

THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

The Children of Israel did exactly what G-d had commanded Moshe. They camped and journeyed according to their banners, every one according to their family and paternal line. (Bamidbar 2:34)

Last week at shul I noted a spider on the floor just off to my right. Being that the shul is ground floor and the door remains open to the outside, it is not completely uncommon to find one there, some even bigger, though harmless..

Sometimes they seem to have a propensity to go in circles, but this one seemed stuck in circle-mode. However, being that I was dovening I didn't have time to make a study out of it, so I just forgot about him for the time being. But, one hour later when he was still running rings around his little bit of floor, I took a closer look to see what was driving this poor fellow to go around in circles.

I didn't notice the problem at first because I wouldn't have thought that it was the source of his problem. However, after a closer look I noticed that he had an odd number of legs because one of his right ones seemed to be missing, and the poor guy seemed to be having difficulty compensating.

I've seen cats run on three legs with one, obviously hurt, suspended in the air; dogs too for that matter. Four legs are obviously better than three, but somehow these four-legged creatures can do without one, albeit temporarily, without going in circles, but not this eight-legged specimen. Although he was gone by the time I had put my Tallis and Tefillin away, unless someone else did him in on their way into shul.

As I left I thought to myself, that's the Jewish people without Torah: just going in circles, spinning our wheels and going nowhere really meaningful. Yeah, I know that during the Seder we say, "Had You only taken us to the Sinai Desert and not given us Torah, it would have been enough!" But we don't really mean it. I mean, what's the point of seven legs when all it can guarantee you is a life of going in circles? History repeats itself every 15 seconds.

I wonder if the spider knew that he was going in circles, and that if he had known, would he have learned to compensate? Human beings are the most adaptable creatures on the face of the earth. We live by phrases such as, "Necessity is the mother of invention," and often thrive on challenges and on being the underdog. So, maybe had G-d not given Torah to us, only freeing us from Egyptian slavery, would we have adapted somehow, some way, at some point in time?

The answer is yes, if we knew that we were only going in circles.

For, there is a very great difference between traveling in physical circles and traveling in spiritual ones. When it comes to doing laps in the physical world the mind recognizes the repetition and points it out to us. It says, "Haven't we recently been here before? Do we want to be here again now? If not, then let's figure out a way to avoid unnecessarily returning here in the future."

However, when it comes to spiritual circles, a person can travel in a straight line physically while going nowhere new spiritually. For example, he can gain promotion after promotion at work, even continue to accumulate great amounts of wealth, but through it all he can either remain on the same or a lesser spiritual level as before. It's usually only after getting old and incapable of living life independently that a person takes stock of his most meaningful accomplishments and asks, "Where did all the good years go?"

No wonder the Hebrew word for reincarnation is gilgul, implying circular movement, as in a wheel: galgal. People who journey in a straight spiritual path do not have to physically travel in circles, reincarnating over-and-over-again. This is the lesson the desert was meant to teach the Jewish people as they began their journey away from Har Sinai towards Eretz Yisroel.

SHABBOS DAY:

O my G-d, make them like galgal - the whirling chaff - like stubble before the wind. (Tehillim 83:14)

This is from one of the psalms that we have been saying daily since the Intifadah began in 2001. It begins with Dovid HaMelech pointing out how the nations of the world continuously plot against the Jewish people because, in the words of Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, our nationhood contradicts their basic premise of the supremacy of human power and independence.

"They say, 'Come, let us cut them off from nationhood so Israel's name will not be remembered anymore!' " (Ibid. 5)

Sound familiar? Fools that we can be, we assume that this means that they want to cut us off from nationhood physically. However, in truth, it means spiritually, meaning that they wish to get us to go in circles spiritually, to believe that all we do in the Name of G-d accomplishes nothing meaningful. This is why the gematria of Amalek is suffek, the Hebrew word for doubt, and it is not a word that implies physical damage. For, far worst is a spiritual death for a Jew than a physical one.

Therefore, measure-for-measure, Dovid HaMelech asks G-d to punish them with going in circles (galgal), that is, let their plans never proceed forward, but always end up being a waste of time. For trying to make the life of a Jew meaningless, let them be punished with their own realization of their own meaninglessness. Nothing can be more painful for a human being to come to the sad and depressing realization, especially when there is no time left to do anything about it, that his life was meaningless, as if it had never been.

This is why it said back in Parashas Behar regarding the Shmittah Cycle, v'sofarta lecha - count for yourself. On a national level it refers to the Bais Din's obligation to keep track of the years for the sake of the Shmittah and Yovel years. However, on a personal level it means keep track of your own personal days and how you use them. A day that amounts to little or no spiritual gain, is a day that has not been lived, and it cannot count towards the days of your life for which you can take credit.

Thus, there are people who live 80 years and it is as if they only really lived 20 years when their mitzvos are added up. And, there are righteous people who may die young after having lived lives that contained more spiritual content and meaning than those who lived 110 years. This is what the Talmud means when it says:

There are some who acquire their worlds in a moment, and there are some who acquire their worlds after many years. (Avodah Zarah 10b)

The difference between the two is the straight line between two points:

After Pharaoh sent the people out, G-d did not guide them through the way of the land of the Philistines although it was close. For G-d said, "The people might have regrets when they see war and return to Egypt." (Shemos 13:17)

This, in spite of all the miracles G-d had thus far performed for them. They still had some growing up to do. Therefore:

G-d led the people about, the way of the desert of the Red Sea . . . (Ibid. 18)

Led the people about . . . from the direct route to a circuitous route. (Rashi)

In other words, to keep the Jewish people on the spiritual straight-and-narrow, G-d kept them on a circuitous physical route through the desert. Until the giving of Torah, when they would have in their own possessions the necessary spiritual steering wheel to keep them from going in circles. From Har Sinai it was only an eleven-day bee-line to Eretz Yisroel:

These are the things Moshe told to all of Israel on the east side of the Jordan in the desert, in the plain opposite the Red Sea, between Paran, and Tofel, and Lavan, Chatzerot, and Di-Zahav - a journey of eleven days from Chorev by way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-Barnea. (Devarim 1:1-2)

And it would have only been 11 days had it not been for the spies' own spiritual circuitous route, which was summed up by the ultimate definition of a circle: ending up at the same point from which one began his journey:

They said to one another, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt!" (Bamidbar 14:4)

Therein lies the very difference between Egypt and Eretz Yisroel: whereas Mitzrayim means a constricted area which only permits movement in one particular area, Eretz Yisroel permits expansion beyond its physical capability (Kesuvos 111a). Thus, every six feet a person walks in Eretz

Yisroel he earns reward in the World-to-Come, for a person who seeks to have a relationship with G-d in Eretz Yisroel never goes in spiritual circles.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

G-d spoke to Moshe in the Sinai Desert by the Tent of Meeting, on the first of the second month in the second year . . . (Bamidbar 1:1)

This parshah is usually read the week of Shavuot, except in a leap year such as this one when Naso is read instead. The basis for this is the following from the Talmud:

A person should make himself into a desert . . . (Eiruv 54a)

Why? Because:

Torah is not in heaven . . . (Devarim 30:12), which means that Torah will not be found in someone who elevates himself. (Eiruv 55a)

The essential point the Talmud is making here is that to receive Torah from G-d, like a desert, one must be humble. A city is the symbol of mankind's greatness and independence, a desert is just the opposite. Without humility, a person distorts Torah, interpreting it according to his own subjective point of view. However, based upon what we have said until now, we can understand another piece of sagely advice from the Talmud.

Indeed, unlike a city a desert is not constricted. It is wide open, boundary-less, undefined. A city permits movement only in certain directions, whereas a desert permits movement in just about every direction. The message of the Talmud: to properly receive and learn Torah one must be unrestricted when it comes to spiritual growth, open to spiritual movement in whichever direction the Torah advises based upon one's personal ability and circumstances.

The Torah knows that no two Jews are alike and that one solution rarely applies to everyone the same way. But there is always a Torah solution for every situation a Jew encounters, and one's ability to know this and find it depends upon one's sense of objectivity, a function of humility. Advanced agricultural techniques may help to make physical deserts bloom, but it is a teshuvah movement that makes the spiritual deserts blossom.

Therefore, though the Jewish people of Moshe's time actually journeyed for 40 years in the desert - a number that represents a complete period of development. It was also a metaphor for the journey of every Jew throughout all of history, whether he was born in a desert or in the middle of a sprawling metropolis. And the goal is always the same, to get to Eretz Yisroel, which represents both the physical and spiritual end of one's journey:

I am G-d your G-d Who took you out of Egypt to give you the Land of Canaan to be your G-d.
(Vayikra 25:38)

However many circles we have to make before we get there depends upon our willingness to walk a straight line.

MELAVE MALKAH:

The wise will understand these, the understanding will know them, for the ways of G-d are straight and the righteous walk in them, while the sinners stumble in them. (Hoshea 14:10)

Our Rabbis taught: A man should not remove stones from his ground onto public ground. A certain man was removing stones from his ground onto public ground when a pious man found him doing so and said to him, "Fool, why do you remove stones from ground which is not yours to ground which is yours?" The man laughed at him. Some days later he had to sell his field, and when he was walking on that public ground he stumbled over those stones. He then said, "When the pious man said to me, 'Why do you remove stones from ground which is not yours to ground which is yours?' he spoke well." (Bava Kamma 50b)

This sounds like just the opposite of what it should be, until Rashi explains the meaning of the words. The pious man was telling the fool that one day he may have to sell his field, at which time it will belong to someone else. However, the public domain belongs to everyone always, so in a sense, he was in fact moving it from property that may belong to someone else in the future, to property that actually always belonged to him, along with the rest of the public.

The man laughed. At the time he obviously had no intention in selling his field, so the notion of thinking about the unlikely struck him as being, at best, frivolous. Only after stumbling over those very rocks did he suddenly realize how events can unfold and go in another direction, and he did not take the suggestion seriously at the time when he had the ability to do something to alter his actions.

It's a lot like driving. When you are on a curve it is hard to trace your lane. The road changes direction every second, so in order to safely respond to the curve you can't look too far ahead of the front of your car. It is virtually impossible to safely see what is coming up 100 meters down the road; you'll just have to wait until you get there to find out, at which time it will be too late to change your direction.

However, on a long, straight patch of highway, even while driving at 100 kph, your eyes can look ahead as far they can see, which allows for tremendous flexibility in terms of choosing the best path to take given your intended destination. As the Talmud states:

Who is a wise man? One who can see what will be born. (Tamid 32a)

That is, he traces his spiritual lane, or that of the world. Walking the path of G-d that is straight, he can see down the road, even into the future and predict the direction events are going. For those stuck in the circle of life, his words will seem foolhardy at first, like when Noach warned his neighbors of the impending flood. Then they stumbled over the very "stones" they themselves placed when they had been in the same spot at a previous time in life.

Thus, it is no coincidence that the Hebrew word for intention (kavanah) comes from the word for direction: kivune. One's intention when learning Torah and performing mitzvos is the best measure of the direction a person is going in: straight on the path of G-d or in the circles of fools. Torah is a tree of life, but only for those who grasp it and its intention; only for those who are willing to go in whichever direction Torah guides us in any given personal or national situation.

That is true acceptance of Torah (Kabbalos HaTorah). And that is the only way to make sure that our days count, not just that we count them, for that is what we bring before the Heavenly Court on our day of judgment: days that count. There is no adapting to life without Torah, just the circles mankind runs in his desperate attempt to find meaning where it does not exist.

Have a great Shabbos,
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Text

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