

THE LAST STRAW

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

He commanded them, "This is what you should say to Eisav, 'So says your servant Ya'akov: With Lavan I have lived and have delayed until now (ayin-tav-heh)'." (Bereishis 32:5)

The actions of the fathers are signs for the children. As we have mentioned before, this is a central operating principle of Torah. It is about being more than just a good example for future generations; it is about doing things now (then) that will leave spiritual ripples throughout history until the end, affecting all generations throughout time.

This is more true with respect to some parshios than others, and especially with this week's parshah, Vayishlach. So much of what occurs in this week's parshah continues to reverberate throughout the millennia until this very day, and past it. In fact, of all the parshios of the Torah, this is one of the most messianic of all.

When Ya'akov was forced to flee home at the beginning of last week's parshah, Vayaitzai, he was 63 years old. He then spent 14 years tucked away at the yeshivah of Shem and Eiver, fortifying himself spiritually before moving on to fulfil his mother's request to move in with her brother, Ya'akov's uncle, the spiritually decrepit Lavan. That made Ya'akov 77 years old on arrival in Padan Aram.

He then worked for 7 years to marry Lavan's daughter, his cousin, Rachel, but ended up with Leah, her sister, instead. Rachel had foretold of such a switch by her father, allowing Ya'akov to prepare for it with his own security system, and to make sure that he would know in advance if it was Leah or Rachel who had arrive that night.

However, what Rachel had not told Ya'akov, was that it would be her who would make it possible for Leah to sneak past Ya'akov's test. She had entered the tent with Leah and answered Ya'akov on Leah's behalf, gaining his trust before leaving Leah behind to finalize the marriage that she herself had so desperately desired. That was the depth of her love for her sister, which spared Leah any further anguish of having to be paired off with Eisav.

As Divine Providence would have it, Lavan at least complied after the fact to let Ya'akov marry Rachel as well, which he did after the seven days of Sheva Brochos for Leah. Over the next 13 years, Ya'akov, through his two wives, Rachel and Leah, and his two concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah (also daughters of Lavan through his own concubines), fathered eleven sons - tribes - along with some

twin sisters as well.

The eleventh son to be born was Yosef, and as Rashi points out, it was his birth that signaled that it was time to move on from Lavan's house and return back home to Eretz Yisroel, some 34 years after being away from home. Thus, at the beginning of this week's parshah, as Ya'akov prepared to confront his brother and arch rival Eisav, the two of them were 97 years old.

The posuk says,

He commanded them, "This is what you should say to Eisav, 'So says your servant Ya'akov: With Lavan I have lived and have delayed until now (ayin-tav-heh)'." (Bereishis 32:5)

NOW (AYIN-TAV-HEH): "Ayin" (stands for the 70 years of exile in) Bavel, "tav" (stands for the 400 years of exile in) Egypt, and "heh" (alludes to 5000 years, after) which will come the sixth millennium which are the Days of Moshiach; after that the saviors will go up on Har Tzion to judge the mount of Eisav. (Ba'al HaTurim)

Now, normally we don't make calculations regarding the arrival time of Moshiach, especially when those predictions are for thousands of years in the future. How distressing it is to be living in the third, fourth, or fifth century, only to learn that Moshiach is not due until the sixth millennium! As the Rambam teaches, we are supposed to anticipate the arrival of Moshiach as if he can come any day?

No problem: The Ba'al HaTurim lived in the sixth millennium anyhow. Furthermore, the projection he makes does not preclude the idea that Moshiach can always come "early" if the world would merit it. Nevertheless, in Ya'akov's words the Ba'al HaTurim has found a very interesting allusion to the inescapable reality that he did not come early, and that he must come sometime in this millennium. The question is, why?

SHABBOS DAY:

I have oxen and donkeys, sheep, servants . . . (Bereishis 32:6)

I HAVE OXEN AND DONKEYS: He did not mention other such species in order to allude to Yosef (who is compared to an ox), who is the opposer of Eisav . . . (Ba'al HaTurim)

True to the theme, the Ba'al HaTurim has found more allusions to the messianic era, defining Ya'akov's historical confrontation with his brother in these terms. It is unlikely that Ya'akov's words were hints for Eisav, who would not have believed them anyhow. More than likely they are for us - all the generations of Jews that have followed - to understand the undercurrent of history and how it is going to play itself out.

Furthermore, these words, the Ba'al HaTurim reveals, are equal in gematria to the words, "Yosef has been born." And, seeing that Yosef, according to Kabbalistic tradition, is the one who corresponds to the sixth sefirah, Yesod, which is considered to be the "cosmic DNA" for the sixth millennium, it

stands to reason that the redemption should finally occur in "his" millennium.

However, that is all very well and fine to say, but Yosef was one of the tribes - one of the LOST tribes - and Eisav was and is, more than ever before - one of the most powerful nations on earth RIGHT NOW. How can Yosef, or any of his descendants, ever measure up to him and actually overcome him? The answer to that question is alluded to in one of the shortest books of all of the prophets.

The verse says:

And the house of Ya'akov shall be fire, and the house of Yosef a flame, and the house of Eisav straw. (Ovadia 1:18)

The fact that Ya'akov is called "fire" and that Yosef is called "flame" is nothing new. Their dynamic personalities and passion to fulfil the will of G-d can only be described in these terms. However, what is novel is the idea of reducing all of Eisavian culture and might to a term that denotes the ultimate in vulnerability and frailty: Straw.

(Try telling that to the American generals who are preparing troops for a possible invasion of Iraq, or the combined forces of the United Nations!)

Certainly, that is not the way it appears in real life, and when Eisav's descendants flex their military muscle, the enemy shudders. Even allies, such as Israel, reign themselves in for fear of earning the wrath of that part of Eisav which, for the time being, can tolerate a partnership with descendants of Ya'akov.

However, theoretically, there is something inherently wrong - VERY wrong - in all of this. For one, Eisav can never be more powerful than G-d Himself, and G-d has already rejected Eisav and aligned himself with Ya'akov. Therefore, what's to fear? After all, as we saw in Egypt, when G-d says go, the enemy of the Jewish people, no matter HOW powerful they have become, is gone. Next to G-d, Eisav and all of his armies, even if all of them from throughout history were to stand side-by-side combat-ready, they might as well be straw.

Nevertheless, practically-speaking, that is not the case, and seemingly, to act in any other way is not only foolhardy, but even suicidal, as Rebi Yosi ben Kisma told his student, Rebi Chananya ben Teradyon (Avodah Zarah 18a). The latter had been risking his life to teach Torah in public, and his teacher warned him that, the fact that G-d had allowed the Romans to destroy the Temple was indication that they were on the upswing at that time in history. To ignore this reality would, and did, result in his student's death.

What is the answer? What then, is the underlying meaning of the prophet's words?

SEUDOS SHILSHIS:

These lights we kindle upon the miracles, the wonders, the salvations, and the battles which You

performed for our forefathers . . . (Naneiros Halalu of Chanukah)

Fire is an amazing thing. It is a phenomenal reality that expresses, simultaneously, both weakness and strength, if that is possible. On one hand, fire is able to destroy the hardest of materials, as we witnessed over a year ago with the complete and utter destruction of the World Trade Center - of which there is no longer any trace of hundreds of millions of dollars of steel, wood, glass, plastic, etc., and physical substances.

Yet, one can put their hand right through fire, as if it is not physical at all. It might be hot, but it is not solid. Water at least has palpable density and can even weigh a tremendous amount. But fire - it dances from its source as if only an apparition, an illusion of light that is noticeable only because of its beautiful color and the intense heat it gives off. Yet, it can burn through just about anything as if it were - and this is the important point - as if it were only straw.

This is a very important, but often understated part of the message of the Ner Shel Chanukah. As we say in "Al HaNissim" on Chanukah:

"You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the wanton in the hands of the diligent students of Torah."

Just like that? Out of nowhere? No question G-d often performs miracles for reasons we may not be aware of, but not usually; not in cases such as the one Mattisyahu found himself in at the time the Greek army had been tightening the screws on Torah-observant Jews. No, usually we have to initiate the process, prime the pump, if you will, before G-d kicks in with a full-blown, redemption-capacity miracle.

In the time of the Chashmonai, the initiation was Mattisyahu's burning passion to sanctify the Name of G-d, after a Jew profaned It by offering an impure animal as a sacrifice on a pagan altar. This was, indisputably, the "spark" that ignited the "fire" that "burned up" all that lay in its path, including the mighty Greek army of that time.

Had Mattisyahu made the calculation regarding a rebellion against the mightier Greek army, he might not have ever responded as he did. But then again, such calculations are not the work or interest of zealots, particularly zealots for G-d, such as Pinchas, the son of Aharon HaKohen - a direct descendant of Yosef. The same Yosef who, as Rashi explains in this week's parshah, stood unafraid between his mother and the evil Eisav, regardless of height or might.

Thus, the Chanukah candles say each year, as they burn brightly, transparent yet powerful: When the passion of truth burns, and the honor of Torah is all that counts, obstacles might as well be straw. For, it is such passion and fire of the heart that draws down an even more intense light, G-d's light, the light of redemption, eliminating anything and everything evil in its path like fire that burns through straw.

And that, as we will now discuss, b"H, has everything to do with Yosef, chayn, and Chanukah.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Kislev & Chanukah, Part 2

G-d called out to the man, "Where are you?" (Bereishis 3:9)

The Hebrew term is "aiyekah," though in reality, the word does not exist anywhere else in Tanach the way the vowels are placed here. Nevertheless, the important thing here, says the Midrash, is that the numerical value of the four letters, alef-yud-chof-heh, is 36.

The number 36 is important for a variety of reasons, most of which are Kabbalistic. However, one reason emerges from the Jerusalem Talmud, which reveals that the original light with which G-d made creation, though hidden away on the first day of creation, shone for Adam HaRishon just before he left the Garden of Eden, for exactly THIRTY-SIX hours in total.

This was not a mere coincidence, especially at such a crucial time when everything that happened, by definition, was going to affect ALL of history. Thus, the number 36 is said to represent this supernal light, which the Talmud says G-d hid for the righteous people in the Time-to-Come, after the evil people no longer exist to take advantage of it (Chagigah 12a). There are thirty-six righteous people in every generation, the Talmud teaches, to benefit from this holy light. (Succah 45b)

Thus, if aiyekah equals 36, which represents the Hidden Light of creation, then G-d was really inquiring about the light itself when He posed His historical question. The fact that He phrased it in terms of the whereabouts of Adam himself is neither problematic nor confusing, because they - Adam's soul and the light of creation - were in fact one and the same thing.

Thus, when G-d asked Adam, "Where are you?" He was really asking, where is the ESSENCE of who you are, your soul that used to shine so brightly with the light of thirty-six, before you ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? G-d was asking, "Where is your chayn?"

That is the source of a person's chayn, his soul, which like fire does not seem to exist and yet, is so unbelievably powerful. Indeed, so powerful that when it is allowed to do its thing uninhibited, it seems to make the body do things that are, well, body-defying.

Thus, the Talmud, when speaking about Pinchas' heroic and zealous deed mentions that it took 12 miracles to make Pinchas successful (Sanhedrin 82b). TWELVE MIRACLES! That's a lot of Heavenly help to make sure he did the deed and got out alive! That means that he took a tremendous risk in even attempting his zealous act.

One has to wonder: If Pinchas had known how many miracles it would take to be successful, would he have even set out to act as he did in the first place? The answer is, yes, of course. Yes, because it was Pinchas' soul that was driving him, and souls don't make such calculations, only bodies do. In fact, it is all the bodies that stand back and gawk in the end after witnessing such heroic action and

think to themselves, "Wow, I could never do that!"

And, they are absolutely right. WE could NEVER do that.

Do you think it was us who gave over the many to the few, or the mighty to the weak, or the impure to the pure. No! The prayer said it was G-d Who did that. WE just wanted it to happen. And when we wanted it to happen so badly that we began to act as if it would, that's when G-d entered the picture and filled the world with His light and our history with His miracles.

Now, perhaps more than ever, we need to understand this concept. For, we live in a millennium of passion. The sixth millennium, which corresponds to Yosef HaTzaddik, also corresponds to the sefirah called "Yesod", or "Foundation." It is the part of the sefiros that represents that which joins things together, ultimately the concept of relationship. It has been the underlying theme of this millennium, particularly of recent history.

However, there is the passion of the body and there is the passion of the soul. Until a person has achieved personal rectification and purification, each passion seems to act in the opposite direction of the other, and thus the fulfillment of one usually comes at the cost of the fulfillment of the other.

In pursuit of the passions of the body, one tends to believe heavily in the physical and its limitations, and to create a lifestyle to accommodate such a point of view. Sacrifices for spiritual goals are often seen as highly impractical and even downright impossible.

However, whereas physical passions can result in both spiritual and physical limitations, spiritual passions result in going beyond one's physical and spiritual limitations. Why? Because, as the Talmud says, "If a person comes to purify himself, Heaven helps him" (Shabbos 104a). In other words, and as the Vilna Gaon points out, a little spiritual effort on our part invokes major help on Heaven's part.

That is when the miracles begin. That is when we shine with the light of creation. That is when our soul emerges from the inside to the outside, and that is when our chayn returns, just as it did for Yosef all through his life.

That is precisely what the Ner Shel Chanukah comes to teach us.

Have a great Shabbos.
A freilechen Chanukah,
Pinchas Winston

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