

# FROM THE NILE TO DENIAL

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

## FRIDAY NIGHT:

*Moshe and Aharon assembled the people before the rock, and said, "Listen you rebels! Will water come out of this rock?" (Bamidbar 20:10)*

There is a joke that goes like this:

**Question:** Why didn't Pharaoh believe Moshe and his threats?

**Answer:** Because he was in de-Nile.

Even though the Jewish people left the land of the Nile, they seemed to have gone to the land of denial. This week's parshah is a sobering look at how the Jewish people ignored the reality of what actually was, and what that cost us. For, when Moshe Rabbeinu hit the rock instead of speaking to it, says the Leshem, it closed the door on the era during which a single individual could have brought the Final Redemption until the time of Moshiach. This is because the actions of the leaders are directed by Heaven based upon the merit of the people they lead (Maharshah, Gittin 56b).

Whatever led Moshe to hit the rock instead of speaking to it, and to refer to the complainers as rebellors, was a function of where the people were holding and what they had been doing. And what they had been doing was denying reality and that cost them the Final Redemption in their lifetime.

This needs explanation.

Humans are remarkable beings, for better or for worse. We have a tremendous ability to adapt to circumstances, which is both good and bad. Adaptability is crucial for dealing with crisis situations and change, two components that seem to be a part of life in this world regardless of how we feel about it. Whereas animals that are forced to migrate to other parts of the world may die out as a result, human beings adjust and make the best of the situation, partly of function of having been formed from the "dust of the earth" from all parts of the world.

Human beings can adjust to crisis situations. We can get over shock. We can witness the unbelievable destruction of the World Trade Center, suffer through it, then clean it up, re-build on the site, and go back to life as if it had been only a theoretical disaster. However, the people who lost loved ones are constantly reminded of the reality of what took place.

As humans we walk a line that allows us either to cope with reality or to ignore it. If we allowed the effects of every crisis to linger, we would be unable to get out of bed in the morning and face a new day. Thus, the Talmud says that G-d built into man forgetfulness after 12 months, so that he would not mourn the loss of loved ones forever.

On the other hand, if we don't let crises affect us at all, or if we don't mourn, and if we live in denial, then we can miss their warning signs and become vulnerable to crises from which we will not be able to recover, G-d forbid. We've seen enough of that over our long history, and we see it all the time in our personal lives and in those of others.

You can feel the tension between the two extremes. And you meet people everyday that go in one direction or the other, though we are often blind to it in our own lives. This is what the Talmud says: A prisoner cannot free himself from his own prison (Brochos ?), meaning that subjectivity about our own lives lessens our ability to do for ourselves what we can so easily do for others. This is why the mishnah tells us to make a rav and acquire a friend (Pirkei Avos ?) - two sources of objectivity that help us through the shackles of subjectivity and do what is objectively correct.

It is the only way to survive. It is the only way to thrive.

### **SHABBOS DAY:**

*Moshe turned and descended the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand . . . As he approached the camp, he saw the calf and the dancing. (Shemos 32:15, 19)*

The golden calf was and is the very symbol of denial. A calf represents playfulness, youth - abandonment to the pleasures of physical life without worrying about the reality of tomorrow. Adults know that "you can either pay us now or pay us later," and that "everyone has to pay the pied piper," but children believe there is a way to cheat him and even rob death, or they just don't think about it all.

Gold represents the sparkling beauty of the physical world. It is the glitter of life in Olam HaZeh -(this world). Because as a commodity gold is so stable, and as a material it weathers much, but it symbolizes eternity to some degree. Thus, a golden calf is to eternalize the life of a child, an embodiment of the fountain of youth, of indulgence in the here- and-now as if tomorrow will never come, though it must, and therefore it was also the symbol of Egyptian society.

The Parah Adumah, on the other hand, says Rashi, is the antidote for this. A society committed to the trappings of the present and the pleasures of physical life can only result in the end, in death and destruction. A parah is a heifer -(an adult cow), and red, unlike gold, represents physical life that is transitory, a sobering look at the vulnerability of mortal man. Because of this, the Red Heifer is the very cure for death and the spiritual impurity it imparts.

In fact, the Brisker Rav taught that the Parah Adumah is an important key to the Final Redemption and Golus Edom - Exile of the Red One, Eisav. The Midrash says that when Eisav sold the birthright

to Ya'akov for food, he gave away his portion in the World-to-Come. It didn't interest him at the time, being concerned only about the here-and-now, and thus the golden calf is also the symbol of his very approach to life in this world. The final exile finds the Jew living according to this approach to life, and the Final Redemption comes to free him from it (if he'll let go of in time).

Thus, there were only to be ten red heifers throughout history, nine of which have already been found and used in the Temple service. To find a tenth - the number that corresponds to the perfection of Creation, is tantamount to Moshiach being here and revealed.

Furthermore, the Parah Adumah is the symbol of service of G-d in the face of paradox. As it is well known, there was an aspect of the procedure of spiritual purification that does not make sense to us: the sprinkling of the prepared waters that defiled the priest at the same time he used them to purify the person who had been defiled by the dead. Even the great Shlomo HaMelech was unable to unlock the secret of that one.

However, one day we will merit that knowledge after Moshiach comes and Creation is spiritually transformed. Simply put, the difference between a chok and a mishpat - a statute such as Parah Adumah and a judgment such as the sin of stealing, is that the former is a description of a higher level of reality than the one to which we presently relate. A mishpat makes sense because it belongs to our present level of spiritual recognition.

For example, a secular Jew looks at a man wearing Tefillin and says, "WHAT FOR?" What he is really asking is, "What good does that do a person in this reality?" He doesn't relate to the mitzvah or mitzvos at all, because his perception of reality does not reveal to him what is lacking from Creation that Tefillin comes to provide.

However, he doesn't steal because he knows that a society cannot survive if it is founded on theft. He doesn't murder because he knows that it is a destructive way of life that puts his own life at peril. On the other hand, he may punish murderers with capital punishment because he sees the need for a serious deterrent to murder. He'll even give charity because he appreciates the need to support the needy to allow society to function more smoothly.

But Tefillin, Tzitzus, or even Shabbos?

Then one day, for whatever reason, he reads something, or sits through some speech, or speaks to some person and comes to understand a detail about a life he never knew, but which he is able to confirm from his own experiences. Following up, he learns a bit more, aware that he is becoming wiser but unaware that he is also growing spiritually. And though at first it may be subtle, eventually he realizes that the new knowledge is forcing a paradigm shift.

As he ascends spiritually, a process referred to by the Torah as teshuvah - (returning), he will view the same reality differently. He will see things that were always there, but which he had been blind to previously. He will relate to things that at one time he saw no purpose for, and reject things that

he once thought were important or, at least, harmless. And though at first, the process will be purely intellectual, eventually it will translate into bodily action and a change of life.

There will come a moment of truth.

### **SEUDOS SHLISHIS:**

*The entire nation of Israel reached the Tzin desert in the first month. The people camped in Kadesh, and that is where Miriam died and was buried. (Bamidbar 20:1)*

Thus, a mishpat is understandable because it is a description of the reality in which we already live, or at least one to which we can grow into by learning Torah. They are "placed" before us. A chok, on the other hand, is a detail about life in this world that belongs to a realm of consciousness to which we cannot yet relate or achieve. Moshe Rabbeinu was able to, but no one else has, not even Shlomo HaMelech.

In a sense, a chok says, "You can't have everything now. You can have your cake now, but you'll have to wait to eat it."

It is the antithesis of the golden calf, which was unbridled abandonment to the present, which was about eating the cake now. Had Adam HaRishon waited only THREE hours until Shabbos before eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, he would have eaten with G-d's blessing and ushered in the Final Redemption. Yes, the present is a gift, but more importantly, it is the stage on which we prove our commitment to the well-being of the future. It is the time that we prove our level of responsibility, which is usually a sacrifice in the present for the fruits of the future.

Thus, what follows the section of the Parah Adumah is the death of Miriam, the righteous and prophetic sister of Moshe Rabbeinu. Her name comes from the word mar which means bitter, because she was born in the midst of the bitterness of the Egyptian oppression. Her very being was rooted in the hardship of the present.

Yet, it was she who inspired the birth of Moshe Rabbeinu, convincing her father and mother to remarry in spite of the decree against Jewish males. And, it was she who saw in Moshe, even before he was conceived, the potential to redeem from the present state of sorrow into the future some eighty years later. And it was Miriam who nurtured the future in the present while everyone else was sunken in sorrow.

The Midrash brings down when Amram separated from Yocheved, Miriam, then only a little girl, said to her father, "Who knows if the redeemer might come from your union." And what happened? Moshe was born. Miriam saw the Big Picture and as a result she became a partner with G-d in His master plan.

She didn't know when or how - the redemption remained a chok to her, but she believed and was decidedly patient.

Thus, the well of Miriam disappeared with her death. The well that followed the Jewish people in the desert had been in her merit, a result of her willingness to accept the present and to work with it on the way to building a brighter future. It was a symbol of her very self-sacrifice that led to the redemption from Egyptian oppression, and of what it means to pay attention to the signs of G-d and to be patient for their fulfillment.

For, the well had not disappeared merely to make it clear that it had been in Miriam's merit in the first place, but to transfer from Miriam to the Jewish people her special trait in preparation for entering Eretz Yisroel, which the nation was about to do. The incident of the rock was to bring out through her death what had been achieved previously through her life. Had the Jewish people been receptive to the message and not in a state of denial, they would not have squandered the last chance for Moshe Rabbeinu, a single individual, to bring the Final Redemption into reality at that time.

### **MELAVE MALKAH:**

*G-d told Moshe and Aharon, "Since you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me before the Children of Israel, you will therefore not bring this people into the land which I have given to them." This [was named] the "Waters of Merivah" because the Children of Israel argued with G-d [there], and He was sanctified through them. (Bamidbar 20:12)*

Amazing, isn't it? It wasn't bad enough that we doubted G-d ten times and were slapped with a forty-year fine. It wasn't enough that Korach doubted Moshe and was duly swallowed up by the earth with his followers. One parshah later the Jewish people go right ahead and express their doubt all over again. When will they get with the program already!!

And, what exactly IS the program?

It is the blueprint for 6000 years of history (and beyond), engraved in stone since the beginning of Creation. It is The Master Plan that is determined to reach fulfillment with or without our help, as Mordechai told Esther,

Mordechai said to Esther, "Do not imagine that you will be able to escape in the king's palace any more than the rest of the Jews. For if you continue to remain silent at a time like this, relief and salvation will come to the Jews from another place, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether it was for such a time as this that you attained the royal position!" (Esther 4:13)

As Kabbalah explains, the end of history (including all the parts in between) was set into motion from the very first moment it began by the word Bereishis meaning bara shis: He created the six days and six millennia at the very first moment in Creation. Yet, in spite of its immutability, sufficient room was left for man to exercise his free will to do . . . to do what?

To either learn about the master plan, or to ignore it. To accept reality, or to deny it. To work with G-d

in the holy role as His partner, or to abdicate such responsibility by becoming swallowed up in the temporal pleasures and realities of this physical world. To turn to Moshe Rabbeinu and say,

"Hey Moshe, you probably already know that the well has ceased to bring forth water. But, it was in the merit of Miriam, and if your righteous sister taught us anything at all, it was to be patient with G-d, to know that everything He does is for our good and well-being, and that all of life is a test of our belief in HIM. She taught us about paradigm shifts and the need to work with them and not against them, when they lead to good and at the same time, to adjust to the loss of physical comfort. So, we're not going to complain, but simply wait over here while G-d works out the details of our next supply of life supporting water."

This, of course, is, or at least should be, the underlying attitude of a Jew who wants to survive in Eretz Yisroel, the land of Hashgochah Pratis. Listen to this:

There is a tradition that, at the time of the arrival of Moshiach, wonderful things will happen for Jews everywhere. On the actual day that they arrive from the Diaspora . . . the walls of Yerushalayim will be replaced. It will also be the day of the re-building of the Temple, which will be built from exquisite stones and gems. Once the dead are resurrected, they will become transformed and will have very lofty natures. However, the same type of transformation will occur for the Jews who remained alive [in Eretz Yisroel], and their bodies will be like that of Adam HaRishon before his sin, and like Moshe Rabbeinu's. They will become so spiritual that they will be able to fly like eagles, which will astound the redeemed exiles. Upon witnessing this, the "Diaspora Jews" will become upset, and they will complain to Moshiach, "Are we not Jews like them? Why do they merit to fly and live in an elevated spiritual state, and not us?" However, Moshiach will answer them, "It is quite well known that G-d works measure-for-measure. Those who lived in the Diaspora and made efforts and sacrifices to elevate themselves by moving to the Holy Land merited purity of soul. They were not so concerned about their finances and health. They traveled over vast lands and crossed seas, not paying attention to the possibilities of drowning, being robbed along the way, or being taken captive by some strange foreign ruler. Being that they placed priority of their spirit over materialism and physicality, they merit, measure-for-measure, to be elevated to this lofty spiritual plane. On the other hand, you who also had opportunities to go up to Israel, but remained hesitant and reluctant, enamored instead with your materialistic status, making materialism a higher priority than spiritual growth, therefore, measure-for-measure, remain physical." (Tuv HaAretz, Praise Of Those Living In Eretz Yisroel When Moshiach Arrives)

However, instead, the Jewish people dealt with Moshe Rabbeinu on the level of mishpat, which made sense to them, with what was tangible to them at that time. They lacked vision, and worst of all, they lacked trust in G-d. All their Torah learning had failed to take them the distance: if they couldn't relate to the conceptual reality of Eretz Yisroel - which is the level of chok, then how could they possibly relate to the physical reality of Eretz Yisroel.

After 40 years they had merely left the land of the Nile for the land of denial. And as G-d talks with us once again through current events, increasing the volume of His voice, so-to-speak, and as we find ourselves confronting new paradigm shifts (that are really only old ones resurfacing), we have to ask ourselves, "Where do we hold?"

Have a great Shabbos  
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