

# BORN TO BE WISE

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

## FRIDAY NIGHT:

*How can I alone carry your contentiousness, your burdens, and your quarrels? (Devarim 1:12)*

This is one of those weeks when I am writing while events are happening around me (Motzei Parashat Pinchas) that can change the course of history by the time this parshah sheet becomes relevant. Even a report by CNN discussed how the present conflict has the potential, G-d forbid, to spread into a much larger regional war that could see U.S. troops invading Iran from Iraq. Then, who knows where it can spread from there, but most have a pretty good guess.

The problem with history is that the future is so unpredictable. If it were more predictable, then we would have avoided World War I, and certainly World War II. Things just seem to happen, and even though some of the most brilliant strategists sit down to discuss what has happened, what is going on, and how to manipulate the future, in the end, things just seem to blow up in their faces, figuratively and literally.

The reason why is simple. To predict the future means to know what G-d is thinking and what He plans to do. If you are not a prophet, that is impossible, and even more so if you don't believe G-d runs history. The leaders making the decisions rarely incorporate G-d and His will into their picture of history, which denies them to consciously play a role in the fulfillment of G-d's plan for Creation. Whatever they think they are doing, at the end of the day they are really only doing what G-d wants to get done.

This means that G-d tells them what to do, but in a way that they think the ideas are their own. Their perspective, which is that which guides their decision-making process, is based upon what G-d wants them to see, so that they will respond in a way that is logical to them, but really just doing what G-d wants accomplished to further the cause of redemption. Only a leader with the fear of G-d is privy to the truth about history, so that he can act as a conscious partner with G-d in forming it.

The message could not be more appropriate for this period of time.

"Eichah?"

It's a question that a person can only ask upon waking up to reality. It's the question a person asks upon finding himself drowning in consequences that he could have avoided had he only taken life more seriously, and had only been real with the reality of G-d.

"We were caught, just like G-d said He would catch us."

"We were punished, just as He had warned we would be."

Ketushah rockets are falling on our Israeli cities, just as was predicted years ago, and we are now back in Gaza in full force, just as was foretold by so many last year in advance of the hitnatkut (disengagement).

"HOW . . . how could we not have seen THEN what we were setting ourselves up to go through NOW? HOW could we have been so willing to have taken what we clearly see now as a completely unnecessary risk?"

"How?" It was the first question ever asked to man after he perpetrated the first sin ever, except that it was pronounced, "aiyekah" and is translated as, "Where are you?" However, it wasn't a question that G-d was asking of man, it was a question that G-d asked man to ask of himself: Where am I, that is, where did it get me, this sin of mine? What did I gain by throwing away Paradise? What was I thinking at the time that convinced me that gaining so little could make it worthwhile to lose so much?"

### **SHABBOS DAY:**

*HOW has the city that was once so populous remained lonely! She has become like a widow! She that was great among the nations, a princess among the provinces, has become tributary. (Eichah 1:1)*

It's like a child who, upon seeing his enemy in a group of other children, throws a stone seeking revenge. Sure enough, the stone hits its mark, and a tremendous scream goes out from the hit child, as all eyes focus on the thrower who all of a sudden cowers from the unpredicted negative attention.

The next thing he knows is that the principal comes out to see what is causing all the commotion. After wiping the blood away from the boy's head and sending him to the nurse, the principal turns in the direction of all the pointing fingers and spies the boy who is responsible. He does not know the whole story of the two boys, nor does he care about it: no one throws a stone at another person, at least in his school.

As the principal advances towards him with a grim look on his face, the stone thrower sees his life flash before his eyes. He no longer remembers the sense of accomplishment he felt momentarily upon accurately hitting his enemy with the stone. All of that was quickly wiped away by the extreme sense of dread he now feels as he wonders how far-reaching the consequences of his action will be. His life is about to change, perhaps forever, of that he is sure, and he wonders what it was in the first place that blinded him to all of this as he threw the stone.

Thus, the rabbis teach:

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

However, if you think about it, that is not the definition of a wise man, it is the definition of a prophet. Perhaps that is why the exact translation of the Talmudic statement is not "one who sees what will be born," that is, what will end up occurring the future, but "one who sees what has been born," that is, now, in the present.

In other words, it is not about predicting the future; it is about properly and accurately understanding the present. A chacham (wise man) is someone who can accurately decipher the present situation, and then determine an appropriate response in the here-and-now. After having done this, the future will take care of itself, at least until it becomes the present.

Thus, as the Talmud says, a chacham is "better than a prophet" (Bava Basra 12a), because he is able to work out on his own what a prophet receives directly from G-d. For, the net effect of properly dealing with the present is knowing the future, for whatever is best for the present is best for the future, because G-d helps those who live in reality and are "modeh al ha-emes" - admit the truth, making the events of the future work out well, even if a few miracles are necessary along the way.

Thus, one of the simplest rabbinical teachings is also one of the most profound:

Consider the loss incurred for performing a mitzvah compared to its reward, and the benefit received for sinning compared to the loss. Consider three things and you will not come to sin: Know what is above you - an eye that sees and an ear that hears, and all your deeds are recorded in the Book. (Pirkei Avot 2:1)

Consider NOW the loss incurred for performing a mitzvah compared to its reward, and the benefit received for sinning compared to the loss. Consider NOW the three things and you will not come to sin IN THE FUTURE: Know NOW what is above you - an eye that sees and an ear that hears, and all your deeds are recorded in the Book.

### **SEUDAT SHLISHIT:**

*If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I place Jerusalem above my greatest joy. (Tehillim 137:5-6)*

The Second Temple was destroyed in the Jewish year 3830, or 70 CE, some 1,936 years ago. The First Temple was destroyed 492 years prior to that date, in the year 3338, or 423 BCE, 2,428 years ago. Even though the Second Temple was a shadow of the First Temple, kind of like the same way the Second Tablets, which Moshe Rabbeinu came down with from Mt. Sinai after the episode of the golden calf, they too were on a lower level than the First Tablets, and this was the reaction to its loss by the Jewish people of that time:

Our Rabbis taught: When the Temple was destroyed for the second time, large numbers in Klal Israel became ascetics, forbidding themselves to neither to eat meat nor to drink wine. Rebi Yehoshua got into a conversation with them and said to them: "My sons, why do you not eat meat nor drink wine?"

They replied, "Shall we eat flesh which used to be brought as an offering on the altar, now that this altar is no more? Shall we drink wine which used to be poured as a libation on the altar, but now no longer?"

He said to them, "If that is so, we should not eat bread either, because the Meal-Offerings have ceased."

They said, "We can manage with fruit."

"We should not eat fruit either," [he said,] "because there is no longer the offering of first fruits."

"Then we can manage with other fruits."

"But," [he continued,] "we should not drink water, because there is no longer any ceremony of the pouring of water!"

They could find no answer for this, so he told them, "My sons, listen to me. Not to mourn at all is impossible, because the destruction has indeed occurred. However, to mourn too much is also not possible, because we do not impose on the community a hardship which the majority cannot bear . . ." (Malachi 3:9). (Bava Basra 60a)

Having lived in the time of the Temple, these were people who appreciated what they had lost. We, on the other hand, so deep into this long and final exile, have never known Temple life, so for us anticipating redemption is as sought after as long as our quality of life is not disrupted, and exile is a passing dream. Therefore:

The rabbis ordained that a man may stucco his house, but he should leave a little bare. How much should this be? Rav Yosef says, "A square cubit (about 18 - 24 inches square)," to which Rav Chisda adds that it must be by the door [of entry] . . . (Ibid.)

As for the rest of the house, it looks as if geulah has already come, since prosperity has allowed us to furnish our homes with the best that the gentile world has to offer. We seem to have forgotten that though THEY are not in mourning over the Temple, WE are.

A man can prepare a full-course banquet, but he should leave out an item or two. What should this be? Rav Papa says, "The hors d'oeuvre of salted fish." (Ibid.)

Perhaps if anything reveals just how much we have lost our spiritual way, it is our smeichot. No question that we must praise and honor G-d for all the good He has done for us, and to celebrate Britot and Chatunot with honor and joy, but if G-d refuses to smile since the Temple was destroyed, then who are we to try and cheer Him up? Like so much in Judaism, these mitzvot are also a matter of timing, meaning that how we celebrate these important mitzvot also depends upon what is going on in history.

A woman can put on all her ornaments, but leave off one or two. What should this be? Rav said, "[Not

to remove the hair in the temple." (Ibid.)

Today, the problem is exactly the reverse of what it once was. In the time of the destruction, Rebi Yehoshua had to convince the people of his time not to overdo it and mourn excessively. Today, we have to be convinced to mourn at all. We talk about scaling down our physical pleasures, but in the name of modesty. What about in the name of mourning over the loss of the Temple . . . over this extended exile which has gotten so bad that we don't even know the difference anymore between exile and redemption?!

As it says, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I place Jerusalem above my greatest joy" (Tehillim 137:5-6). What is meant by "my greatest joy"? Rebi Yitzchak said, "This is symbolized by the ashes which we place on the head of a bridegroom."

Rav Papa asked Abaye, "Where should they be placed?"

[He replied], "Where the tefillin is worn . . ." (Ibid.)

### **MELAVE MALKAH:**

*Rejoice with Jerusalem . . .* (Yeshayahu 61:10)

The rule is as the Talmud states:

Whoever mourns for Tzion will be privileged to behold her joy, as it says, "Rejoice with Jerusalem" (Yeshayahu 61:10).

Which begs the question, "What are we doing?" We have the Kotel, the retaining wall of the Temple, and too few people go on a regular basis. We have Jerusalem, and so few Jews in the Diaspora even long to visit her. And, after 2,000 years away from the land, we have Eretz Yisroel and so few have any yearning to live on holy land.

As we have said before, a person may have a dozen reasons (excuses) as to why he can't make aliyah, but none of them apply to the mitzvah of yearning to live in Eretz Yisroel. That's right, MITZVAH. The only inherent danger in YEARNING to live in Eretz Yisroel is that it might catch on and one day force a Jew to introspect and ask, "Hey, why ARE we still in Chutz L'Aretz?" And who knows what will follow at that point!

In the meantime, the Talmud concludes:

It has been taught: Rebi Yishmael ben Elisha said, "Since the day of the destruction of the Temple we should by right not eat meat or drink wine, only we do not cause a hardship on the community unless the majority can endure it. And from the day that a Government has come into power which issues cruel decrees against us and forbids to us the observance of the Torah and the precepts and does not allow us to enter into the 'week of the son' (Brit Milah) - according to another version,

'redemption of the son,' we should take upon ourselves not to marry and have children, and thereby let the seed of Avraham our father come to an end of itself. However, let Israel go their way: it is better that they should err in ignorance than presumptuously." (Ibid.)

We are a people of great "ups" and great "downs," of full exiles and partial redemptions. And, at the end of all the good times, we are stuck asking ourselves, "How? How did it ever come down to this again, when once again we are strangers in a strange land with which we used to be so familiar? How could we have so misjudged the situation back then to not see what could come in the future?"

Eichah.

As the Talmud states, if we remain in mourning for Yerushalayim, the symbol of our special and unique relationship with G-d, then our entire lifestyle will be in line to reflect such an attitude. This enables us to know what to do in the present in order to maintain that relationship, which allows us to protect ourselves in the future.

That is Tisha B'Av. This is "Shabbat Chazon," the "Shabbos of Vision," when we get real with life and the national ambitions of the Jewish people. It is a time to become "chachamim," people who can accurately and honestly evaluate the present, so that we can will and G-d can fulfill. All hope for the future lies in our being able to do this in the present.

May we merit to see our days of mourning turned into days of joy.

*Shabbat Shalom,*  
*PW*

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Text

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