

A MATTER OF WILL

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

The Egyptians chased after them, all the horses and chariots of Pharaoh, with his horsemen and forces. They overtook them while they camped by the sea, beside Pi-HaChiros, before Ba'al-Tzefon. When Pharaoh approached, the Children of Israel looked up and saw that the Egyptians were chasing them, and became terrified. (Shemos 14:9-10)

Trapped! With their backs to the sea, the Jewish people looked up at the approaching Egyptian army which had only one mission: capture the fleeing people. But, as Kabbalah teaches, the events down here on earth only reflect the real battles taking place in Heaven, usually between the angels representing the protagonists and the antagonists. And, success down here is only determined by success up there, as the following account portrays.

Although the sea had not yet split, Bnei Yisroel entered the sea until it was up to their necks, fighting against the great waves. In the meantime, the Sitra Achra tried to persuade the Angel of the Sea to drown them by arguing with G-d that B'nei Yisroel did not deserve to be saved. "Master of the Universe!" he began to argue, "Did not the Jewish people worship idols in Egypt? Why do they deserve a miracle?! However, G-d answered him, "Fool! Did they serve idols as a matter of choice (m'toch ratzon)? They only worshipped idols because they had been in slavery (m'toch shibud) for so long. There is a difference between actions performed as a matter of force, and those performed as an act of rebellion!" (Yalkut Shimoni 1:234)

This is an interesting dialogue that took place before the miraculous splitting of the sea that saved the Jewish people from certain death at the hands of the pursuing Egyptian army. But the Sitra Achra wasn't born yesterday either. He knew that G-d does not punish people for sins they could not avoid. As the Prosecuting Angel, he had to be aware of the laws of Divine justice, so what was he really trying to do?

The previous debate is in contrast to a similar debate, which had a different outcome:

The Holy One, Blessed is He, said to Gavriel, "Go and make a mark on the foreheads of the righteous, a [letter] Tav with ink, so that the Destroying Angel will have no power over them, and on the evil, a Tav from blood, so that the destroying angels will overcome them."

The Attribute of Justice said before The Holy One, Blessed is He, "Master of the Universe! Why are

these different from these?"

He answered her, "These are completely righteous, and these ones are completely evil."

She said before Him, "Master of the Universe! They [the righteous] could have protested [against the actions of the evil and change them for the better] but did not!"

He said to her, "It is revealed and known before Me that had they protested, it would not have been accepted."

She said before Him, "Master of the Universe, before You it is revealed and known, but who revealed it them?!"

And, thus it says, "Old man, young man and maiden, children and women, shall you slay to complete destruction; but do not approach any man upon whom is the sign (Tav). Begin from My Sanctuary!" And [after] it says, "So they began with the elders who were before the Temple" (Yechezkel 9:6). (Shabbos 55a)

That Midrash is talking about the time of the First Temple, just before its destruction by Nebuchadnetzar. It was devastating and there was a tremendous loss of life, and not just of the people who had become sloppy in their service of G-d, but even for the righteous ones as well. If only G-d had been able to counter the Attribute of Justice's argument . . .

However, not only was The Holy One, Blessed is He, not born yesterday, He wasn't born at all! Not to mention that He wrote the rule book, and that all the angels are only projections of His own Will. So, why did G-d win the debate in the first argument and lose it in the second one? And what, if anything, does it say to us?

SHABBOS DAY:

G-d said to Kayin, *"Why are you angry, and why are you dejected? If you did the right thing would I not accept it? But by not doing the right thing, mistake crouches at the doorstep. He desires you, but you can rule over him."* (Bereishis 4:6-7)

The difference between the two cases is obvious. In the first Midrash, the Jewish people would never have worshipped idols had they not spent so much time in Egypt. Even if they enjoyed it and felt as if they had gained something from it, it was only because they did not know better, or that they had absorbed the culture from the Egyptians all around them. A person can only be so strong while exposed to spiritual impurity for so long a period of time.

G-d's response to the Sitra Achra does not mean that the Jewish people were one hundred percent innocent. Don't forget that they were made to believe that they were about to be eliminated either by the Egyptian army or by the water of the sea. They suffered, and more than likely as part of a purging process of the effects of the idol worship with which they were involved.

Indeed, that may have been part of the Sitra Achra's argument. "Fine," he may have been arguing, "so they were dragged into idol worship against their own will. Nevertheless, You can't deny the effect that it has had on them. How can they merit being saved if they are going to be stuck repeating the ways of the Egyptians amongst who they lived for so long?"

And, he was not that off the mark. There is no question that remnants of Egyptian culture stayed with the Jewish people as they wandered in the desert, and it resulted in the deaths of at least three thousand Jews in the incident of the golden calf. Nevertheless, whatever effect Egyptian idol worship had on the Jewish people over the course of two centuries, it still remained shallow enough that the nation could receive Torah at Mt. Sinai.

Well, not exactly. For, part of the reason why the Jewish people were made to die when G-d spoke the first two of the Ten Commandments directly to them was so they could be "rebuilt" anew, as in Techiyas HaMeisim. Indeed, it was the special Heavenly dew, reserved for the period of Resurrection of the Dead, that G-d used to revive the Jewish nation that had died each time for the over-exposure to such a high level of holiness.

Dieing and coming back was a sure bet to eradicate the effects of "shibud," at least, to justify not drowning the Jewish people by the sea. The fact that the Jewish people were involved in idol worship against their will, also had the effect that it did not penetrate their consciousness too deeply, keeping it somewhat superficial for them.

In the second case, for the Jews at the time of the First Temple, their lack of effort to reach out to their wayward brothers was not the result of any cultural pressure. Rather, it was something inherent in the people, something for which they could be held accountable, and it stopped them from trying hard enough to do outreach, regardless of the results.

After being in exile for over 2,000 years without a Temple, we have been living m'toch shibud for a long time now. We have absorbed so much of our host cultures, some for the good and much for the bad, especially in recent times. It does not bode well for the Jewish people, especially as we enter historically murky and often violent waters.

On the other hand, this may be cause for extra mercy from Heaven. There is no question that today, the Sitra Achra is once again trying to "drown" us in a sea of troubles, pointing his finger at all our non-Jewish activities to prove that we are beyond repair. There is probably a great argument going on up there that is determining the fate of the Jewish people as we go about our daily activities, and it will be up to G-d to win the debate.

It wouldn't hurt to make it easier for Him. Before the tally is down in Heaven, let's do it down here on earth by deciding, honestly, for ourselves, how much of our Western ways are the result of long, ongoing cultural and familial pressures, and how much we choose to do, as a function of our personal yetzer haras. Yes, the sea always crouches at our doorstep, especially in exile. The question we have to ask is, "At whose invitation?"

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

A righteous man will flourish like a date palm, like a cedar in Lebanon he will grow tall. (Tehillim 92:13)

Last Shabbos afternoon (28 Teves, 5766), Rabbi Yitzchak Kaduri passed away at the age of 108 years old. Not only was he a Gadol HaDor, but he was the Mekubel HaDor -one of, if not THE greatest Kabbalist of the generation, someone whose mind lived in the upper realms, though he lived amongst us here on earth. And, he was someone who was told by the Ben Ish Chai that he would live a long life, and not die before seeing the face of Moshiach.

As with all people of such great spiritual stature, the stories and legends abound. As to how many are true, that is something only the Mekubel and G-d Himself knew for sure. However, what is not open for dispute is that he was a great tzaddik and miracle worker, in the true sense of the term. We'd all like to assume that, just as Rav Kaduri, zt"l, fulfilled the part of the blessing of living a long life, he also did not leave this world without first seeing the face of Moshiach, and lately, many have said that he did.

The real question is, what does this mean for us? We, as a nation, are at a critical point in Jewish history, and it seems to be getting more critical each day. Years ago, a Torah Code was found that said: "Know the tenth month, know 5766." The tenth month, of course, is Teves, the month we just finished. It was assumed that 5766 was, is, a year, this year, the one that began last Rosh Hashanah. And, guess what?

That same year was found encoded in all five books of the Torah - several times. Often words associated with redemption were also found clustered around the encoded date. But, when it comes to Torah codes, those that talk about redemption, and especially those that deal with the future, they are relegated to the level of "amusing".

Well, Teves 5766 has been a big month. On the fifth of Teves, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had a stroke from which he has still not woken up. And, just like that, he has been removed from the political scene, just as Yitzchak Rabin was removed in his time. The Americans, seizing the moment that emerged from the political vacuum (with Sharon not yet dead, Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert did not fully assume the reigns of power), went behind the Israelis' back and promised the Arabs of East Jerusalem the vote in the upcoming election.

Irony of ironies. Hamas, originally funded by the Israelis to undermine PLO control, became the enemy instead of the ally. Then, in an effort to control Hamas, Sharon, at the urging of the U.S. government, worked unilaterally to shore up Fatah's political strength, to encourage the Palestinians to pursue peace through mutual acceptance of one another, at the cost of Jewish security and the lives of 10,000 settlers.

The assumption, or rather the gamble, was that the Palestinian people could be trusted to elect a government that would be devoted to the American Road Map to peace. And, though a lot of

political gambles do work in the end, in the case of this very critical one, and much to the shock of the entire Western world, it did not. Instead, by virtue of Western democracy, Hamas, which to this day does not accept the existence of the Jewish state, and who is a terrorist organization funded by Iran, the other major concern of the Israelis and the world at this point, became the "owner" living right next door.

Talk about Hashgochah Pratis!

Then a few days later, Rabbi Kaduri was taken from the world, and it's as if the floodgates have lost their strength to hold back the violent waters that are about to rush in. The cedar of Lebanon that shielded us from the Hurricane winds of history, is no longer with us.

And, all this in the month of Teves, just like the Torah codes alluded to.

MELAVE MALKAH:

The Children of Israel went on dry land in the sea, and the water was for them a wall of water on their right and their left. (Shemos 14:29)

Ironically, the Torah codes span the very parshios we are reading these days, which deal with the redemption from Egypt, through the episode of the golden calf, and just after. The Final Redemption, as the Arizal said, is really just the completion of the one that began in these parshios. Thus, the Ben Ish Chai (who gave Rav Kaduri his blessing), pointed out that the gematria of "keitz" (as in "Keitz HaYamim - End-of-Days) is equal to the number of years we left Egypt early, or rather, prematurely: 190.

Those of us who enjoy the mystical aspect of life, and who yearn for things like redemption and Kibbutz Golios, would like to believe that the Torah codes are a message from Heaven, part of which has to do with the context of the codes and the timing. We'd like to believe that "5766" means this year, just as "tenth month" means "Teves." They already found: Sharon, ill, fifth Teves, bleeding, operation, destroy, brain - all clustered around the original code.

In spite of the earth-shattering events that have occurred in the last few weeks, the facts are hard to know, but then again, does it really matter? Regardless of the veracity of the codes, the events and their underlying irony are real, as will be their consequences.

Also in this parshah is another vort. The first time "wall of water" is mentioned (Shemos 14:22), it is spelled Ches-VAV-Mem-Heh; it is just as the Jewish people began to enter the area of dry land framed by the walls of water on both sides. The second time "Chomah" is mentioned, it is spelled without the Vav: Ches, Mem-Heh, which can be read: chaimah (anger), indicating something had happened between the first mention and the second one to anger G-d.

This the Vilna Gaon explained: Before the Jewish people had to walk between the two walls of water, they were duly impressed by the miracle itself. However, after they entered the area

surrounded by the walls of water that, at any moment in time could collapse on them and drown them, they became nervous and fearful, and that disappointed, and therefore, angered G-d. "After all I have done for you, you still doubt My desire to save you?!"

"Chamas," in Hebrew, also means "anger." Maybe it is not so much the anger because of how much we have come to imitate our gentile allies, amongst whom we have lived for so long, but because as we walk between the "walls" that threaten us on both sides: the United States and Europe on the West side, and the Palestinians and Arab world on the East side, we do not have enough faith in G-d.

For almost sixty years now, and in spite of the rejection of Torah and its values, great miracles have occurred not only to preserve the tiny state of Israel, but to even expand it against all the odds. Yet, when push comes to shove, we have capitulated (m'toch ratzon) to the logic of the West, only to find out that the gamble has put us in an even more dangerous situation than ever before.

Everything going on down here, is just a projection of what is going on up there. And, up there a court case is in progress; there is an argument taking place that includes all the instruments of Divine justice. It's a debate about the Children of Israel, what they believe, who they serve, and what they are doing. Just how much is a function of shibud, and how much is a function of ratzon? That is the question.

All is for the good, and the redemption is destined to occur. How smooth it occurs will depend entirely upon the outcome of the Heavenly debate.

*Have a great Shabbos,
PW*

Text

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