in the end, because the Gevuros must eventually be rectified. Sin must, by necessity, give way to repentance, and if not, then to punishment, for the sake of the purpose of creation. However, the potential of the Gevuros to permit evil, and its potential to punish for that evil are far greater than we appreciate, or could handle. The Holocaust was one of the most recent case in points.

Therefore, G-d, taking the measure of individuals and the world as a whole, determines in advance how much Gevuros a given generation can handle, and allows only that much to be available at that time. Whatever Gevuros is allowed to run amok in the world is going to be the cause of sin in some, and their subsequent punishment, or of the power of others to withstand sin and perform mitzvos.

And that takes time, lots of time - 5,763 years of it, so far to date.

So, while it may look crazy out there, and as if nothing much is happening to further the cause of creation, it is really just the opposite. Some may choose to sin, and suffer the consequences for doing so (a highly illogical choice, given the nature of punishment), while others will choose to resist sin and perform mitzvos - all of it is part of an ongoing tikun of Ma'aseh Bereishis, regulated by the Master of the Universe with precision, for our own good.

SEUDOS SHILSHIS:

The inclination of a man's heart is evil from his youth. (Bereishis 8:21)

What a comforting thought. Before the gun even goes off to start the race, we're already starting off

behind the proverbial 'Eight Ball.' Adam, explains the Ramchal, was equally balanced between good and evil. However, as a result of his sin, the scales were tipped heavily in favor of the dark side, which has encased us with darkness.

Indeed, the Talmud writes:

Rebi Shimon ben Levi said: Everyday, the [evil] inclination of a person overcomes him and wants to kill him, as it says, "The wicked one watches for the righteous and seeks to kill him" (Tehillim 37:32). (Kiddushin 30b)

Let's say a person has to get up early in the morning. His alarm clock goes off, and he realizes that he has to get up. Barely conscious, he immediately feels an overwhelming force to remain in bed. He may WANT to get up on time, but at that dark moment in the day, while sleep still remains heavy upon his eyelids and the comfort of the bed entices his body, he FEELS like sleeping in. It's an unfair battle to be sure.

Even after he has finally left his bed, the battle does not end there. Rather, until he finally loses consciousness in sleep at the end of the day, it is WANT versus FEELING the rest of the day, the former being a function of the intellect and the latter being a function of the emotions and nerve endings, the evil inclinations most reliable devices for seducing a person down the path to sin, large or small.

If so, what kind of world is this, and what kind of G-d would create such a world? Even if Adam blew it by going against the will of G-d, and tipped the scales in favor of the evil inclination, what point is there in continuing on with history if success against evil is an impossibility?

Rebi Shimon ben Levi answered that question at the end of his teaching:

If The Holy One, Blessed is He, did not help him, he would be unable to prevail, as it says, "But G-d will not forsake him to his hand" (Ibid. 33).

There is a way out of the trap - there is a way to navigate the confusing and difficult world of the emotions and sensations. It's called help from G-d.

In fact, if one wanted to explain the actual difference between man before Adam's sin and man after the sin, it is this: Before the sin, man could confront evil head on and overcome it on his own through free-will choice; after the sin, man's free-will can only lead him to acknowledge his dependence upon G-d to overpower his evil inclination, and to actually turn to G-d to enlist His help. And, once he does, the Talmud encourages:

One who comes to purify himself, They (Heaven) help him. (Shabbos 104a)

Thus, once a person makes his decision to do teshuvah, all of a sudden, he gains insights that help his WANT overcome his FEELING. All of a sudden, opportunities arise that allow him to more readily pursue spiritual goals. All of a sudden, at precisely a moment of weakness, someone comes along,

or something occurs, to pick up the slack and see him through the moment back to a position of spiritual strength.

It makes perfect sense too. The first man used his free-will incorrectly, and ended up hiding from G-d. The ultimate rectification, therefore, would be to use our free-will to find G-d once again. It is the inclination of man to maintain the status quo of history, that is, distant from G-d. It is the role of free-will to once again point our feet in the direction from which we came, and it is Heaven's role to carry us from that point onward, back to where we really belong: The Garden of Eden, if not in this world, then in the next one.

MELAVE MALKAH:

The whole earth was of one language and of common purpose. And they said, "Come, let us build us a city and let us make a name for ourselves, in case we be dispersed across the whole earth." (Bereishis 11:1-4)

In case you are dispersed across the whole earth? SURPRISE! Your very actions led to exactly that: And G-d dispersed them from there over the face of the entire earth. (Bereishis 11:8)

How ridiculous! It is one thing to sin and fail. However, it is something altogether different to sin in order to accomplish a certain goal that NOT sinning would clearly have accomplished. The situation of the Tower generation would be laughable if WE weren't guilty of the same mistake.

But we are guilty, and for the same reason: We don't understand the purpose of creation. And, if we do understand the purpose of creation, then we don't understand it on a deep enough level. Because, if we did, we wouldn't ever sin, except at an extreme moment of weakness, and we wouldn't misunderstand the meaning of our actions.

On a simplistic level, history seems to be like a movie. There are many actors - all of mankind - some prominent, some secondary, some good, and some evil. There is a plot - world peace and quality of life for all societies - and sub-plots - individual concerns for personal happiness. And, there is an element of fate, a barely understood system of natural cause-and-effect built into creation that can help or hinder the actors, adding an element of mystery and surprise to the script of history.

Sometimes, history seems like a boat adrift on a river, powerless to do anything other than to ride the current of the stream that seems to have a mind of its own. Life, thus, becomes a matter of staying on the boat, and of trying to have as comfortable a journey as one can while remaining unaware of the final destination. Hopefully, the rapids will be manageable, and no waterfalls await downstream, promising certain doom.

In each case, we are part of something, but we don't quite know what. We see that life is full of opportunities, and that we have abilities. We see that we have needs, and the potential to fulfill them. However, beyond that, life seems to be ambiguous, which makes predicting outcomes

difficult if not outright impossible.

However, all of it - the world, the people, the opportunities, and the abilities - all of it possesses a spark of information that when analyzed, as Avraham Avinu did, reveals a common truth. At the bottom of all of it, there is a common thread, a driving force that is the reason for the world being as it is, for people being as they are, and for the existence of specific opportunities and abilities.

It is this 'thread' that is the basis of Torah and all the mitzvos. It is this thread that transforms events like the Flood the Dispersion from punishment into rectification, compensating for what man failed to contribute to the fulfillment of the purpose of creation. It is the reason why, today, Israel is at odds with much of the world while under the gun of the Arab world, and why America is pushing for a war with Iraq, against much of world opinion.

It is the reason for all that goes right in creation, and all that goes wrong. Adam HaRishon may have understood all of this, but failed in his attempt to properly utilize this thread. The Generation of the Flood and the Dispersion clearly did not understand this thread, and succumbed, instead, to its backlash. Now, as history comes to a close, times seems to speed up, and the world walks a dangerous course, once again, to self-destruction, it becomes increasingly important to understand this thread now, more than ever.

B'eZRas Hashem, we'll start next week.

Have a great Shabbos,
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