

A STANDING OVATION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

All the nations will ask, "*Why did G-d do this to the land? Why did G-d act with such anger?*" (Devarim 29:23)

Good question. True, it was asked after the complete exile from the land during the time of the destruction of the First Temple, but it is a question that many religious people, Jewish and non-Jewish, are asking today. According to the Torah, the people who will ask the question will answer it as well with the following words:

"It was because they abandoned the covenant of G-d, the G-d of their fathers, which He made with them when He brought them out of Egypt. They went and served other gods, and bowed down to them, gods they never knew before, and which He did not give to them. The anger of G-d went out against this land, bringing upon it every curse that is written in this book. G-d exiled them from their land in anger, fury, and in great rage, and threw them into another land to this very day." (Devarim 29:24-27)

That definitely seems to apply to the First Temple period. On the other hand, perhaps the situation today is the continuation of the situation of that time, and therefore the answer is as applicable today as it was then. In other words, the situation today is just the ripple effect of the original event over the course of two millennia.

For example, the returning exiles from Babylonian only represented only a portion of the population that had been living in the Diaspora at that time. As hard as Ezra the Scribe tried to convince the Jews of Chutz L'Aretz to return and rebuild the Jewish commonwealth, he did not succeed. As a result, the redemption remained only a partial one in many different ways.

For example, when the Jews came back to Eretz Yisroel, they had to re-sanctify the land, but did not include all lands. One such land that had not been re-sanctified was Azza, though it was as much a part of Eretz Yisroel as the cities that were re-sanctified. Indeed, the Talmud says the reason why they did not re-sanctify it was so that the laws of Shmittah, and other mitzvos dependent upon the land, would not apply to it, giving the poor additional sources of income (Chullin 7a).

Whereas this may have been a boon to the poor of Ezra's time, it may have worked against the settlers in our time. For, as it says in Tuv HaAretz, the land atones for the sins of the Jews living there,

both the accidental sins and the ones done with intention. However, it is the performance of the mitzvos dependent upon the land that frees the land of the sins it has absorbed from us, without which the final stage of atonement cannot occur. (Tuv Ha'Aretz, p. 72)

Thus, even though Gush Katif was within the borders of Biblical Eretz Yisroel, and is as valuable to the Jewish people as other parts, it was spiritually-handicapped in a way that can be traced back to the time of the First Temple. Therefore, the question asked back then has echoed down through the centuries, and even though there are no nations today believing or informed enough to answer as the Torah has said they would, it doesn't really matter: the answer has echoed throughout the centuries as well.

SHABBOS DAY:

All of you stand here today before G-d, your G-d, with leaders of your tribes, your elders, your law enforcers, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, and the proselyte that is part of your camp, from the hewer of wood to the drawer of water, about to enter into the covenant with G-d, your G-d, and into His curse, which G-d, your G-d makes with you today. (Devarim 29:9-11)

At the end of Parashas Ki Seitzei, the HaEmek Davar makes an interesting point by comparing the mention of Amalek in Parashas Beshallach with that of Parashas Ki Seitzei. At the end of Beshallach it says:

G-d told Moshe, "Write this as a memorial in the Book, and repeat it carefully to Yehoshua. I will completely eradicate the memory of Amalek from under heaven." (Shemos 17:14)

Thus, in this posuk G-d has promised to personally be at war with Amalek, fighting and completing the war until Amalek is completely obliterated. We don't seem to be actively involved in the process whatsoever.

However, in Parashas Ki Seitzei it says:

Therefore, when G-d, your G-d has given you rest from all your enemies around you in the land which G-d, your G-d gives to you as an inheritance, annihilate the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget this. (Devarim 25:19)

Thus, we are commanded to take responsibility for the annihilation of Amalek, obviously with the help of G-d, and actively fight against him nonetheless. Why the change of approach in the Torah?

The HaEmek Davar explains:

Annihilate the memory of Amalek . . . That is, annihilate the kingdom of Amalek, which is not how we explained it in Parashas Beshallach by the promise of G-d to eradicate the memory of Amalek. There it reads as a function of Nature without any apparent Providence at all. However, in Parashas Ki Seitzei this promise is only for the sake of the mitzvah of eradicating the kingdom of Amalek . . . Don't forget . . . This is a command. Even during times that we are unable to accomplish this mitzvah, it is

forbidden to forget the people of Amalek and the mitzvah of eradicating them, in order that we remember to strengthen ourselves in our faith in the Providence of G-d, even when the world functions naturally. (HaEmek Davar, Devarim 25:19)

That is the essential battle, the one that takes place throughout history, behind the scenes, and quite naturally. There was a moment in history when actually doing battle with the people of Amalek occurred for the sake of annihilating, but it was missed and passed up, and the main battle has taken place in ways that are not always apparent to the idea.

Rashi explains on the posuk:

How he met you by the way - vayezaneiv becha - and attacked the stragglers . . . (Devarim 25:18)

Vayezaneiv becha . . . he cut off the Milah and threw them up towards Heaven. (Rashi)

And, not just the Bris Milah of the Jews they killed, but the entire Bris Avos that it represented, with which this parshah began. Why? What statement was he making by this cruel and grotesque act? Amalek doesn't do things like this for nothing; he's heavy into symbolism, in an evil way, just as we are in a holy way. That's what it means to be the antithesis of something.

Well, what does Bris Milah symbolize? The Torah says:

When Avram was 99 years old, G-d appeared to Avram and said to him, "I am G-d A-lmighty, walk before Me and be perfect . . ." (Bereishis 17:1-2)

Be perfect . . . Be whole-hearted in all the trials I impose upon you. (Rashi)

In other words, G-d was telling Avraham, do not waver in your loyalty to Me when I test you; stay with Me until the end. What did He mean by this? He meant that, in spite of the urge to abandon faith during the test, don't.

However, how could Avraham possibly even consider failing a test from G-d, including the Akeidah? His whole life had been an investment in the service of G-d, and falling short of G-d's expectation would have rendered his life meaningless and not worth living. So, what kind of yetzer hara could possibly have taken Avraham Avinu down such a path to such self- destruction? And, how did Bris Milah counteract that?

The answer to that question lies in a deeper understanding of a test from G-d, and the underlying meaning of Bris Avos.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

You shall remember the entire way which G-d your G-d led you these forty years in the desert, in order to afflict you and to test you, to know what is in your heart: will you observe His commandments or not. He afflicted you and made you hungry, and fed you the manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, in order to inform you that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by all the

utterances of the mouth of G-d. (Devarim 8:2-3)

The Hebrew word for "test" is nisayon, the root of the word being Nun- Samech, or neis (miracle). For, what a test and a miracle have in common is the way they reveal the reality of G-d through what has occurred, a person by acting in a way that reveals his belief in G-d, and the miracle by virtue of the fact it is supernatural.

Thus, a test and a miracle are mutually exclusive since they both accomplish the same thing: they turn a period of Hester Panim into one of Gilui Panim. Hence, if the reality of G-d is clear through miracles then there is really no way to test faith in G-d. Therefore, in order to make a test valid, G-d has to perform it during a time, and in a way, that the hand of G-d in it is not that clear.

What makes a Divine test a test is the way it demands a sacrifice from a person, usually putting at risk something the one being tested holds dear, in the name of what may be a higher spiritual value. If it is clear that G-d is truly demanding that, could a reasonable person not comply, even if it means giving up one's own child, as Avraham had been prepared to do?

When G-d tested Avraham something he held dear had to be at stake, and there had to be room to rationalize that G-d didn't want it. For a G-d- fearing Jew like Avraham Avinu, the only way a test would prove anything was if there was a way to see not completing the test as a bigger mitzvah.

Amazingly, the rationalization doesn't seem to work the same way for people not being tested. Somehow they can see through it, as if that is what Heaven wants just so they can bear witness to how the one being tested fought off the yetzer hara and did the loyalty thing over the rationalized thing. This way the person being tested, and possibly those looking on, can say, "Wow! You must really believe in G-d to risk personal comfort for something that could only be valuable if G-d is truly there!"

It is very telling how most cultures, when designing some kind of sign or banner to reveal to the world what they believe or to what type of society they belong to, choose some kind of outward manifestation for all to see. And yet, Bris Milah - the very symbol of the covenant between G-d and the Jewish people, like the Holy of Holies itself, is completely HIDDEN that even Jews forget about it.

Hence, as far back in time as the first commandment to circumcise ourselves, before the Torah was given to his descendants, Avraham Avinu was being informed of what kind of history he, and more importantly, his descendants were going to live through, until Moshiach's time. With few exceptions, the hand of G-d was going to remain strong on behalf of the Jewish people, but quite hidden all the same.

Our job, embodied in the very concept and reality of Bris Milah, is to strengthen our faith in that hand and its loyalty to us by acting loyal to it, in spite of our inability to point at it and say, as the Egyptian magicians had been able to say with complete certainty, "This is the finger of G-d!" (Shemos 8:15).

MELAVE MALKAH:

He has said, *"Because the hand is upon the Throne of G-d it is a war for G-d with Amalek in each generation."* (Shemos 17:16)

In every generation, and at all times.

The trouble is that not only does G-d fight this battle behind the scenes in ways that are not always apparent to us, but we, the Jewish people don't always know who the enemy is in order to see Him fighting it. There is no nation called "Amalek" today whose history we can trace back and follow to see its fate.

This is also why Amalek attacked the Bris Milah of the Jewish people who straggled behind the rest of the nation, to say that just as Bris Milah is hidden from the public eye, so will their attack be. For, no one knows more than Amalek himself that the best way to make a Jew zealous for G-d is to attack his belief in G-d head-on.

Undermining Jewish belief in Hashgochah Pratis must be the result of a carefully planned and concealed attack, one that takes into account their sensitivities, and more importantly, their yetzer hara. Amalek can transform himself into people, things, even events that push our belief in Divine Providence to its limit, the goal of which is to leave doubt - suffek, the gematria of Amalek, in our minds and in Hashgochah Pratis.

Remember Bilaam and the daughters of Midian? Remember how their goal was to keep the Jews out of Eretz Yisroel, to push off the Final Redemption by pushing them in the direction of Ba'al Peor? Ba'al Peor? That disgusting, degrading form of idol worship? The Jews who were so civilized . . . worshipping Ba'al Peor?! Never!

Well, at least not right away. First they invited the Jewish men to do a little shopping for some fine linen products, for which Rashi says, the Jews of that time had a soft spot. Upon entering the tents of the merchant in search of some "finer linen," they were suddenly exposed to even greater incitements of the yetzer hara, fulfillment of which was dependent upon performing a service to the idol, Ba'al Peor.

That's the way it happened then, but the entire episode of the process is also a parable for all of history, how Jews can go in search of something innocently enough, and be succored into an even greater, more magnetic form of the yetzer hara, until eventually it results in a form of idol worship, which may simply mean a lack of belief in Hashgochah Pratis.

Events that are tests have been happening, and will continue to happen. They are being designed for us as a way to prove our true colors with respect to Hashgochah Pratis, and the ultimate goals of the Jewish people. A lot of opinions are flying around, and will continue to fly around, defending one approach or another regarding the interpretation of those events.

They always do.

The important thing to ask is, "If I believe like this, what will I have to sacrifice, and if I interpret the other way, what will be the sacrifice?"

If the assumed sacrifice is something dear to your heart but not G-d's, it's worthwhile to give it some serious thought before rendering your final decision about in which direction you go. It's that time of year to do so.

It's been a very fast action-packed year. A new year, 5766 is about to begin, b'ezras Hashem Yisborach. According to Rabbi Yitzchak Kaduri, one of the most respected Kabbalists today, the letters Tav-Shin-Samech-Vav stand for: tihiyeh shnat sod v'gilui - it will be a year of secrets and revelation. Personally, I think the process has already begun, and self-honesty and clarity about the ultimate goals of the Jewish people may be our most valuable assets in a year that promises to be even more "exciting" than years in recent history.

May G-d have mercy on His world, inscribe us in His Book of Life, and seal our fates for a year of health, success, and happiness. Thanks to all of you who have read what I have written and thought about what I have said. I hope that it has benefited all of you, and I look forward to continuing on in the upcoming year with this wonderful merit of writing and spreading Torah to our people far and wide.

Chasivah u'Chasimah Tovah,
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Text

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