

LIFE IS A STAGE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

When Pharaoh approached, the Children of Israel looked up and saw that the Egyptians were chasing them, and became terrified. (Shemos 14:10)

LIFE IS A STAGE. The question is, why must it be? When you believe, as many do, that life is random, or at least that God doesn't get involved in the nitty-gritty details of everyday life, then it is easy to assume that it has to be a stage, because nature has to run its course and life has to play itself out, which can include all kinds of superfluous details.

However, once you hold that God not only runs the entire show, but that He actually gets involved in every last aspect of daily life, and guides things to their ultimate conclusion, then why must we go through all that we go through? Why must so many seemingly superfluous details occur if getting to the point of history seems to be achievable without them?

For example, the entire episode by the sea. What an event. If we're talking Hollywood, then of course there has to be drama. Of course there has to be tension. The Egyptians have to pursue, and the Jewish people have to get stuck with their backs to the sea. Then, just as the situation seems hopeless, and the solution seems well beyond human reach, God steps in and splits the sea dramatically, gracefully.

Then comes the big chase. Just as the Jewish people think their problems have been solved, the Egyptians give chase and actually enter the sea after them. Once again, panic ensues in the Jewish camp as they flee with more confusion than ever before. Was the splitting of the sea just a clever ruse to trap the Jewish people after all, and not a path to freedom?

As they ponder that question while giving up hope of survival, all of a sudden, the sea comes crashing in on top of the Egyptians, just as the last Jew makes it to safety. Clear to everyone now was the trap God had set for the Egyptians, and not the Jewish people. After a year and seven days, the Jewish people are finally free of Egyptian domination and cruelty. What a movie it would make. What a movie it DID make.

But, the cameras were not rolling by the real Red Sea. No tickets were sold to see what happened when the real Egyptian army was subdued and the real Jewish people, and unfortunately, the real Erev Rav, crossed the sea on dry land and made it to safety, just as was destined to happen ever since God promised Avraham that it would. So, why all the drama?

And, we haven't even added the part about Iyov and his role in all of this. If you recall (if you don't, you can Google a previous issue of Perceptions), the story of Iyov played a major role in the entire redemption process. In fact, it was Iyov who played the scapegoat to draw the Sitra Achra away from the sea so that the Jewish people could go to freedom, while the Egyptians went to the bottom of the sea.

This was because the Attribute of Justice reminded God that the Jewish people had been guilty of idol worship back in Egypt, and were worthy of drowning as a result, just like the Egyptians. Apparently, he had a good case, because God was compelled, so-to-speak, to use Iyov as a way to take the heat off the Jewish people so that God could fulfill His promise to the Avos that the fourth generation would make it back to Eretz Yisroel.

In other words, the whole give-and-take between God and the Satan in Sefer Iyov was just a way to pull him away from the Red Sea, so that God could spirit the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov across the sea to safety, even though Strict Judgment demanded that they not be saved. While the Sitra Achra was off testing the righteousness of Iyov, God was off splitting the sea and freeing His people while drowning the Egyptians. Again, if you believe history is random, then you need conspiracies to move things around to your liking without getting caught. If you hold that there is little rhyme or reason to history except what we make out of it, then you have to manipulate situations to make them work out your way.

But, if you believe God runs the world, and that He is expediting its fulfillment, then why all the drama? If you don't know how to get from Point A to Point D without going through B and C along the way, then what can you do? But if you have the wherewithal to go directly from one to the other without causing anguish along the route, then why not?

Because, history is not about going from Point A to Point D, as we would like to think that it is, anymore than it is about going from birth to death. It's about what you happened to become, and happened to accomplish along your way from one to the other. It is about what you experienced on your journey from birth to death, whether it lasted 80 years or eight years. The drama is what life is about, because that is what makes people, and what reveals what people have become.

Let me illustrate this point with a story told to me by a good friend recently who was traveling together with his wife and child.

They were returning home by airplane, which in this case was a smaller plane for the short haul from city to city. However, my friend's wife, who happens to be somewhat over anxious about the threat of terrorism in general, became so when after boarding the plane, she saw what she thought was a suspicious passenger. She refused to fly.

However, her husband and daughter were not concerned at all, and tried to calm her down, which she had difficulty doing, and eventually she got off the plane to inform security to come search the "suspicious" man once again. What she did instead was create concern and turmoil because she

wasn't supposed to get off the plane like that without being escorted by an official.

It took time and a lot of cajoling, not to mention threats from security and the crew, but my friend and his family flew that flight, though he had to talk to his wife and calm her down the entire flight. Besides, what guarantee did she have that the next flight would be any better? So, beside herself, she flew anyhow.

The funny thing was that, as my friend spoke to his wife, he kept an eye on the man of concern, and sure enough, he did act suspiciously. In fact, as he calmed his wife down, he himself began to wonder if he himself should inform the stewardess of the man's behavior, or just jump over the seat and save the day. But, what if he was wrong, and the FBI arrested him instead?

To make a long story short, in spite of the reason for concern, such as the way the man pretended to ignore everything that was going on around him, they arrived safely home, after which my friend related the story. And, as a conclusion, he related to me his own summary of the Hashgochah Pratis that brought about all the events from beginning until the end (aside from the fact that maybe their actions dissuaded a would-be terrorist from carrying out his diabolical plan!).

The bottom-line? It was just a test from God. God arranged it that this person should be on the plane, and act just strangely enough to create a questionable situation, in order to test their level of bitachon and emunah. But, as Yosef HaTzaddik told his brothers (paraphrased): "You wanted to kill me, but God had other plans, so therefore, the best you could do was sell me. If God wants you to stay alive, can I kill you? And, if He wants you to die, can I save you? So why worry?"

Same thing by the Red Sea as well, though on a much larger scale. Everything from start to finish was in the hands of God, and He knew how it would end before it even began. In fact, ever since Creation came into being, and before, God already knew and arranged for the events of every second of history. There are no surprises for God.

But, there are surprises for man. Things happen all around us all the time, some of which we expect and are prepared for, others of which we don't see coming and which catch us off guard. They appear to us in such a way as to make us think that nature is running its course, and that evil people can have their way with us, or that the incredible turbulence I experienced this week on my flight to New York can wreck my plane regardless of what God thinks.

Wrong. It was God shaking my plane, and I mean shaking it. I really thought that the wings were going to snap off at some point, and even contemplated saying the Shema. I am no stranger to turbulence, but this was one of the worst and most prolonged. How much, I wondered to myself, can a plane handle, and for how long?

Well, I made it to New York without a problem, thank God. Without a physical problem, that is. Spiritually-speaking, I'll have to wait until a later date to find out how I fared with my bitachon and emunah, which includes knowing that if your time is up, there is not much you can do about it, and if

it is not, then there is nothing you have to do about it, except trust in God in every situation.

Hence, all of the drama in life is not because God plans to sell tickets to His movie, or because it is the only way for us to get from Point A to Point D. He can, and has on many occasions, done exactly that without having to go through all the other points along the way. For the right people at the right time, kevitzas haderech¹ has worked just fine.

Rather, it is for the people on the ride, that they should experience life in such a way as to develop their trust and faith in God, first by revealing how good or poor it already is, and then, by encouraging the people to improve it. This results in an enhanced relationship with God in this world, so we can enjoy an enhanced relationship with God in the next world.

So, whatever we go through in life, be it real or imagined, be it something that we really can be concerned about, or something that, because of our own paranoia, we tend to be concerned about, it is all min HaShamayim and for the sake of testing us, or encouraging us, or for pushing us to new spiritual heights. God doesn't need it, but we do, and He does it for us, so that we can realize what is missing, and rectify it.

Or sometimes, it's not to test us, but to reveal to us our own greatness, a kind of reward for having worked on ourselves over the years. It's His way of saying, "Look how good you really are! I have always known it, and it is about time that you do as well." He can afford to show us that, because he knows that to the people He does, they are humble enough to take it in stride.

But either way, all of the drama of life, be it real or assumed, is for us, so that we will get to Point D, either directly or indirectly.

[1] Literally, the "jumping of the way," and technically it refers to using Kabbalah to miraculously travel physical distances.

Text

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