

TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH...

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

Moshe spoke to the leaders of the tribes to tell the Children of Israel. (Bamidbar 30:2)

We are now in the three weeks once again. It is a cyclical thing, right? It comes around each year at the same time, just as Pesach does in its season, and Succos does in its time. However, there is a difference: whereas Pesach is a yearly celebration that we anticipate with excitement as we should, Tisha b'Av is a day that we dread and with good reason. Whereas the 15th day of Nissan is an opportunity to repeat a wonderful national experience and to grow from it, the ninth of Av is a day to avoid a similar national experience.

Indeed, the three weeks come around each year to remind us what we have yet to accomplish, and what we have failed to complete. When Moshiach comes, and may he do so in our time, Pesach will continue to be Pesach, at least until Year 6000. When Moshiach comes, Tisha b'Av and all the other fast days will be turned into days of joy and holidays.

There is a famous story of someone who came to the Chofetz Chaim for a brochah. He was moving to America and he made a point of stopping by the great and holy Chofetz Chaim for a blessing that would protect him from the elements of the "desert," as America was called in those days, being devoid any real Torah Judaism. The Chofetz Chaim received him and asked:

"Why are you not a kohen?"

Bewildered by the question, the man answered somewhat confused,

"Because my father was not a kohen?"

"And why was he not a kohen," the Chofetz Chaim persisted, leaving the man even more in doubt about what the great sage wanted to hear from him. He had come to the Chofetz Chaim for a blessing, and instead received an unusual interrogation.

The man thought for a moment, but could only answer,

"Because his father was not a kohen."

But the Chofetz Chaim asked further, "Yes, but why was HE not a kohen?"

Now the man was confused and feeling helpless, and could only answer,

"I don't know why."

Finally, the Chofetz Chaim revealed what he was thinking, and the basis of his blessing,

"Because at Mt. Sinai, when Moshe Rabbeinu called out to the Jewish people after the sin of the golden calf, 'Whoever is for G-d, come to me!' only the tribe of Levi answered the call. The firstborn sons, who had been the designated kohanim at that time, did not rally around Moshe, and because of that they lost the right to be G-d's chosen priests, replaced instead by the zealous Levi'im. Learn from this mistake. Next time, when the call goes out to rally around the banner of Torah for the sake of G-d, do not remain idle, but come out with enthusiasm."

The Chofetz Chaim was making more than one point. The realities that we accept to be fact are not always as they seem to be. For example, everyone knows that the root of Tisha b'Av was the sin of the spies. As the Talmud says, for crying over nothing we have been forced to cry over something, the destruction of two Temples and a long and often bitter exile.

But the truth is that, though Tisha b'Av is indeed rooted in the sin of the spies, the other truth is that it is in this week's parshah that the sin was polished to perfection, so-to-speak. And Moshe makes mention of this:

Moshe answered the descendants of Gad and Reuven, "Should your brothers go to war while you live in peace here? Why would you discourage the Israelite nation from crossing into the land which God has given to them? That's exactly what your ancestors did when I sent them from Kadesh-Barnea to scout the land. (Bamidbar 32:6-8)

Had the two-and-a-half tribes of Reuven, Gad, and Menashe settled into the land with the rest of the nation, then the requisite number of 600,000 Jewish males over the age of 20 would have settled the land, and THAT, says the Vilna Gaon, would have neutralized the Sitra Achra for good. It would have been the tikun for the spies, and no Tisha b'Av would have been necessary, except as a holiday to celebrate the arrival of the Final Redemption. Therefore, the Three Weeks are just as much a reminder about that episode as was the original one.

SHABBOS DAY:

Give to a wise man and he will get wiser; teach a righteous man and he will increase in learning. (Mishlei 9:9)

The problem with the spies was not that they were nervous about entering Eretz Yisroel, or that they had concerns about how to make a living there. They were only human and new at this Eretz Yisroel business, and G-d certainly understood that, as He understands it today. The problem was that the spies did not stop there, but rejected life in Eretz Yisroel altogether, as if it was just one mitzvah that was not all that important compared to the rest of Torah.

They must have thought that G-d would agree with this, otherwise they never would have had the

gumption to act so traitorously right under the very auspices of G-d. It's like Bilaam who thought that G-d leaves room for alternative visions when the time is right, and Bilaam banked on that he could figure out that time. Likewise, the two-and-a-half tribes in this week's parshah must have thought there was room for their vision as well, that their request to live east of the Jordan river for the sake of their cattle somehow was not a contradiction to the ultimate goals of the Jewish people.

In fact, we can say the same thing about Korach, and Dasan and Aviram. The latter two, when requested to appear before Moshe Rabbeinu answered:

"You neither brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Do you think you can pull something over our eyes? We will not come up!" (Bamidbar 16:14)

An incredible chutzpah! Or were they were making a point? Perhaps they felt justified in replacing Moshe with Korach because they believed that Moshe's leadership was based upon the fulfillment of his mission to bring the Jewish people from Mitzrayim to Eretz Canaan. Since Moshe would not bring them into the land, perhaps his right to rule had ended. If so, then it might not have mattered to G-d if others fought for Moshe's position. Having failed his mission, and having lost prophecy for 39 years until the last of the generation of the spies died in the desert, there was room to think, or rather, to rationalize that Moshe had lost favor in G-d's eyes, and the A'lmighty was just waiting for the right zealot to come along and usurp his position.

G-d's reaction to Korach's rebellion and to Dasav and Aviram cleared matters up very decisively. And, the answer to the spies was swift and final when the moment of truth came. Yes, G-d let them talk it out amongst themselves a bit, and then stew over it a bit, but when the Cloud of Glory came down and pronounced judgment, punishment was swift and measure-for-measure, as it always is.

Likewise, the tribes of Reuven, Gad, and Menashe must have thought that their intentions were noble and not contradictory to the ultimate plan of the Jewish people. How else could they have approached Moshe Rabbeinu with an idea just after having served a 40-year sentence for having made the same request at the beginning of the journey? They must have thought there was a difference between what they were doing and what the original spies had done.

Indeed, the Leshem explains that in Yemos HaMoshiach, Jerusalem extends to incorporate the very area in which these tribes settled, which is perhaps why the Old City was in the hands of Jordan for so long before being re-taken in the 1967 war by the Israelis. There is an inherent connection, and the two-and-a-half tribes that chose to settle in that area may have tapped into that, believing that they were settling in a portion of Eretz Yisroel.

This was unlike the spies who had simply chosen to remain in the desert for no other reason except to avoid living in Eretz Yisroel. They rejected the land and the relationship it represented with G-d, and were punished for that. But they thought they were taking a portion of the Holy Land in the

present for the future, and what could be wrong with that? How shocked they must have been by Moshe's reaction. Later, the Midrash attributes the first exile into Babylonia to them.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

The beginning of wisdom is the fear of G-d, and [the beginning of] holy men's knowledge is understanding. (Mishlei 9:10)

When the Torah portrays Korach and his followers, we stand back and say, "Wow, were they ever selfish people. And their chutzpah? Unreal!" As if we ourselves could never stoop to such a level. Yet, time and time again we are told by many commentators not to be fooled by what we read: the Torah is presenting everything from its point of view, not from ours.

What this means, in essence, is that you can fool some of the people some of the time, but G-d, NONE of the time. He is the One who can see into the heart of a person and know better than the person himself what the REAL intention is behind what he does. The Ba'al Tzeddakah can think that he is writing the check purely for the sake of the person or organization in need, but his underlying intention, perhaps unbeknownst to him, may be to appear important.

In the Western world, they like to say that the road to, well, you know where, is paved with good intention, as if to say, even with the best of intentions you can end up stoking hot coals after it is all said and done. The Torah says that this is not true. You can fail at your efforts with the best of intentions and not end up in Gihennom, for it is our hearts that G-d takes note of, not the actual success we achieved.

The road to Heaven is paved with good intention. The road to Gihennom is paved with people who appeared to have good intentions but who, in the end, had just the opposite. What happened to the spies, Korach, and the tribes of Reuven, Gad, and Menashe later on, who were the first to be exiled hundreds of years later, might also happen to many of us as well, sometime during our lifetimes, often only after we leave this world and have no more chances to do teshuvah.

As the prophet said:

For the ways of God are straight; the righteous walk in them and sinners will stumble over them. (Hoshea 14:10)

Thus, two people can walk the same path, but if their starting points are different, one being a truth seeker and desiring only to do the will of G-d, and one desiring personal gratification, but in a way that looks like he is performing the will of G-d, then they will end up in different places: one in Heaven, and one in Gihennom, two in Eretz Yisroel, and 10 six feet into the desert.

The Torah gives us a clue to the real motivation of the tribes who chose to remain on the east side of the Jordan River:

The Children of Reuven and the Children of Gad had abundant livestock - very great. They saw the

land of Yazer and the land of Gilad, and behold! - the place was a place for livestock. (Bamidbar 32:1)

For livestock, yes, for Jews, no. Well, at least not yet, not until Moshiach comes and the yetzer hara is slaughtered, and the K'lipos (those nasty spiritual realities that result in evil and spiritual impurity that drag us down) are removed from Creation. Once they're gone, then the entire world can rise to the level of the spirituality of Eretz Yisroel, while Eretz Yisroel increases in holiness to that of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem increases to the level of the Holy of Holies (it will always be holier in Eretz Yisroel). Then, and only then, can settling east of the Jordan be like living in Eretz Yisroel.

MELAVE MALKAH:

If you are wise, you are wise for yourself; and if you scorn, you alone will bear it. (Mishlei 9:12)

Therefore, though we mourn the loss of the Temples during the Three Weeks and on Tisha B'Av, we are really mourning our lack of self-honesty, the kind that brought us into exile in the first place. They say that during the time of the First Temple, people sinned because they thought the Temple and the sacrifices constantly atoned for them. Thus, ironically, it was their belief in the Temple and the sacrifices that allowed them to rationalize their own sins.

Kabbalah teaches that there are five levels of soul, and therefore five levels of will. The first one is called "Ratzon" (Will), and that initiates a thoughts process that will eventually result in action. This sets in motion "Hirhur," the initial intellectual murmurings of planning that lead to "Machshavah" (Mind), and an actual plan to do something. This usually results in talking about it (Dibur), and finally, an act (Ma'aseh).

Thus, a corrupt will can be enclothed in many layers of virtue and great planning, the underlying truth known only to G-d, and also perhaps to some very insightful people. However, like a bad equation, eventually the truth shows up. A donor who is told that only anonymous donations are accepted will write the check regardless, and with the same enthusiasm (perhaps more), if his or her intentions are altruistic. If, upon being told such information, the donor pauses, reduces the amount or changes his mind, it is usually an indication that something is crooked at the top.

We Jews never choose to rebel against G-d. We never demand exile and greet national destruction with joy. We certainly appreciate the value of NOT looking spiritual gift horses in the mouth, and at one time, never doubted the existence of G-d or His involvement in our affairs. So, how did we get here in the first place, and why haven't we left it yet?

The answer is, because we are doing many noble things, even by Torah standards, except for one mistake. Rather than do them for their own sake, we often do them to avoid the larger issues that the Three Weeks come to bring to the forefront. On Tisha B'Av, we don't even learn Torah, except for that which deals with the underlying reasons for the destruction itself.

The Three Weeks, in fact, come to tell us what Moshe Rabbeinu tried to tell the tribes of Reuven, Gad, and Menashe in this week's parshah: Get real with the idea of redemption! Involve yourselves in

the issues of Geulah Shlaimah. As Mordechai told Esther, "That it is coming, you can be certain. But whether you will ride on its crest or be steamrolled by it is the choice that G-d is putting before you," - before all of us.

We're running out of chances to get this right. Some of us are betting this is the last one.

CHAZAK!

Have a great Shabbos (as much as one can have during the Three Weeks),
PW

Text

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