

THE REMAINING CURSE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

This parashah sheet is dedicated leuie nishmas to Rochel bas Mordechai Zechariah, z"l, a.k.a. Ruth Sylvia Woloz Kaye, on her yartzheit - an honest woman with a very good heart.

FRIDAY NIGHT:

It will be when you enter the Land that Hashem, your G-d, gives you as an inheritance, and you possess it, and dwell in it, that you shall take of the first of every fruit of the ground . . . (Devarim 26:1-2)

Talk about split personalities. This week's parshah begins talking about the first fruits from Eretz Yisroel, a happy event, and how G-d and the Jewish people are inseparable. Then it quickly shifts into a new mode that brings with it a long list of curses for not obeying the Torah and walking in the ways of G-d. In the past, some congregations found this parshah so emotionally overwhelming that they would skip it during the course of the weekly Torah readings.

It is a very heavy parshah to be sure, one that, ironically is read two weeks before Rosh Hashanah, when we are judged for such things. Tragically, most of what is found in these curses has occurred to the Jewish people at one time or another throughout the long course of Jewish history. The Holocaust alone saw many such "curses" come true on a daily basis.

The final curse mentioned is both a curious and frightening one:

G-d will return you to Egypt in ships, on the road of which I said to you, "You shall never again see it!" And there you will offer yourself for sale to your enemies as slaves and maidservants - but there will be no buyer! (Devarim 28:68)

Some questions need to be asked here, for there seems to be some inconsistency in this statement. On one hand, who cares what the posuk really means! Following on the heels of the previous easily understood and witnessed curses, we can assume that this curse, whatever it means, has to be the worst of all. But, on the other hand, knowing the true intent of the posuk might yield important insights that can, perhaps, either mitigate or avoid such a curse altogether.

To begin with, we did not leave Egypt on ships, so why would we return there on ships? The posuk seems to be stressing not only that we can be returned to Egypt after all we went through to leave it, but even stresses the mode of return. We left Egypt on foot and on donkeys; why must we return there on ships?

And, if we return to Egypt, G-d forbid, on ships - a different path of return than leaving, why does the

posuk then mention that road upon which we left Egypt, the road we previously saw, and about which we were told we would never see it again? Furthermore, what does the posuk add by first telling us that we will offer ourselves as slaves to our enemies, who, presumably, would have no need to buy us, and then that there will be no buyers, as if to add insult to injury?

After all the curses the Jewish people have had to endure, that is the last and ultimate one.

And finally, the only time we see the Jewish people being told that they will not see something again, it is here:

Moshe told the people, "Do not fear! Stand fast and see the salvation of G-d that He will perform for you today; for as you have seen Egypt today, you shall not see them ever again!" (Shemos 14:13)

Assuming that Moshe was referring to the Egyptians about to be drowned in the Red Sea any moment, surely that was the last we'd ever see of them again, at least alive! It doesn't mention anything about the path we took from Egypt to freedom . . .

So, Rashi already partially answers the question when he writes:

Because they will decree upon you the doom of death and extermination. (Rashi, Devarim 28:68)

In other words, a Final Solution. Enslavement of the Jewish people will not be good enough for the enemy, as it was in Roman times, or forced conversion to other religions, as it was in the time of the Spanish Inquisition, etc. True, the enemy may first work the Jews of that time to death as the Nazis (yemach shemam), did. But, the final goal of the enemy will be nothing short of complete and utter extermination of every last Jew they can get their hands on.

Will they succeed, G-d forbid? We have already seen that try as they have and try as they do, they cannot. For, as the commentators point out, Bris Avos, the covenant made with the Forefathers, is a guarantee that a remnant of the Jewish people will always survive.

A remnant?

Small consolation for those who are not part of it!

SHABBOS DAY:

He will bring back upon you all the sufferings of Egypt, of which you were terrified . . . (Devarim 28:60)

Regarding the issue of the boats, the Sifsei Chachamim comments on Rashi's insertion of the words "in captivity" the following way:

He inserted the words "in captivity" because otherwise it is not a curse . . . This was a bigger curse than going by foot since they drowned themselves. (Sifsei Chachamim, q.v. B'onios)

In other words, the captured Jews jumped overboard in order to drown themselves rather than face what awaited them at the end of their journey. We find similar accounts after the destruction of the

Second Temple, where young Jewish boys and girls jumped ship in order to avoid being forced to do that which the Torah forbade.

According to the Targum Yonason, the boats being spoken about would travel the very Red Sea the Jewish people crossed to escape the Egyptians. Perhaps this is why Moshe referred to not seeing Egypt again as opposed to not seeing the Egyptians, since the latter drowned while the former remained intact, in some form or another. Thus, the curse of traveling by ship to Egypt was having to return there through an overly natural way along a path we had left by supernatural means, a complete reversal of events.

When could this happen? As a Jew living in Eretz Yisroel, it is too frightening to think about the possibility of falling into the hands of Arab enemies who have no problem producing Arab versions of The Protocols of The Elders. Not that I believe such a thing could happen, G-d forbid, but then again, they didn't think the First Temple could ever be destroyed either!

That is why I find particular comfort in the words of the Ba'al HaTurim, who reveals the following:

G-d will return you . . . The gematria [of the Hebrew words] are [equal to] the words: This will be in the days of Yirmiyahu. (Ba'al HaTurim, Devarim 28:68)

Really? Well that was a long time ago - during the time of the destruction of the FIRST Temple, to be precise, some 2,426 years ago. Phew!

But if it was, then why is it the last-mentioned curse? It should have been mentioned earlier in the list of bad things to happen for straying from a Torah way of life, and not at the end of the list, implying that it is the worst of all of the curses!

Here are two possibilities: 1) either the curses are listed out of order and some of the previously mentioned ones happened later in time, and perhaps they can still occur at this late stage of history, G-d forbid. Or, 2) it was the last of the curses to be fulfilled, which begs the question: What has been happening to us since then, and why?

There is no question that exile from Eretz Yisroel after the destruction of the First Temple was horrible, but it was no free ride after the destruction of the Second Temple either, or all the years in between. The Crusades and pogroms brought unimaginable suffering to the Jewish people for decades, if not centuries. And, of course, the Holocaust and the methodical process of torture and extermination of Jews is still so fresh in the collective mind of the Jewish people that even those of us who were born after it, still feel its historical impact to a serious degree.

Have the curses been repeating themselves throughout history? We know that history repeats itself; do the curses repeat as well? If so, then the words of the Ba'al HaTurim are not so comforting. After all, returning to Egypt in captivity upon the waters of the Red Sea could still remain a possibility, G-d forbid. Or, is there something different about the Jewish people and history since the destruction of the First Temple, and all the suffering we have undergone throughout the centuries?

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

Even any illness and any blow that is not written in this Book of the Torah, G-d will bring upon you . . .
(Devarim 28:61)

In the year 2448/1313 BCE from Creation, a very amazing thing happened: G-d turned 3,000,000 Jews into a nation of prophets, beginning a unique period in history called the "Period of Prophecy." It lasted exactly 1,000 years, ending about 100 years after the destruction of the First Temple, which was destroyed in the year 423 BCE. With few Jews still willing to listen to the warnings of their prophets, G-d ceased to talk to man.

Until that time, says the Ramban (Parashas Behar), one did not visit a doctor when one became ill, one went to a prophet. The physical illness was obviously the result of a spiritual illness, and it took a prophet to explain to the person what needed tikun, and in what area of life he needed to do teshuvah. However, with the close of prophecy, people went to doctors instead when they became ill, not for a prophetic explanation of what caused their illness, but for a physical prescription to heal their ailment.

What is the point? In the beginning, an illness was a great way to communicate to an individual that he needed to do teshuvah, and a prophet was a great person to turn to in order to understand why. Without a prophet to explain the nature of the illness, what good did getting sick accomplish, other than being a punishment for a cause for which a person may or may not have been aware?

The answer is and always has been tikun, but of a different nature. Whereas before the remedy for the illness or calamity was good mussar, giving the person a chance to consciously participate in his own tikun, today the tikun is performed by Heaven with or without our understanding, and with or without our direct and conscious involvement. We can try and match up the punishing effect with some cause we know we created, but during this period of hester panim, we can never know for certain if we are correct. When we turned our back on prophecy, we turned our back on the right to know what Heaven was doing, and why.

So, perhaps, the curses listed in the Torah in this week's parshah, and first in Parashas Bechukosai, applied to the generations that enjoyed prophecy. They were signs provided to generations that had a sure way of confirming what was happening to them, and why. This allowed them to take responsibility for their own teshuvah and to work more directly with G-d in bringing Creation to completion, a phenomenal ability that was taken from us when prophecy was denied to mankind.

It's no longer relevant in our generation to be taken by ship back to Egypt by way of the Red Sea, so that we can mourn how we once crossed the same path to freedom through a great miracle. How many Jews today deny that such a miracle ever took place, and how many of them could ever make the connection between what is happening today and what happened back then? That level of tikun is no longer relevant to us today; we are no longer included in the calculations of Heaven as to what tikun is necessary and why. We just go through them and do the best we can to make sense of

them, but knowing, nevertheless, that tikun is indeed occurring and in the best way possible for our generation.

MELAVE MALKAH:

G-d will scatter you among the peoples, from the end of the earth until the end of the earth . . . (Devarim 28:64)

It is a chidush, that is, a new idea. And, the following example is also a great chidush that I hope will be understood for what it is saying.

By the rules of the Torah, the Holocaust had to be a tikun. Millions of questions arose out of the Holocaust, and most will not be answered until Yemos HaMoshiach and onward, if at all, but that does not lessen the fact that it was a great tikun.

One of the greatest questions that emerged from the countless ashes of the Holocaust for Torah-believing Jews was, what could the generation have done that was so bad to warrant such a terrible destruction of so many Jews, in such a brutal way and with such hatred? And if it was accumulative, was it fair for the last generation to suffer for the sins of the previous generations? What could have angered Heaven so to have shown such wrath against a generation that also resulted in the deaths of at least 1,000,000 innocent children, and many of the greatest righteous people of the generation?

It's the judgment aspect we have difficulty with, especially since we had no one to ask about what was going on at the time, and so many Jews were too assimilated to listen to any message that may have filtered down from the top. To be sure, Divine judgment was involved, but who are we to guess to whom, how, and why?

On the other hand, let's say Moshiach comes sometime over the next few years. How many years after the Holocaust would that be? About 75 years, or one lifetime?

Now, suppose that the souls of the Jewish people around 1940 needed more than one lifetime to rectify themselves before Moshiach comes, some perhaps two, three, or maybe even four lifetimes. However, according to the Divine plan, there just wasn't that much time left for even two more gilgulim (reincarnations), and therefore things had to speed up - a lot. A lot of people, as a result, had to die around the same time.

However, death alone is not always enough. Perhaps a person dies young, G-d forbid, and returns in a new a gilgul. That does not necessarily mean that the new one will be his last one, because there may be more tikun necessary than can be accomplished in a single lifetime. Perhaps it will take several lifetimes to bring about the size of rectification Heaven is looking for from that particular soul.

Unless, of course, the person undergoes yesurim (suffering) - a word derived from the word mussar,

usually associated with the heart wrenching type of chastisement that leads to spiritual growth. The more yesurim one undergoes, the more complete his tikun can be in a single lifetime, and therefore, the purer he can come back in his next gilgul, so pure, in fact, that it can actually be his final one.

All of a sudden, we are no longer dealing with judgment and punishment of individuals, but of history. According to this idea, it is the lack of time remaining in advance of Moshiach that necessitated such a severe historical response to where the Jewish people were holding in the 1930s. That is how children and righteous people could also suffer and be taken before their times, and in such an violent manner.

This doesn't undo anything the Holocaust brought about, or lessen the pain of those who endured it, or the losses of families through it. All it does is show how the Holocaust emphasized our inability to connect up human cause with Divine effect, but more importantly, how tikun takes place no matter what we do, and even the worst things are for our good.

Perhaps the only real curse to have survived until our time is our inability to see this and to actively participate in our own tikun as we once did during the time of the prophets. But, if Moshiach comes soon, and may it be so, then we may have confirmation of this idea, and the terrible black hole at the end of Jewish/world history will be revealed and sealed for only good.

Ksivah v'chasimah tova, and a great Shabbos,
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