

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE READY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

Moshe went and spoke these words to all of Israel. He said to them, "I am a hundred and twenty years old today; I can no longer go out and come in . . ." (Devarim 31:1-2)

Welcome to 5766.

As I stood before my employer, I realized all of a sudden how tenuous my position was. There I was, trying to justify my existence, trying to gain the confidence of my boss so that he would see fit to re-hire me. My past performance did not necessarily guarantee me a position at the firm in the upcoming year, and I have to say, I was very nervous.

And, to make matters worst, I had to present my budget for the upcoming year. I had to justify my expense account and walk out with a decision that would assure me the necessary funding to do my job and do it well. Item by item, I had to explain why I thought it was important for my performance in the upcoming year.

It was exhausting, and in the end, when I finally finished my appeal and closed the door behind me, I felt as if the trial was only really beginning. After all, if at any point in time during the upcoming year I did not live up to my agreement, I could lose my job or at least lose my expense account. I definitely had my work cut out for me.

Who is my boss? G-d. What is my job? Another year of life. What is the expense account? All the resources I will need in the upcoming year to be able to perform mitzvos and maximize my performance as a G-d-fearing Jew. When was the interview? It will be, b"H, this coming Rosh Hashanah, and safely assuming that I am not righteous, and praying that I am not evil either in the eyes of Heaven, throughout the Ten Days of Repentance.

It's more than just that. When Shakespeare said, "All of life is a stage," he probably didn't know just how true his statement was. Though life seems to be quite random with countless moving parts that seem to work independently of each other, the truth is that everything, down to the smallest detail and including the largest one, has been perfectly scripted and well-synchronized. And all of it, without fail, is working towards a singular and Divine master plan for Creation.

G-d is the playwright, and the casting director Who is responsible for casting all the parts, the director and the producer. He wrote the play long before we were born, and had in His Mind exactly

who He would need to play the part perfectly at precisely the right time. Day after day He searches for and finds just the right person and situation to play the role that He designed as part of the overall plot for Creation.

There are heroes and villains, and billions of "seconds." The question is, who will get which part? To be in a supporting role is no big deal; being alive makes one a part of the play just like that, even if one is just an extra playing a tribesman in some remote part of the Amazon. And, being a world leader in a major role, does not make one a hero if he or she leads us in a direction that runs contrary to Torah and its goals for the Jewish people.

What people don't realize is that they have been in training and rehearsal for their parts in the play since they were very young. As each decision helped to mold the person into being who the person was becoming, literally defining the part that person is destined to play in the master plan of Creation, the Talent Scout of all talent scouts has been watching, taking note of all the talent in the world He has created, and casting the "actors" for His premier performance.

However, it is really on Rosh Hashanah (and for the "in-between people" the entire time of Aseres Yemai Teshuvah) that most of the auditions take place. That is, when we pass before G-d and try to prove how our talents justify our being part of His main cast, especially as a hero and not as a villain. Then, if we have trained well enough over the years, and have been successful enough to zero in on what it is G-d looks for in a star character, we may be fortunate enough to land a main part in the Final Act of the play called, "Creation and Its Ultimate Fulfillment."

Thus, Yehoshua merited to replace the great Moshe Rabbeinu who had completed HIS part on exactly the 120th year of his life, right to the day and to the exact moment.

SHABBOS DAY:

Moshe summoned Yehoshua and said to him before the eyes of Israel, "Be strong and courageous, for you shall come with this people to the Land that G-d swore to their fathers to give them . . ." (Devarim 31:7)

The world seems to be divided between those who think they are great and are doing wonderful things, and those who think they are mediocre doing somewhat unimportant things, at least unimportant to the world at large. It is not an even split, and there are some in-betweens, but those are the two extremes though it is possible for both groups to be wrong about themselves and their deeds in the eyes of G-d.

The most important thing is to know there is a game plan for Creation, which is why the Torah was given to reveal. Not knowing the game plan is like being on closed-circuit TV without knowing it: you go about your business as if no one is watching while all kinds of people are watching you. Instead of putting up your guard and remaining alert, custom- tailoring your actions to convey the right impression to those watching you, you do just the opposite being off-guard.

Then there are the people who know their lives are making a difference, for better or for worst. They sit in places like the White House, 10 Downing Street, the Kremlin, and even in the Knesset in Israel. They make decisions that impact millions, if not billions of people, in ways that even they can't reckon, and even they can totally miss the point of life in this world.

They have leading parts in the play, but the production is more like Candid Camera. They are a central focus, but as far as they are concerned, the camera might as well be hidden in the bush. They act as masters at their own game when in fact, unwittingly, they are pawns (extras), BIG pawns in G-d's Master Plan for Creation.

As you may recall, to have free-will a person requires three beliefs:

1. A person must believe in G-d, which means he believes in Objective Truth, a single opinion about life in this world that applies to all of mankind. Without this level of belief, principles in life become a matter of opinion, and opinions are the result of subjective perspectives. It is virtually impossible for a person to be "free" of his own opinion since it is usually the only way he relates to reality. On the other hand, when there is an objective reality to which one can compare his own perspective, it becomes possible to see flaws in one's own arguments about life.
2. A person must believe that G-d has communicated that Objective Truth to mankind, which is tantamount to believing in Torah from Mt. Sinai. If we do not have access to Objective Truth, then we are back to square one again regarding being "free" of our own subjective realities, to which is otherwise like being virtual slaves.
3. A person must know about and understand the existence of an internal yetzer hara (evil inclination). Without this type of knowledge a person can only assume that all inner voices are his own, and therefore they are to be obeyed. Ignorant of this third point, even G-d-fearing people can rationalize sins and find justification for doing them. The first chapter of the classic work of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, "The Path of the Just," is "Watchfulness." Watchfulness of the yetzer hara, the biggest con-artist of history, designed to trick us in order to make us smarter, better, and more righteous. You can't negotiate with a partner you don't know about or believe in; you can only be his victim, as billions seem to be in every generation. There are ten "gates" in Rabbi Luzzatto's book, designed to help a person become righteous, and some say, to become a prophet. The first gate assumes that the reader already believes in the first two points, and begins the chapter with the this third idea.

As we pass by the Greatest of Casting Directors during the Aseres Yemai Teshuvah, this is what is being evaluated. Each "actor" on the stage of life is being graded in terms of these three beliefs, and where one stands with respect to each belief determines what kind of part one plays in history.

Apparently, Yehoshua bin Nun, whose very name alludes to the Nun Sha'arei Binah, (the Fifty Gates of Understanding) apparently scored very high on the test. Hence, he was given such an important role of being the Moshiach Ben Yosef of his generation.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

But I will surely have concealed My face on that day because of all the evil that it (the Jewish nation) did, for it had turned to gods of others. (Devarim 31:18)

This, of course, is the concept of Hester Panim - the hiding of G-d's face from man, and comes from the Hebrew words: haster astir panai. Thus, whereas once we merited to actually hear G-d speak and witness His miracles in a way that could not be disputed, after Hester Panim took affect, we were left only with a world that resembles an airplane on auto pilot.

But is it an all-or-nothing mode? In other words, because G-d hides His face from mankind, does it mean that no man, not even a righteous person, can see His hand in history? This certainly seems to be the basis of the following dialogue:

Our Rabbis taught: When Rebi Yosi ben Kisma fell ill, Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion went to visit him. He said to him, "Chanina, my brother, do you not know that this nation has been placed in power by G-d Himself, for she has destroyed His house, burned His Temple, killed His pious ones, and caused His good ones to perish, and still continues to rule! Yet, I have heard that you sit and study Torah and gather crowds in public with a Torah Scroll resting on your lap!"

He replied, "Mercy will come from Heaven."

"I am trying to be sensible," continued Rebi Yosi, "and you say, 'Mercy will come from Heaven'!? I would not be surprised if they burn you together with your Torah scroll!"

Rebi Chanina then asked, "How am I as far as the World to Come is concerned?"

Rebi Yosi asked, "Have you no merits at all?"

He answered, "I once mistook the Purim Seudah charity money for the ordinary charity money [both of which I was responsible for] and distributed it to the needy [compensating for the loss from my own pocket]."

Rebi Yosi said, "If that is the case, let my portion be with you and my fate similar to yours."

They said it was not long before Rebi Yosi ben Kisma passed away and all of the Roman notables went to his grave and delivered a great eulogy in his honor. Upon returning, they found Rebi Chanina ben Teradion sitting and occupying himself with the Torah, publicly gathering assemblies, and keeping a scroll of the Law by his chest. Immediately they took him, wrapped him in the Sefer Torah, placed bundles of branches around him and set them on fire. They then brought tufts of wool, which they had soaked in water, and placed them over his heart so that he should not die quickly. His daughter exclaimed, "Father, that I should see you in this state!"

He replied, "If I alone was being burned it would have been too hard to bear. But now that I am burning together with the Sefer Torah, He who will have regard for the plight of the Torah will also

have regard for my plight." (Avodah Zarah 18a)

Talk about Hester Panim! Here a righteous man was risking his life for Torah and mitzvos, and the evil people responsible for destroying the House of G-d were able to torture one of G-d's heroes to death! A touching story it is, but a terrible tragedy nevertheless, and one that could easily intimidate others from being so bold at a time of great spiritual need, and make others wonder if G-d really runs the world!

It seems as if Hester Panim, when it operates, it does so for everyone equally - or does it?

MELAVE MALKAH:

G-d saw that the light was good, and G-d separated between the light and the darkness. (Bereishis 1:4)

G-D SEPARATED: He saw that the wicked were unworthy of using it (the light); He therefore set it apart for the righteous in the Future Time. (Rashi)

On the level of Pshat, it sounds like the Ohr HaGanuz (the Hidden Light of Creation), which is the light of Torah, which was hidden away, out of the reach of the evil of history until such time as evil is completely eradicated in Yemos HaMoshiach. From both, the Torah's and Rashi's explanation, accessing the Ohr HaGanuz seems to be an all-or-nothing reality: either it's available for everyone or it's available for no one.

However, explains the Leshem, this is not the case:

He [G-d] made a separation in the illumination of the Light, that it should not flow or give off light except for the righteous, whose actions draw it down and make it shine. However, the actions of the evil block it, leaving them in darkness, and this itself was the hiding of the Light. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 133)

Indeed, the above story of Rebi Chanina ben Teradion concludes like this:

His students called out, "Rebi, what do you see?"

"Parchment is burning," he replied, "but the letters are soaring Heavenward."

Was he making it up? Was he simply delirious? Or did he have a vision on another level of reality, on the level of the Ohr HaGanuz, a level free of the Hester Panim that seemed to have shrouded the vision of everyone else around him, with the following exception.

"Open your mouth," [they begged him] "so that the fire can enter you!"

He replied, "Let Him who gave me [my soul] take it away, but no one should injure oneself."

The Executioner then said to him, "Rabbi, if I raise the flame and take away the tufts of wool from over your heart, will you bring me to Eternal Life?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Swear to me."

He swore to him, after which he raised the flame and removed the tufts of wool from over his heart, and his soul quickly departed. The Executioner then jumped into the fire.

And, lest someone think that the rabbi was wrong and so was the executioner, the Talmud concludes with:

A Heavenly Voice exclaimed: "Rebi Chanina ben Teradion and the Executioner are going to Eternal Life."

Thus confirming that, yes, Rebi Chanina ben Teradion, in spite of the severe degree of Hester Panim affecting the entire world in his time, was able to access the Ohr HaGanuz and see the hand of G-d even at such a time. This resulted in a phenomenal level of Kiddush Hashem to such a degree that even the Roman executioner was forced to abandon his hostile way of life and surrender his life to the Ultimate Truth.

And here you have the main criterion upon that which the Master Playwright bases His decision on when deciding who will do what, when and where in His epic production. Here you have the theme of the Aseres Yemai Teshuvah, the question that echoes throughout these days of awe, when we are given a chance to audition, not just for another year of life, not just for a reasonable budget for the upcoming year that takes into account the cost of living, but also for a starring role in the only production that has ever, and will ever make a difference.

Hatzlochah Rabbah.

Have a great and productive Shabbos Shuva,

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Text

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