

STATE OF THE UNION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways. This is the defilement of the nations that I am throwing out before you; [through them] the land became defiled. Therefore, I am punishing them; the land itself is spitting out its inhabitants. (Vayikra 18:24-25)

I love Eretz Yisroel and I love living here. I don't think that I have ever regretted moving to Eretz Yisroel even once over the last 20 years since being here, and I don't believe I ever will. Come what may, and in spite of many Diaspora opinions to the contrary, I sincerely believe that it is in Eretz Yisroel that a Jew should be from this point on in history, though I know that most won't make it here until after Moshiach arrives.

However, the Eretz Yisroel of today is not the Eretz Yisroel of 20, or even 10 years ago. True, Medinat Yisroel has been evolving into its present form ever since its declaration of Independence in 1947. Indeed, what we see today out in the open has really been stewing below the surface for over 50 years now, evident by the fact that Shimon Peres is still very much in control of the direction of this country.

(No man, probably in the history of mankind, has ever lost so many elections, and yet maintained so much influence over the politics of his country as Shimon Peres has. Ironically, his last name is spelled the same way that Iran's Biblical name is spelled: Peh-Raish-Samech. Both are proving to be formidable elements in the shaping of this country's policy regarding the land and its security.)

How has the country changed over the last few decades? It has become increasingly secular, to the extreme. But, you will tell me, Medinat Yisroel has always been an extremely secular state, even leaving G-d out of its "constitution," while the Americans even mention G-d on their money. I will tell you, in spite of all that, and in spite of the original intentions of those who formed the modern state, there seemed to be a line in the ideological sand that the secularists, at least the ones in power, knew and observed regarding how far they could push the religious Jews that are living on the land.

Clearly, that is no more.

The result of this transition is that the religious world, in order to "survive," is being forced into unholy alliances. There are issues now that never made it to the bargaining table years ago because the secular authorities didn't dare, for one political reason or another, bring them there. However, the

hardcore secularists have pushed their way through and nothing is taboo any longer. They are in political power today, and are intent upon minimalizing, if not outright removing any political power that the religious parties may still yield in the secular halls of power.

On the surface, especially to Jews living in the Diaspora, it all seems quite natural. After all, Medinat Yisroel has always dreamed of full acceptance by the Western world into the so-called "Family of Nations." In the Western world, the emphasis has always been on the physical standard of living; culture comes second like spice for food, always meant to enhance the flavor of the food, never to take away from it.

What kind of Western country closes its stores on Shabbat? What kind of Western country lets its religious citizens live within its own sub- culture? What kind of modern Western country interferes with the construction of a new and efficient highway because a cemetery lies along its planned route, and for religious reasons yet? How can Israel become the Hong Kong of the Middle East when it has one of its political feet still stuck in the old days?

Ironically, as they do this, presumably with security for the country in mind as well, the Middle-East is becoming less safe by the day. Had the Palestinians only bought into the program, then the gamble would have paid off big time. But the only thing that happened big time was the turning over of the reigns of power we gave to them to the very enemy set upon our destruction. We've sacrificed and risked so much for people who, at the end of the day, don't have much of a say regarding the terrorism that takes place in this country.

SHABBOS DAY:

I have separated you from the peoples that you should be Mine . . . (Vayikra 20:26)

We are at the crossroads right now in our history. And, when I say "we" I do not mean only those of us living here in Eretz Yisroel. Medinat Yisroel may only refer to those living within the borders the K'nesset decides upon, but Eretz Yisroel refers to wherever the Jewish people are meant to live as far as Heaven is concerned, and that is an issue for all of Klal Yisroel. (The Holocaust only affected the Jews of Europe, but what Jew living in the Diaspora could live a "normal" life while it was happening, especially if they had relatives living in Europe at the time?)

Regarding the posuk just quoted, Rashi states:

If you hold yourselves apart from them, then you will be Mine, but if not, you will become subjected to Nebuchadnetzar and others like him . . . (Rashi)

Is this interpretation true, and if yes, always? And, does it apply today as well? If yes, then who is Nebuchadnetzar today, and who are his friends? I'm not talking about reincarnations; I'm talking about approaches to life, so we can answer the question, "Does modern Israeli society fit that bill?" Have we taken the bait? Have we joined Nebuchadnetzar's circle of friends, and thereby put ourselves in harm's way?

Nebuchadnetzar WAS the Western world at that time. Indeed, if were he alive today, he would be the leader of one of our modern Western countries. Being the product of modern times, he would be more civilized today, or at least more constrained in his approach to taking over the world. He would love Hollywood, and all the benefits of a cutting edge technological society.

Judging by the look of Israeli society today, it is a Nebuchadnetzar groupie. While this has brought many physical and even some spiritual benefits to Israeli citizens, it has also set into motion a process that is set on morphing the Jewish state into a Western one. The religious- secular balance of yesteryear is no more, and though the religious world is feeling more squeezed all the time, worrying about what crisis looms in the not-so-distant future aimed at undermining Torah authority, if Rashi is correct (and he is quoting a universally accepted opinion), it is the secular world that is blindly running down a path to destruction, G-d forbid.

We can't be like the gentile nations. Hashgochah Pratis will not allow it. The only reason why it has gotten this far out of hand is because of the rules of free-will, historical process, meaning tikun olam (world rectification), and for the sake of the Grand Finale. Something big is coming up that is going to bring the world up to spiritual speed, and it requires a certain kind of world setting to make it all come together as planned by Heaven.

You can feel it: Iraq, Iran, Russia, Hamas, North Korea, Oil prices. You name it; it is all playing into a final scenario that will not be just another scenario. And, as the Talmud says, it all has to do with the Jewish people (Yevamos 63a), in general, and particularly at the end of days. It has to do with the pesukim at the end of Acharei Mos and Kedoshim. And, at the rate things are going, it has to do with us, our generation, so be prepared. ALL of us have to be prepared.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

G-d told Moshe, *"Speak to the entire congregation of the Children of Israel and tell them, 'Be holy, for I, your G-d, am holy.'"* (Vayikra 19:1- 2)

Last week I wrote about the miracle of life and the need to always appreciate every aspect of it. Since then, I read an article on the topic of preventing memory loss, and it is worth quoting here. Particularly interesting is the author's choice of words and description. It says: You've heard of the tree of knowledge? Think of your brain. Inside that four-pound organ sitting inside your skull is a root and branch system of truly biblical proportions. Hundreds of billions of brain cells called neurons stretch toward each other with root-like growths called axons and dendrites. As close as they might get, the tiny nerve endings of one axon never touches those of the dendrites branching toward it. Instead, memories and other thoughts have to hurdle what are called synaptic gaps. Without chemicals called neurotransmitters (such as dopamine, norepinephrine, serotonin and acetylcholine) bridging them, these tiny gaps may as well be as wide as the Grand Canyon. Information just can't get from one neuron to the other. And that means memories, though stored throughout your brain, are just out of reach. "You know that if you have a phone, I can call you," says Michael Ebadi, Ph.D.,

professor of pharmacology and neurology at the University of Nebraska College of Medicine in Omaha. "But if you don't have a phone, there's nothing I can do. That's the way it is with neurotransmitters. In order for things to occur, you know you need transmitters. In the absence of transmitters, biological function is halted." If neurotransmitters are the stuff that helps transmit memories, then what makes neurotransmitters? Although the brain's primary fuel is glucose, experts believe that key vitamins and minerals supply the raw material for many of these neurotransmitters. And that may be what's at the heart of many memory loss problems. Although Americans eat a lot of food, they don't always choose the right kinds. As a result, many of us just don't get enough brain-boosting nutrients. And even if you are among the few who are getting the Daily Values of these essential nutrients, you may not be home free as far as memory is concerned. (Prevention's Healing With Vitamins, Rodale Press, Inc., 1996; p. 375)

You only need to forget something important, even just temporarily, to recall how precious our memories are to us, and how much of a role they play in everyday life and what we accomplish. Without a functioning memory, G-d forbid, life starts all over again every moment, leaving no room for growth, relationships, or any of the important things in life that make human life so special. We can live relatively well without many parts of our body if need be, but a life without a functioning memory is barely any life at all.

And yet, all of that comes down to synaptic gaps.

With all due respect to the Creator of the Universe, it seems that the safer bet in life would have been to avoid the gaps and just make the connections direct. But that's only because we humans are always looking for the safest and easiest route to follow in life. Not to mention that we have little or no appreciation of how synaptic gaps play a central role in the facilitating of free-will and earning reward in the World-to-Come, the purpose of life.

I certainly don't have an idea, but I'm willing to venture a guess, and even tie it into this week's double parshah.

Computers have perfect memories, at least compared to us humans. However, that perfection seems to go hand-in-hand with some level of automation; all the "choices" the computer makes are the result of pre-programmed responses to situations that arise. They're not very human, and therefore not very G-dly.

Furthermore, all computers, wired the exact same way and consisting of the exact same components will act exactly the same way with fantastic technical consistency. On the other hand, no two humans are the same, and even identical twin brothers can be quite different from one another, each excelling in areas that the other does not.

One reason is *siyita d'Shemaya*, or Heavenly help. Indeed, the Talmud reveals that many aspects of memory depend upon *siyita d'Shemaya* (Megillah 6b). And whenever that is the case, there is room for man to choose to turn to G-d for help, the point of free-will and life itself. Indeed, like the process

of birth, which depends upon so many near-impossible situations not going wrong, our process of remembering leaves plenty of room for prayer and good deeds in order to warrant that Heavenly help. And, let's face it, it is our acknowledged dependence on G-d that makes us even consider the need to be holy.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Do not worship idols, nor make molten gods for yourselves; I am G-d your G- d. (Vayikra 19:4)

Money has been called the root of all evil, but it is not really true, otherwise it would be hated. The root of all evil is a perversion of our own sense of G-dliness, which makes us strive for independence beyond G-d Himself. On Yom Kippur, the subject of the first part of this week's parshios, is about atoning for too much independence, the source of most sins.

Money is just one of those wonderful devices that G-d created to allow us to either use in His service, or to delude ourselves into believing we can succeed beyond what is really possible.

Part of the illusion we can create is that of health. When we feel good, we feel almost invincible. Even if we get sick, we tend to believe that we will heal completely for certain, when in reality we might already be sick beyond repair, G-d forbid. It is a physically dangerous world out there. Even before we start talking about human terrorists, we have to address the issue of bacterial and viral terrorists that are at constant war within our bodies.

Like most people, I have always had a fascination with the human body and the way it works. It is awesome, and then some. In fact, I usually get emotionally overwhelmed trying to take in all the various systems at work to make us work, seeing how much has to work in tandem just to take a small little baby step. It is very, very humbling.

But when I'm not sick or looking into anatomy books, I'm simply taking life for granted. Walking, jogging, going from place to place, and from one thing to another, often without thinking twice. It makes me feel independent, at which point I make a point of thanking G-d for all of it, but there are plenty of times I forget to thank G-d, and plenty of folks who never think to, which is why they end up looking at themselves as gods, or the next best thing.

Idol worship, at the end of the day, is just man trying to expand his sense of independence. It is a way of acknowledging the miracle of life with having to take responsibility for it. It is the way that man is able to be grateful for his existence without having to owe anyone for it, to the point that people even worship what they call the devil. It is a temporary and feeble attempt to bypass the need to be holy, even though every aspect of human life, from synaptic gaps to generation gaps. It is striking how one day Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was the most powerful secular leader in the country, moving ahead full-steam to carry out what he saw to be the future of Medinat Yisroel, in spite of all the opposition he was causing to surface. Then, the next day he was gone, and although not dead, months later it's as if he never existed.

It's not that the political situation has improved, ideologically- speaking; it hasn't. In fact, one week after Sharon's demise, Shimon Peres commented that, as impressed as he was about Sharon's willingness to move forward with concessions, he saw in Olmert even greater willingness to go what Peres sees as the final distance in some process that most of us have no idea about-a process that our two parshios specifically warn against.

From a secular Israeli politician's point of view, the ironic direction history has taken is coincidental. It is not seen as the fulfillment of warnings from the Torah, but just an unfortunate turn of events: just as Israel was in a generous and peaceful mood, her neighbors went in the other direction. And, the dynamics of the Middle-East are becoming an ever- widening whirlpool that is beginning to suck in nations far beyond its borders.

It always reminds me of that Rashi on Parashas Shemos, the one on the posuk that has Pharaoh planning against the Jews lest they multiply and turn against Egypt. The Hebrew is poetic: "Pen yirbeh? Ken yirbeh!" Lest they multiply? For sure they will multiply, meaning that the more Pharaoh schemed to destroy the Jewish population, the more G-d created the means, i.e., supernaturally, for them to multiply, and how (six births each time!).

It's a lesson that the secularists should learn well, but which of course they won't, just as Pharaoh in his time didn't learn it, which raises the question, what's the point? Hope. It is to give hope to those who believe in Hashgachah Pratis and the Tanach, and for those looking for signs that the events of today are far more than just a dark, passing phase of history. More than likely, they are the last phase of history.

It's time to forsake Nebuchadnetzar's ways, if not nationally, then personally. That's not an easy thing to do these days with everything available around us, but an absolutely necessary one nonetheless.

Have a good Shabbos,
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Text

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