

OF VISIONS AND DECISIONS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

"See that I place before you this day a blessing and a curse." (Devarim 11:26)

It always amazes me how fast Rosh Hashanah comes after Tisha B'Av. Officially, there are seven weeks of consolation that separate the two, but those seven shabbatot go by as if they were only three.

The passage of time is very deceptive. Life gives the impression that one has all kinds of time to do this or do that, to make amends for one shortcoming or to fix another. And yet, if one doesn't schedule them in, all chances to do so can come and go, and leave you wondering, "Where in the world did the time go?"

It gets even more disconcerting when you consider that the future is this big massive amount of time yet to occur, and the past is this big massive amount of time that has already occurred. However, the present is but a fleeting moment, a threshold over which the future runs while rushing to become the past. This is not poetry, its reality.

You can't change the past, and you certainly can't change what you don't know is going to occur. But, how do you change that which is speeding past you at the speed of light? You may see that moment coming up? And all of a sudden, it just passed by, and now it is forever in the past, stuck in time as it is for good.

So what are we dealing with here? Where does our free-will make a difference? With regard to what are we being evaluated on over Rosh Hashanah?

Hence, the Talmud says:

All is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven. (Brochot 33b)

What does this mean exactly? It means that you can't control the future, and you can't change the past, and the present is a fleeting moment to work with. You can only change yourself. You can choose to panic, or you can choose to stay calm. You can choose to be kind, or you can choose to be selfish. You can choose to have a positive or a negative disposition in life.

It's like standing in a rushing shallow stream with both feet firmly planted on the bottom of the stream. The water rushes like mad around each ankle, temporarily breaking into two streams before

rejoining on the other side of the ankle. The water doesn't care about you, but unable to go through you, it just goes around you.

On the other hand, it is your job to hold your ground, to not get washed away by the stream of water. It is your job to take your stand and withstand all the pressures trying to wash you downstream. Focused and with secure footing, there is even a sense of accomplishment as the water is forced to yield to you, and not you to the water.

Life is that stream, and it seems to care nothing about the values you wish to keep. Indeed, it even seems as if there are forces at work, and there are, bent on testing those values, or worst, breaking them, to see if they can be washed away "downstream", resulting in either a temporary or permanent compromise. When we take a stand, it is only with respect to our values in life.

We can get Heavenly help against such forces, but for the most part, we can't control them anymore than we can control the flow of the stream — even if we choose to live in a religious community. Things can go wrong there as well, and in some cases, even more so.

However, to the extent that we can dig in and take a stand against the negative forces of life, the Talmud tells us, is what our free-will is all about. From the moment that you wake up in the morning, until you go to bed at night, you face the world with your morals, and with your set of values. That is who you are, and that is the difference you make to the world.

And that is what the Heavenly Court looks at on Rosh Hashanah.

SHABBAT DAY:

"The blessing will come if you obey the commandments of G-d, your G-d, which I command you today; the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of G-d, your G-d, but stray from the way which I command you today, and pursue other gods, which you have not known." (Devarim 11:27-28)

Indeed, it is amazing what Heaven will overlook and forgive from year to year. But, it is equally amazing what they won't. What's the difference between the two? The reason for the compromise when, from Heaven's perspective, there was no reason for one, or that lack of it, when from Heaven's perspective, it was called for.

Animals cannot compromise. They are pre-programmed to respond. They cannot sit back and observe their society and ask questions about it. They cannot contemplate higher levels of existence like humans can, other than the ones they are born into.

It always amazes me how much Torah people already know, even if they never grew up with any formal Torah education. Rather, the society into which they were born, and the family within which they grew up, seemed to already know many of the mores found within Torah. Sometimes, and even on their own, and even without a concrete belief in G-d, they come to conclusions about life that are similar to those spelled out by Torah.

True, by this time in history, and thanks to the Christian world, much of Torah has made it, in some form or another, to the furthest reaches of mankind. However, many of those societies, without any way to substantiate what they were being taught, were naturally receptive into accepting many of the new ideas, even when some of them ended up turning against their own Jewish populations at some point in time.

This is because human beings, having been created in the image of G-d, can discern:

"G-d said, 'Let Us make man in Our image and likeness'... G-d thus created man b'tzelem Elokim — in the image of G-d." (Bereishit 1:26-27)

The term "Elohim" can be used to describe every intelligent force that is separated from matter (i.e., spiritual instead of physical)... As such, it is eternal, and thus, the term is used regarding G-d and His angels. It is also applied to judges because of their ability of reason [and power of discernment]... (Sforno, Bereishit 1:26)

As such, man can have a "set of values". He can know right from wrong, and often intuit one from the other. At the very least, he can intuit that there should be right from wrong, as opposed to animals that cannot. The only problem mankind has, and it is a problem that can result, ultimately, even in holocausts, is in determining exactly what "right" is.

If you ask the lion, "Why did you kill and eat that zebra?" he will answer you, if he could, "You mean there is another way? I didn't even consider that. I didn't even consider that I should consider that. I'm a lion, and lions eat zebras, period."

However, even the worst anti-Semites will put forth a reason as to how ridding the world of Jews is good for mankind. Hitler, ysv"z, wrote a lot about what he thought, and as ugly as his thinking was, he tried to justify his hatred of the Jewish people, and his plan to exterminate them. And, you can be sure, that if he convinced millions of supposedly intelligent people to willingly participate in a genocide of the worst kind, you can be sure what he said sounded intelligent to them... as evil as it may have been.

Indeed, one of the most shocking eye-openers for me was reading that, at first, Nazism was perceived by the German intellegensia as a messianic movement. That's right, messianic movement!

SEUDAT SHLISHIT:

"The [false] prophet or the dreamer of visions must be put to death because he spoke about straying from the path which G-d, your G-d, who brought you out of Egypt, and who redeemed you from slavery, commanded you to follow. This way you will destroy the evil amongst you." (Devarim 11:6)

On Yom HaDin, that awesome and final day of judgment, a person may stand before the Heavenly Tribunal, and they will say, "You did not learn Torah, and we understand why. However, even as the Torah simpleton that you were, you still held that stealing was improper, and yet you stole. Even

according to your own system of values, you compromised yourself for no good reason!"

Or, the person may stand before the Heavenly Court, and they will say, "You were a great Torah scholar, and very punctilious in your performance of Jewish law, and in fact, too punctilious, at times. In the following situation, you maintained the strict letter of the law, whereas the situation required you to make a compromise, since that would have resulted in a fair settlement for all involved."

What we want to hear is the following from the Heavenly judges: "You learned Torah the best you could. We are particularly impressed by the way you held fast to the law in this particular case, in spite of hardship to yourself, and even more impressed by how, in this situation, you compromised and gave some ground to others, and again, in spite of the hardship to yourself. Your power of discernment came from G-d, but your usage of it was all your own, and for that you have a place by the Shechinah that you probably never dreamed was possible, because as was typical about yourself, you rarely considered the reward for doing right instead of wrong, you just did it, and lovingly, we might add."

There is an interesting account in the Talmud that says a lot in a few words. That's one of the beautiful things about Torah in general, and the Talmud in particular: it knows exactly what it wants to say, and how to say it, and it can therefore do so in far less words than the average person. Here's the story.

[When] Onkelos the son of Kalonymus became a proselyte, the Emperor sent a contingent of Roman [soldiers] after him, but he enticed them by [reciting] verses and they converted to Judaism. Thereupon, the Emperor sent another legion of Romans after him, commanding them not to speak with him. As they were about to take him away, he said to them: "Let me tell you just a simple thing: [In a procession] the torch lighter carries the light in front of the torchbearer, the torchbearer in front of the leader, the leader in front of the governor, the governor in front of the chief officer; but does the chief officer carry the light in front of the people [that follow]?" "No!" they replied. So he said, "Yet The Holy One, Blessed is He, carries the light before Israel, as it says, 'The Lord went before them... in a pillar of fire to give them light' (Shemot 3:21)." Then they, too, converted. Again he sent another legion, this time ordering them not to listen to him. They took hold of him, and as they were walking he saw the mezuzah on the door frame, and he placed his hand on it saying to them, "Now what is this?" and they said: "You tell us." He told them, "According to universal custom, a mortal king dwells within, and his servants guard him from the outside. However, [in the case of] The Holy One, blessed is He, His servants dwell inside while He guards them on the outside, as it says: 'The L-rd will guard your going out and your coming in from this time onward' (Devarim 6:9)." They, too, converted to Judaism, so he sent for him no more. (Avodah Zarah 11a)

It is a remarkable story, but what does it have to do with Tisha B'Av, the seven weeks of comfort, and the Aseret Yemai Teshuvah that is coming up quickly?

MELAVE MALKAH:

"They have mouths, but do not speak; they have eyes, but they do not see. They have ears, but they do not pay attention." (Tehillim 135:16- 17)

During the Three Weeks, we read three special haftorot, "Divrei Yirmiyahu", "Shimu dvar Hashem", and "Chazon Yeshayahu" — "The words of Yirmiyahu", "Listen to the word of G-d", and "The Vision of Yeshayahu". In each one, there is an emphasis on one of three major human abilities for understanding life in this world: speech, hearing, and sight, and the Pri Tzaddik explains that this is not coincidental.

Indeed, there is a progression here from speech, to hearing, to sight. Eichah asks, "How?" How was it possible for the Jewish people to sink to such a level, after so much instruction and so many warnings, that the end result was the total destruction of the Jewish people, Jerusalem, and the Temple? The answer: because it is possible to have mouths, and yet say nothing meaningful, to have eyes, and yet not really see, and to have ears, and yet not really hear.

When people are in such a mode, they tend to make important that which is trivial from G-d's point of view, and make trivial that which is extremely important to Heaven. Nothing renders a person's life more meaningless than this, making G-d regret that He ever created them, and resulting in their removal from existence.

In the story of Onkeles the Ger, according to the Talmud, Onkeles was the nephew of Hadrian. His conversion to Judaism was based upon advice he had solicited from his uncle, who told him: "Purchase goods which do not, at present, command a high price, and are not favorites in the market, but for which there is reason to believe a demand at higher prices will eventually arise." Onkeles, believing that his uncle's advice described Judaism at that time, went to Eretz Yisroel to learn Torah and convert.

"That's not what I meant," Hadrian told his Jewish nephew, "and sent legions to bring Onkeles back to his Roman senses. However, much to his consternation, Onkeles had a knack for bringing Romans to Jewish senses, causing the greatest amount of conversions of Gentiles to Judaism in history.

Realizing that Onkeles was armed with intellectual proof for his way of life, Hadrian advised his legions at first to not speak with Onkeles, and when that was not enough, he told them to not even listen to a word that leaves his mouth. Yet, that was not enough either, for they could see Onkeles touch the mezuzah on the way out the door, and that was the opening Onkeles needed to convert another entire Roman legion.

Speech. Hearing. Sight. Onkeles the Ger knew how to use all three to speak in a creative way, just as G-d did when creating existence. He knew how to make people listen to what they were hearing, so that the truth penetrated their being and moved them to change for the better. And finally, as someone who came to embrace Judaism later in life, he knew the power of the eyes to allow a person to either see reality for what it is, or to miss it altogether and live in a fantasy.

Last week, I heard, saw, and spoke about a point that has greatly affected my attitude towards kiruv (outreach) while watching Aish HaTorah's video, "From the Ashes" (www.kiruv.com). The entire video is well done and powerful, but one of the most powerful points for me, was when Rabbi Noach Weinberg, shlita, gave over a vort from Rav Shach, zt"l, based on a posuk from Yeshayahu. The upshot: If one man can be responsible for the deaths of 6,000,000 Jews, then one man can be responsible for the salvation of 6,000,000 Jews.

Do you SEE it? I do. And, not only do I see it, but I hear it, and now I am taking the time to speak about it, and I am looking for ways to act upon it. Hitler, ysv"z, also did this for evil; we're supposed to do it now for good. He was able to convince 50,000,000 Germans to participate in his diabolical plan until he committed suicide. We're supposed to be able to convince 12,000,000 Jews to participate in a plan to bring back the Jewish people until Moshiach comes.

Come this Rosh Hashanah, seven weeks after Tisha B'Av, they're going to be asking, "Is anyone listening out there?"

Have a great Shabbat,

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