JOURNEYS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

These are the journeys of the Children of Israel who left Egypt as a nation under the leadership of Moshe and Aharon. (Bamidbar 33:1)

Journeys: Life is about journeys - your journey, my journey, the next person's journey. We're all on a journey, and not only in this lifetime but throughout history. We travel through the course of one lifetime and then stop after death for a bit to integrate the lessons of the previous journey before moving on again into another incarnation. We are born into the world and into a family, and it feels as if it is the first time we're here, but it isn't. It is only the next stop on our cosmic journey to personal completion before G-d.

When one learns Sha'ar HaGilgulim (the Gates of Reincarnation) by the Arizal, one gains an appreciation of just how true this is. The following is one of the more famous examples of a soul in motion throughout the ages:

As we already know, a Ruach cannot reincarnate until the Nefesh has done so and has been rectified. When the Ruach has been rectified, then the Neshamah will also undergo rectification. In Hevel's case, though the Nefesh and Ruach were damaged and mixed together with evil, his Neshamah remained completely good. Thus, when his Nefesh reincarnated, it first went into Shais, the son of Adam HaRishon. This caused the evil to be separated out and later given to Bilaam, the evil one. Both of these levels, the good and the evil of the Nefesh had previously been included in Hevel, as his name alludes, with the Heh of Hevel alluding to the good which was given to Shais. This is the sod of the posuk, "Everything You placed (shattah) under his feet" (Tehillim 8:7), which has the letters Shin-Tav (Shais) and Heh (of Hevel) . . . The evil of Hevel's Nefesh is represented by the letters Bais-Lamed, which is the sod of the posuk, "Such judgments, they know not (Bais-Lamed)" (Tehillim 147:20). For, these two letters refer to the Klipos and the Bais-Lamed of Bilaam (Bais-Lamed-Ayin-Mem). We mentioned before that even the level of evil that was separated from the good must, by necessity, contain an element of Holy Sparks. This is the sod of Bilaam the prophet and what Chazal mean when they say that "he was equal to Moshe" (Bamidbar Rabbah 20), who was from the good of Shais, as we will explain. The little amount of good that was in Bilaam, reincarnated into Naval HaCarmelli, and that was the beginning of the tikun. Bilaam's only power was in his mouth by speaking loshon hara and cursing. Therefore, after Pinchas killed him, he reincarnated into a rock that could not speak, to rectify the loshon hara that came from his mouth; as we have said: a person

can reincarnate into a Domaim, Tzomayach, Chayah, or Medabehr (Mineral World, Vegetation World, Animal World, and Human World). . .

However, when Naval followed in his ways and spoke loshon hara about Dovid HaMelech saying, "Who is Dovid and who is Ben Yishai?" (I Shmuel 25:10), he reversed the tikun. Not only did he not rectify the previous sin but he added to the damage. Therefore, it says, "and he was a rock" (I Shmuel 25:37) since his mazel saw how previously he had reincarnated into a silent stone, and then "His heart died within him." (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 29)

Hevel, of course, was Adam HaRishon's second son, born at the beginning of history and died shortly thereafter. Part of his soul went into Shais, who was Adam's third son born 130 years later, and the other part of his soul, the bad part, went into Lavan (hence: LAMED, BAIS, Nun), Ya'akov Avinu's father-in-law over 2,000 years later. After he died, the Bais-Lamed part of Hevel's soul reincarnated into Bilaam who lived in Moshe Rabbeinu's time, hundreds of years later.

After that, to rectify Bilaam's problem with loshon hara, he returned again inside of a rock for a period of time, before returning to the world in human form in Naval HaCarmelli in Dovid HaMelech's time, again hundreds of years later. More than likely that soul, like so many others, has since returned many other times, but Sha'ar HaGilgulim only goes up until the 1500s.

SHABBOS DAY:

When I was a young boy, there was a program called "The Time Tunnel." For those who do not recall it, it was about two scientists who were part of an experiment to travel through time, which they did by walking the length of some cone-shaped spiral tunnel. The experiment only partially worked; they were able to go into the past but could not come out of it.

So, basically, the program was a dramatized history show, with the two main characters going in and out of major events of the past, knowing what was going to happen because they were from the future, but unable to change anything because it was history. All they could do was bear witness to what had unfolded, and play some sort of role along the way, knowing full well that their true lives lay beyond their present, fictitious lives.

It is a good analogy for life. Our souls are time travelers, though our bodies are not. Our souls know the past because they were there, and they can even know the future since they are capable of rising above time, even at night while we sleep. In fact, déjà vu, when a person has a sense that he already knew what was going to happen before it actually did, might simply be some of that future knowledge filtering down into the physical brain, allowing for a sense of recognition at the time of the event.

So much has already been written about this idea, movies have been made, and some psychiatrists even use hypnosis to perform past-life regression. As to whether or not it is possible today to truly know who we were in previous lives remains to be seen, in spite of the claims of success. (I have

personally heard some pretty convincing stories from reliable people.) There is no question that in the past it was indeed possible to know such information, as Sha'ar HaGilgulim makes perfectly clear.

One of the dramatic elements of "The Time Tunnel" was how the crew back home was some how able to get the main characters out of a life- threatening jam just in the nick of time by moving them into another period of history. And, as involved as the two characters had been in the slice of time they had just visited, once they began to roll through time again, they could afford to just let go of the past, though the characters they left behind were stuck in it.

Life is very, very absorbing. It has a way of convincing us that nothing ever existed before it and nothing will ever exist after it. So much appears to be a matter of do-or-die, and as a result, people invest so much into the present with little or no regard for the future. And, I don't just mean future as in tomorrow, next week, or even the next decade, but future as in the next lifetime, and principally, as in the World-to- Come.

The trick in life is being able to rise above it. It's like being a rocket ship trying to break free of the earth's gravitational pull. It's a real tug-of-war as gravity madly pulls downward as the rocket thrusters violently push the space ship upward, until the rocket gets to a height where gravity is too weak to hang on, and the space craft is finally able to drift effortlessly into the quiet of space.

We know what pulls us down, what holds onto us with great power, and what keeps us from being objective: life itself. Between temptations and crises, we are constantly being kept on earth and mired in subjectivity. The question is: What has the ability to thrust us up and out in order that we see life in a more objective manner, in order to make decisions that take into account far more than just the immediate past, present, and future?

The answer to that question is short on letters but long on understanding: Insight. However, we're not talking merely about a new approach to an old idea, but about actual insight, or more accurately, the ability to see in.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

The Pri Tzaddik on this week's parshah points out that the Jewish people made forty-two stops in the course of their forty years of wandering. This is significant, he explains, because each stop corresponded to one letter of G-d's forty-two letter Name, which you can see from the prayer called "Ana b'Koach" in all siddurim. This prayer is comprised of seven stanzas of six words each, and when the first letters of each word are brought together, they formed one of the forty-two letter Names of G-d.

What is the point of this correlation? Explains the Pri Tzaddik, each letter from this Name represents a particular level of spiritual growth on the path to a person's personal completion. When a person acquires all forty-two letters, (stops along their personal journey to completion,) he has no need for

any further rectification; he is said to have acquired HIS world, that is, his intended portion in the World-to-Come.

The Arizal explains in Sha'ar HaGilgulim that it can happen in a single lifetime. And, if it does not happen in a single lifetime then it is likely to happen over several lifetimes. And, if history comes to a close before the person can acquire all forty-two levels of growth, then there is Gihennom to finish off the refinement process - not a pleasant prospect.

Eventually, when history has ended and we stand before the Heavenly Tribunal on our day in court, they will replay all of our gilgulim. We will watch with the Bais Din all the events of all of our lives, and we will be shown how each particular event was designed to help us move a notch or two in the direction of personal completion.

We will be detached from the situation, like time travelers who happened to drop in on the past, and we will see ourselves act out in ways that are obviously incorrect, literally wasteful. We will be amazed at how easily we were overwhelmed by the situation at hand, emotionally drawn in until we acted in a way that suggested there was no tomorrow.

And, we will probably say to ourselves: "If only I knew then what I know now."

The truth is, if we knew now what we will know then, it would be impossible to exercise free-will. We'd be like the scientists in the program who knew the outcome of events while the people around them did not, and we could afford to make the appropriate sacrifices because we'd know what the pay off will be and what it will not be. There would be no reason for us to be rewarded in Heaven for that.

Therefore, Heaven compromised for our benefit. We don't get to know much about our pasts or our futures, at least not much that we can translate into conscious knowledge and use to better navigate the present. But we do get to learn works such as Sha'ar HaGilgulim, or the idea of reincarnation, and past lives surface in one way or another to sensitize us to the possibility so that we can take some time to contemplate the finiteness of the events of everyday life. All that lives on past them was our response to the crisis.

Ultimately, this is what the Vilna Gaon has taught us. He has said that life is about sheviras hamiddos, the overcoming of bad character traits, like anger, for example. Nothing allows for this more than being able to rise above of the moment until you become an objective observer instead of a subjective participant. It is when one can do this that one is able to correctly assess a situation and appropriately respond to it, each time earning another one of the letters of G-d's Name and one's own completion.

I say this because there is much happening in the world today, and more which promises to only intensify the struggle to break free of that which wants to dishearten us. All of it will be a test of our ability to rise above the moment and the crisis, and remain positive in the face of tremendous

negativity. The redemption of G-d can come in the blink of an eye, and even faster if we remain positive and trust in G-d.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Hear the word of G-d, O House of Ya'akov and all the families of the House of Yisroel . . . (Yirmiyahu 2:4)

These are the first words of this week's Haftarah, the second Shabbos of the Three Weeks. They are pure rebuke by the prophet who brought us Eichah. The entire Haftarah is about how the Jewish people strayed and turned to idol worship instead of seeking out G-d. It doesn't even end on a positive note, which is why the First Temple was destroyed shortly thereafter.

Actually, it is the fast of the 17th of Tammuz today as I write this, the first day of the Three Weeks. I have just gotten off the phone with someone who has told me, in the name of a certain Mekubel, that events will occur by the Shabbos of the parshah for which this is being written that will impact the entire world. Apparently certain signs are supposed to occur to indicate this, and have been quickly since last Lag B'Omer.

The news doesn't faze me. The truth is, I am usually better prepared for the Three Weeks long in advance, but this year my son's Bar Mitzvah was somewhat of a distraction, coming on Rosh Chodesh Tammuz. That ended, and all of a sudden the 17th of Tammuz is upon me, and the period of disengagement that seemed months away is actually here.

The tension is unbelievable. The situation is serious, but we don't yet know how serious. Yesterday, the government admitted what seemed to be the case from the start: disengagement has very little to do with appeasing the Arabs and everything to do with making George Bush happy. Entire cities that took years to build up and millions of dollars of investment to make into an example of beauty and efficiency is about to be scrapped for political agendas that have little, if anything, to do with the safety of the Jewish people.

As the prophet says in this week's Haftarah, the people we turned to in order to defend ourselves have themselves become the persecutors.

And what about us? So close to the moment of crisis and we're not quite sure what to think: for disengagement, against disengagement, or impartial to it? Tie an orange ribbon or don't tie an orange ribbon? Make a stand or don't make a stand? It's a done deal; no, it's not a done deal? Be positive; give up the ship already?

There are a lot of people doing a lot of talking, and it becomes more confusing by the moment. However, the prophet offered one solution that puts all of it in perspective: HEAR, specifically, "Hear the word of G-d." If you are quiet for a moment, you can hear it, like a breeze rustling through the trees on a quiet day. That's what Adam HaRishon heard in the Garden of Eden:

Then they heard the voice of G-d moving through the garden like the day breeze, and the man and

his wife hid from G-d among the trees of the garden. (Bereishis 3:8)

To many it seems as if G-d is holding out, keeping His peace while we go through Gihennom down here. It's not true. The difficulties we encounter are to get our attention, which is only meaningful if there is something to hear. That is what the Three Weeks are about: learning to become a listener to the Divine message that resonates through every event and thing in Creation, but even more so when history intensifies.

If we incline our minds to listen, our ears will learn to hear. Then the positive ending can finally come, and our journey through history can end gracefully. Otherwise, G-d will just keep talking louder until we learn to pay attention.

CHAZAK!

May we see a happy ending in our time.
Good Shabbos,
PW

Text

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