

TEAM G-D

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

G-d tossed the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen, and the entire army of Pharaoh that followed into the sea after them — not one survived. (Shemot 14:27-28) It works something like this. The Jewish nation ends up in a foreign land for some Divine purpose, usually to extract the Holy Sparks located there and to bring them back to Eretz Yisroel. We do well there over time, but after a while, the situation starts to sour. Nothing good in this world lasts forever, so why should the golden eras in golut go on forever. How can we ever think that they can?

Then, if we cry out to G-d, He usually saves us, and we are able to leave with a minimal amount of persecution. If we don't cry out to G-d, then it's as if He says, "Well, if they are good with the situation, they why should I get involved?" We don't realize that the situation will get bad enough in the future that we will later regret not having called out to G- d when the situation was not as bad.

However, sometimes the situation is not as bad as it can get, but time has run out. This means that a time for redemption has arrived according to G- d, but the problem is that we are not yet ready for it. This happened in Egypt, so what did G-d do? He had Pharaoh intensify the slavery until we were forced to call out for salvation.

"Oh, is that My children I hear? What? They are suffering? Unacceptable. I will have to go and save them!"

However, there may be an additional problem. Yes, the situation is bad for the Jewish people. Yes, we have cried out to G-d and have caught His ear, so-to-speak, allowing Him to set the redemption process in motion. However, the oppressive nation may not have become as evil as necessary to warrant G-d punishing them, or in the case of Egypt, destroying them. According to the Zohar, G-d does not like to punish gentile nations before they have had their fill of evil.

This happened in Egypt. The time for redemption had come, but the Jewish people weren't calling out for it, so G-d increased the slavery and they called out, warranting redemption. However, in spite of the increased slavery, redemption from Egypt required the destruction of Egypt, which was not possible since Egypt did not warrant destruction. A dilemma, but not for long.

What did G-d do? He sent in Moshe Rabbeinu, who ended up instigating Pharaoh, who then

implement a new decree demanding bricks without supplying the means to produce them. This was not simple slavery and oppression, this was cruelty for cruelty's sake. Finally the straw came along that could break the camel's back, and the plagues began with a vengeance. All the conditions fulfilled, Egypt was destroyed and the Jewish people went free.

The problem, you will say, is that Egypt was forced to fill its quota of evil artificially. Had Moshe Rabbeinu not shown up on the scene as he had, the Jews probably would have continued on like that for some time, without the unreasonable demand of bricks without straw. Can a people be punished for doing something evil if they were pushed into doing the evil by an external source?

This is why, as the Talmud points out, that G-d did not have any joy from seeing the Egyptians drown in the sea. Even though they may have filled their quota of evil, it was not of their own doing. Therefore, even the angels were not permitted to sing praise of G-d while the Egyptians were destroyed as the Jewish people fled to safety. There was something not "glatt" about entire thing.

SHABBAT DAY:

Matzah will be eaten seven days, and no yeast will be seen with you, nor will there be leaven seen with you within all your boundaries. You will tell your son that day, *"This is done because of what G-d did for me when I came out of Egypt."* (Shemot 13:7-8)

The exodus from Egypt was, is, a work in progress. However, how many people sit down to their seder with this in mind? Most of us make a seder that celebrates our complete and miraculous redemption from Egyptian slavery, but that is not quite accurate. We escaped, but we lost four-fifths of our population on the way out. The remainder got to the desert, but all the men between the ages of 20 and 60 years, with the exception of a few, died in the desert over 40 years because of the Spies. How many people were actually left in the end to inherit the land for which we were taken out of Egypt in the first place!

And even now, as we hobble to the finish line of history, how many Jews have we lost along the way? We lost even before the destruction of the First Temple, 10 of the 12 tribes, a huge portion of the Jewish population. That has left us with only the tribes of Yehudah, Binyomin, and Levi! It's like Egypt all over again. And, even after building up the nation from these remaining tribes, we've lost entire families during periods of intense persecution, most recently the Holocaust, during which half the entire world Jewish population was wiped away — entire families!

During Roman times, the situation got so bad that the rabbis considered passing a decree that would forbid marriage, so that the Jewish people could die off quietly, or at least quieter. What is the point of bringing children into the world only to be slaughtered by anti-Semites? And, as the Haggadah says, as fast as we dispense with one, other anti-Semites spring up in history even faster.

I wouldn't want to calculate it, but I surmise that the odds of a family line making it to Yemot HaMoshiach is not that great, considering how many have not made it even to this point. How

depressing, though it doesn't seem to fade many of us who are still here today, for one reason or another. Then again, how many of us here today are "plutzing" over the 80 percent rate of assimilation or the 52 percent intermarriage rate? Except for those directly involved in kiruv, most just go about their own business as if the world is perfectly fine the way it is, though it really is not.

And this whole Jonathan Pollard episode is really disgusting. The injustice is unbelievable. It is one thing for a man to be mistaken for an enemy and tried as such, certainly a tragedy. But what do you call it when the people responsible for his being abused and left in jail know that he is innocent of the charges, or at least the extent to which the charges against him have been leveled, and yet act like nothing is wrong?

Evil.

The main culprit in the entire episode, it seems was then Secretary of State, Casper Weinberger. He wanted to punish the Israelis for "stealing" information that the Americans had promised to share with Israel in the first place, such as knowledge of Saddam Hussein's chemical arsenal. They didn't share this crucial information, based upon which we all received gas masks just in case, because the Americans were angry at the Israelis for having taken out the Iraqi's nuclear reactor in 1981.

Apparently the CIA had been working on "cultivating" Saddam Hussein into an American ally, and the Israel attack on the Iraqi reactor ruined everything. That got then Vice President George Bush Sr. furious at the Israelis, and the CIA livid because clearly their man in the Middle-East was going to be Saddam Hussein. We won't talk about the oil connections, or Weinberger's business interests in Iraq, or the fact that his father was an apostate Jew who married a non-Jew. No biases here? No conspiracies here?

And the real spy who passed secrets onto the Russians, of which Jonathan Pollard was originally accused, was later caught, an American. He received the light sentence that Pollard should have received, why Pollard was left in jail to "either be killed or kill himself". That'll show the Israelis ... how wrong the Americans can be, and vindictive nonetheless. In spite of historical proof to show the Americans just how wrong they were, Pollard continues to languish in jail.

What a mess! One man's life is totally ruined for passing on information that not only did not damage American interests, but it was information the Americans should have passed long anyhow. His wife, for all intents and purposes, has lived the life of an agunah, and how much time and money has had to be spent to try and free a man who should have been free a long time ago!

For things like this we were freed from Egypt? What, "there weren't enough graces in Egypt to bury us there that we had to go out into the desert and die?"

SEUDAT SHLISHIT:

G-d said all these things: "I am G-d, your G-d, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of servants. You will have no other gods besides Me." (Shemot 20:1-3)

So we could blame ourselves for all the tragedy and disaster. After all, you can't say that the Torah didn't warn us about straying from its path! There are two parshiot of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, so who is to blame for all that the dark despair of Jewish history if not us? That is the price you pay for freedom! On the other hand, maybe had we known in advance what it was going to be like historically, we might have opted out. That's the way we "sell" it to a potential convert, asking him or her, "Why would you want to be part of a people that is always despised and abused by just about every nation it comes with which it comes into contact?" That's like the age-old question that is asked, "Sure You were the G-d Who took us out of Egypt. But weren't You also the One Who put us there in the first place? How about don't put us down there, remove the need to take us out of there, and we'll be perfectly even?"

The age-old answer is, "Not really." You see, going down to Egypt was also a good thing, a merit in our favor, a gift. G-d did not owe us a redemption because He put us into Egypt, as if doing so was a debt against Him. Rather, going down to Egypt was the first positive thing for the Jewish people, and leaving Egypt was the second one.

You see, when Adam HaRishon ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and was forced into exile from the Garden of Eden, he set all of mankind on a course for tikun. All of history has been about tikun for the sin of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and nothing else. There are billions of people in the world today, trillions over the course of history, and everyone who has ever existed has existed in order to try and contribute in some way to the tikun of all of mankind, so that we can return back to where we belong, Gan Aiden.

Adam HaRishon understood this, having been the one to have committed the sin, and set out the rest of his life on a course of tikun. However, as the Leshem explains, no longer being as great as he was at the time he sinned, his tikun only had the power to rectify himself and not all of mankind. As a result, it was every man for himself, and eventually every nation for itself, when it came to carrying out tikun and receiving the benefits for doing so.

To join the path of tikun meant to step out of the reality of the rest of the world that was basically "out to lunch" when it came to understanding what to do with their opportunity of life. It made a person different, and thus Avraham Avinu was called "Ish Ivri" — the "man on the other side", of the world, that is. Devoted to tikun, his lifestyle became noticeably different from everyone else around him at that time.

That is why circumcision became important for him. As the Talmud says, one of the things that Adam HaRishon did as a result of his sin was to reverse his Brit Milah (Sanhedrin 38b). Thus, to show his commitment to reverse the sin of Adam HaRishon, Avraham Avinu performed Brit Milah, as a symbol of his devotion to tikun, first to himself and then eventually to everyone who might follow in his ways.

Once on board, it was a whole different reality. Ever see the life of an Olympic athlete who makes

the cut and becomes part of the Olympic team? It's a miserable life to the one looking on from the outside. All work, no play. Certain basic pleasures of everyday life are out of the question, and restrictions are slapped on everywhere. It looks like slavery to anyone who does not relate to the process, especially when you join G-d's team.

MELAVE MALKAH:

"If you will obey My voice, and keep My covenant, then you will be unique to Me above all the nations, for all the earth is Mine. You will be a kingdom of priests to Me, a holy nation." These are the words to tell Israel. (Shemot 19:5-6)

Stretching the analogy a little further, a member of the Olympic Team might complain to the coach:

"Gee, coach. You let him stay up later, and go out on his own. I even saw him drinking something with alcoholic content and eating something forbidden to us! What gives?"

"What gives? I'll tell you what gives! Tomorrow he's going to be told that he has not made the team and sent packing. If you don't like the life of an Olympic Athlete, then you can leave with him!"

But of course you don't. Instead, you quickly shift your position and say, "Ah, not at all. I'm totally grateful for making the team! Whatever I have to do, you can be sure that I'll follow it, coach!"

Well, if that is your response, then you are either a masochist, or someone who buys into the master plan, which includes winning medal at the Olympics, becoming famous, getting lots of fat endorsements from sponsors, and retiring early on millions of dollars of investments. What's a little self-denial and hard work in the meantime, especially since the status of being part of such an elite team is immediate gratification in its own right!

The four-fifths of the Jewish people that were lost in the Plague of Darkness will eventually come back. When and where, it is hard to tell, but come back they will, come back they must. And, with them will come the Jews who died in the desert because of the golden calf and those who followed the advice of the spies, and not to mention every Jew who ever died physically because of persecution, or spiritually because of assimilation. They may have already paid their dues, or they may still have to pay them, but once they do, they will rejoin the Nation of Israel once again.

This is because when Avraham Avinu chose to follow in the way of G-d, He bought into the "program". He tried out for G-d's team and made the final cut, and since that time he and his descendants have been in training for the big return to the Garden of Eden, the main event of history. Anything that has happened to us has been because we are in the picture, G-d's picture, and all of it is for the sake of tikun, a work that can only be considered to be in progress as long as Moshiach has yet to arrive.

Thus, when we sit down at the Seder Table and recount the leaving of Egypt, what we are really doing is acknowledging and giving gratitude for having made G-d's team. Yes, it has been a very

rough journey with a lot of restrictions and major consequences for not sticking with the "diet". However, all of it has been for our own good, and not for G-d's, for the last thing anyone human being wants is to not make the cut, and to be sent packing, which is basically what has happened to just about all of mankind since Adam first left the Garden of Eden.

Knowing this, and living up to the demands of being on G-d's team makes it much easier to do so. There is less resistance from within, and certainly less resistance from without. This is what the blessings and curses teach us and remind us each year that we read them. And, this is what we ask the potential convert as well: "Do you understand that when you convert to the Jewish people you are joining G-d's team, and committing yourself to world rectification, which can happen, sometimes, in the cruelest of ways from man's perspective?"

It is the question that Avraham was asked by G-d and which he answered with a life of trial and tribulation, and never wavered in his faith. It is a question that the matzah asks us each year as it stares at us from amidst the bounty that surrounds it. And, if we become one with the realization of what that means, then hopefully we can avoid the part of the "training" that has forced us to go to extremes just to survive it.

Chag Kosher v'Samayach, may we merit the Geulah Shlaimah this Pesach,
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Text

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