

BREAKING AWAY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

"These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of Egypt!" (Shemos 32:4)

Just as it is no coincidence that Parashas Zachor tends to fall on the Shabbos that we read Parashas Tetzaveh, as mentioned last week, likewise it is no coincidence that Parashas Parah tends to fall on the Shabbos of Ki Sisa, which tells of the account of the golden calf. As Rashi points out at the beginning of Parashas Chukas, from whence Parashas Parah is taken, it was the role of the Parah Adumah—the Red Heifer—to rectify the damage that was caused by the calf.

When a rocket is sent into space, its first battle is liftoff. For what may seem like an eternity to the astronauts inside, and Nasa's crew down on earth, the space vehicle struggles upwards, working very hard to break away from earth's gravitational pull. Once it does, flight becomes extremely easy, but until that point, it is extremely difficult.

It was no different for the Jews who left Egypt. Four-fifths of the Jewish population couldn't even break away from Egypt's spiritual depraved pull, choosing to remain in Egypt instead of being redeemed, and dying in the Plague of Darkness instead. And, the remaining one-fifth that did leave with Moshe Rabbeinu kept being drawn back, constantly fighting to escape the spiritual and emotional bonds that encumbered them, and which resulted in the building of the golden calf in this week's parshah.

In the end, like the four-fifths back in Egypt, most of them failed to break away as well, warranting death in the desert as a result of the episode of the Spies. So close to the border of Eretz Yisroel, and therefore, from breaking free of Egyptian bondage, they folded instead, crushed under the weight of their previous biases, unable to truly and fully leave Mitzrayim.

However, before they died, they left behind descendants who were meant to continue the journey, to succeed where their parents had failed. Thus, when the Haggadah says that "every Jew should look at himself as if he too left Egypt," it is literal, because it wants us to know that all that pull in the wrong spiritual direction, in any generation, is the spiritual gravitational pull of Mitzrayim, reaching out to us over the millennia, determined to pull us back.

The golden calf, in any generation, represents capitulation to the values of Mitzrayim. The Red Heifer, on the other hand, represents breaking free of Mitzrayim, and even though it is a chok, a statute, a law whose reason may defy us for the time being, enough is known about it to allow us to conceptually ride on its back, away from the Mitzrayim of our own time, hopefully for good.

How so?

Consider the differences between the Red Heifer and the golden calf. To begin with, the heifer was created by God, whereas the calf was a manmade creation, the result of black magic. Everything about it was illicit and artificial, a statement of man's desire to create God in the image that best suits the desires and whims of humans.

The calf was made of gold, a symbol of eternity, but not of God's version of it. It was the calf, or at least what it represented, that the perpetrators wanted to eternalize, and that was licentiousness, a responsibility-free life. It was eternal youth, and its yokeless lifestyle that the makers of the calf pursued, and materialism for materialism's sake.

The Red Heifer, of course, was red, the color of blood, the color of physical life. The right to have it, and to let it flow through our veins in order to keep us alive and active, is totally a function of being responsible human beings. It was burned to ashes, as part of the purification process from exposure to death, to remind us that everything about the physical world is as temporary and fragile as ashes, so don't imbue it with too much importance, but appreciate it while you have it.

It is a chok, the quintessential statute, the kind of law, says Rashi, that the Satan laughs at the Jewish people for, and the gentiles question. For they think that anything God understands we should be able to understand as well, and if we can't understand something, it must lack any logic, and therefore, meaning as well. A ridiculous, yet extremely prevalent attitude towards God and life in the Western world.

Nonsense, says the Parah Adumah. Man knows what he knows because God has taught it to him. If there is more to know, and man does not know it, it is because God has deemed it inappropriate for man to know such knowledge at the time. Whatever man discovers, he does so when he does because God has decided the time has come for such knowledge to be shared with man, and so He does.

This last point alone has so much of mankind entrapped in Mitzrayim. Brilliant as many of them may be, they are not smart enough to see how their limited approach to God limits God to them, and this is the source of their own spiritual undoing. They imagine themselves content with their approach to life, though in truth, it is spiritually futile, and they assume that it is all that God expects from them, if He is even there at all.

It is this ideology that was the basis what the Erev Rav meant when they yelled out, regarding the golden calf: "These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of Egypt!" (Shemos 32:4)

No, these are the gods that brought you TO Egypt, and keep you there the entire time. For, all they are, and all they can ever be, is external manifestation of mankind's inner desires. They were created to permit that which is forbidden, and to assuage the conscience of those who indulge in animalistic behavior. It is a religion for sure, but the religion of self- gratification. And, before we sit back in

wonderment about how people can be so selfish, and so self-deluding, we have to consider how we do the exact same thing in our time, in our own way. Sure, it is easy to see and point it out in others, especially since they used wood and stone to embody their physical drives in a spiritual reality. However, it is far more difficult to point out in our ourselves, especially since our "idols" have become far more sophisticated.

Do you know why so much is going wrong today, and getting worse?

No, I mean the reason beyond that of the sub-prime mortgage collapse, the credit crisis, ongoing bankruptcies, open international hostility towards Israel, etc. I don't mean the reasons put forth by the "experts" who do not factor in the will of God when explaining the global recession and global tensions.

Perhaps you do. However, this is my take on the situation facing the Jewish people today, and it is based upon sources and lots of historical precedent. You may not like what I am about to say, but the parshah, and the time of year makes it difficult to not say something.

Unlike during previous recessions in the last few decades, in this recent one, the Jewish people are losing their hold on the Diaspora. Between financial instability and increasing anti-Semitism, home-away-from-home is becoming less so by the day. This is not hubris, but an objective statement about where Jewish history seems to be heading at this critical time, since the world at large seems to be an increasingly more dangerous place for the Jew, with no signs of letting up.

We don't want to believe that this exile is ending, or that if it is ending, that it will do so roughly. In spite of the fact that the Muslims have gained the political upper hand internationally—against all logic—and that anti-Semitism is becoming acceptable once again even amongst non-Muslims, we are holding on for dear life to the notion that somehow, by protesting against what we see as injustices towards Israel and the Jewish people, we can simply right the wrongs.

Fine. Go down kicking and screaming. Over here, in Israel, the tradition and the belief is that, no matter how scary the situation will become for us, and it will certainly test our trust in God, we'll make it. We won't lose the land again, and we will, miraculously, VERY miraculously, survive the onslaught, if and when it comes. We now live where we all Jews have to end up eventually, so we are, as far as we are concerned, ahead of the game.

The trouble is, true as that may be, the Jews of the Diaspora don't buy it, and do not hear any reason to change their attitude towards remaining in the Diaspora, in spite of all the signs indicating the end of the exile. They are intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually stuck there, taking no lesson about life in exile from the crumbling world around them.

Furthermore, they fail to see how God is also severing their only connection to the land: money. For decades, as Jews prospered in the Diaspora, they contributed to the building of the Final Redemption—financially, while their brothers and sisters who lived on the land built it up physically.

According to the Vilna Gaon, that is the reason why Eretz Yisroel, a.k.a. "The King's Palace," has been made so dependent on outside sources of financial support: in order to give the Jews of the Diaspora a portion in the development of Eretz Yisroel.

However, as the economy falters, and local needs become increasingly more pressing, Diaspora Jews feel less able, and less compelled, to help other Jews beyond their own financial perimeter. They assume that since Divine Providence is making that the reality, it must be the will of God that they cut back on tzedakah leaving the Diaspora for the Holy Land, without even considering the possibility that God is weaning the Jews of Eretz Yisroel off foreign funding, in advance of the Final Redemption.

Who has to worry? The Jews Eretz Yisroel? That's the way it looks to many. However, in truth, it is the Jews of the Diaspora, because the Jews of Eretz Yisroel will survive one way or another, since this is the land of personalized Divine Providence, and therefore, great miracles. You can already see this happening, and it will be increasingly so as time moves on, especially as the Shechinah leaves the Diaspora altogether.

And, when the Shechinah finally comes home completely, as we learn from the Babylonian exile, then it is time for all Jews to come home completely, or at least want to. However, in the meantime, so many do not, because they still associate the Diaspora with the good, secure life. Indeed, this is the only thing keeping so many Jews from even contemplating living in the land of their fathers, just as it did in Europe before the invasion of the Nazis, y"s.

It's one of the last remaining obstacles to redemption. I know, I know, it says in the Talmud that we can't come back as a nation until God says it is time (Kesuvos 111a). I also know that sections of religious Jews have built their entire approach to Eretz Yisroel upon those very lines in the Talmud. But, did it even occur to anyone that what is happening today is because it is time, and that God would make it even clearer if we would only be willing to hear His opinion on the matter?

Well, apparently, here comes His opinion. He had been telling it to us nicely over the last few decades, but, as a nation, we turned away, and dug deeper into the Diaspora instead. So, now He is speaking to us through the events of today, which seem to be geared at one thing, and one thing only: breaking the bond between the Diaspora and Diaspora Jewry, including those of us actually living here in Eretz Yisroel, but with a Diaspora mentality.

Yes, we will be tested here in Eretz Yisroel. But, also yes is that this time we, the Jewish people, are in Eretz Yisroel, and not in Europe, and we are at the end of history, not just towards the end of it. So, therefore, great miracles, on par with those that occurred in Egypt, if not greater, will happen for us here as well, to save us from whatever fearsome realities presently concern us.

However, for the Jews of the Diaspora, there is still work to do, and that part of the process, in case you haven't yet noticed, is well underway. Therefore, when the cry goes out once again, as it did in this week's parshah thousands of years ago after the incident of the golden calf, "Who is for God?"

be sure that you hear it, and respond to it with the same zealousness as the Tribe of Levi did in their time.

Text

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