

LEARNING HISTORY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Remember the days of old, understand the many generations that have passed. Ask your father, and he will tell you; your elders, and they will say it to you. (Devarim 31:17)

Every week Rabbi Winston uploads a shiur on the weekly parshah. Parashas HaAzinu can be found [here](#):

[See videos at the bottom of this article]

A couple of weeks ago I got into an interesting discussion with a friend of mine at shul. He was about to begin giving a course in history, and we were discussing, based upon the above verse why it is not one of the 613 Mitzvos to learn history. After all, since those who forget are doomed to repeat, and the Torah warns us not to, you'd think that it would be a mitzvah to learn history.

But it is not. So, where does the above verse come in? Is it merely just good advice? It seems to be much more than that, and certainly should be, considering that the future of the Jewish people, and therefore, the world, depends upon its fulfillment. Is it in a category of its own, and if so, which one?

Personally, I have always loved history. I have always found it fascinating, in spite of the fact that so much of it is simply details. I can't say that I have been good at memorizing a lot of those details, as some may be, but even just a general knowledge of what once happened, where, when, and when possible, even why it occurred, I find empowering. Like self-knowledge, it allows us to better understand ourselves.

However, history is only meaningful, and not simply entertaining (for those whom it is), if it is patterned. Who cares about one's family history unless it has something to say about our own personal history? We want to enjoy life as much as possible, but there are obstacles to a life of bliss, such as health issues, for one. Therefore, anything we can know that can give us the upper edge when it comes to controlling our health, as much as is humanly possibly, we find fascinating at the least.

The same is true for financial issues. Money may not be able to buy everything, but it buys an awful lot, and can certainly assist a person to be happier in life. Therefore, any historical information that can allow us to be more protected from financial loss and more able to increase financial gain, is crucial to know. People pay lots of money to hear speakers talk about historical patterns in the market place, and how it can affect personal income.

The main point about patterns is that they suggest, quite strongly, that there is method to the madness. Life can appear quite random, and if it is, the conversation can end here, because there is nothing that history can teach us except what can happen sometimes, though we may never be able to predict when it will. The concept of randomness makes all of us victims, and life becomes a matter of ducking punches.

You cannot prepare for the unpredictable. Therefore, people who have decided that there is no rhyme or reason to history, feel little or no need to heed the lessons of the past, and feel free to throw caution to the wind. They have no problem turning on their friends and backing up their enemies, if that is what will work best for them at the moment. And, that is precisely what is going in the West today, especially in America with respect to Israel.

"What will the children think?" is a line that has been used for a long time by many parents when doing something that can easily mislead children into thinking that certain inappropriate behavior is in fact appropriate. It may be that the parents are indeed acting incorrectly, or that they are only acting in a way that appears to be incorrect, but the bottom line is that the children will get the wrong idea about what is right.

I would be very interested in seeing a poll taken across the United States of today's youth regarding issues of right and wrong. I would like to see how they define morality, if they even believe in it at all, or if they even know what it means. I would like to know how left-leaning they are, and where ideas such as God and religion fit in, if at all.

One of the reasons why this interests me is because as certain adults fight right now to try and return to more traditional values, I wonder if it means anything. And, judging by the responses in the Comments area after many such articles, I'd say that the next generation is so out-to-lunch as far as moral issues are concerned that such well-meaning and desperate conservatives are bailing out a sinking ship that others from their generation have already poked full of holes.

In other words, America is already what they are trying so hard to stop it from becoming. You can already see what the children think and believe, and they are poised to make it even more liberal once they get the chance. In fact, I think that the Obama Administration is just the forerunner of all of that, and that we really won't know how bad the situation is until the next President gets elected, if he even gets the chance.

In other words, there is no halting the process now. In fact, I read an excellent article this last week, which is also very well-written. I haven't enjoyed reading an article as much as I have this one, and I rarely read the same article twice. But, this one by David Solway, FrontPageMag I have read three times, if just to see once again how the author has explained and phrased what he means to say. I am going to excerpt it here.

When an organism or a "superorganism" senses that it is losing control, that its favored position

atop the dominance hierarchy is no longer assured and that it is facing the prospect of imminent dispossession, as if by reflex it turns aside, practices the art of studied indifference or develops an array of subterfuges-what Bloom terms the "endorphin strategy" that makes us feel good while it dulls the senses and cripples the intellect. It almost invariably contents itself by blanking out the menace or mugging its weaker partners and cohabitants. This description, then, of animal and primate behavior has profound implications for the trajectories of entire societies, cultures and civilizations, that is, "superorganisms."

As they rise to the top of the international or global "pecking order," they experience a "testosterone surge" of power, confidence and exploratory vitality, which impacts the very psychology of its constituent "cells" or members-individual human beings. They do not feel the need to apologize for their triumphs, expanding economies and higher standards of living. They move into the future with flexed assurance and a proud conviction of their civilizing mission and justified ascendancy. However, when these larger groupings intuit that they are slipping from their privileged position above the common ruck and are beginning to slide inexorably down the scale of power and preference, they proceed to espouse various delusory measures to evade the shock of recognition. Rather than struggle to preserve or regain their pre-eminence, they concentrate on the banana peel, as it were, pretending that no challenge is being posed to their fading hegemony. Or they turn upon their own, whether individuals, groups or nations, whom they blame for their evident discomfiture and, indeed, for their unadmitted but darkly sensed weakness. They may even begin shilling for the enemy, whom they profess to see as an equal, a potential benefactor, a friend in the making or a collaborator in some noble cultural initiative.

As Bloom reminds us, "In a world where some cultures elevate violence to a virtue, the dream of peace can be fatal." Moreover, so ignominious a surrender tends, ironically, to strut under the banner of "peace, freedom and justice." And this, I fear, is precisely what is happening in the contemporary West. "Peace" means that we are no longer willing to fight for the principles and traditions that have raised us to the top of the dominance hierarchy and that we are ready or eager to submit to a clear ideological foe. "Freedom" means that we have accepted the growing likelihood of defeat and comparative servitude. And "justice" means the acknowledgment of the "rights" of our adversaries to game the social, political and legal systems of their host countries to their advantage, in other words, to insinuate their norms of conduct and cultural presuppositions into a way of life we have long taken for granted and are now prepared to surrender piecemeal to the claims of the "other."

The symptoms of capitulation are unmistakable, not only with regard to the increasingly muscular, secular autocracies, like China and Russia and their allies, which we try desperately to pretend away as they ascend the scale of power and control at our expense. The signs of cultural enervation are also evident in our yielding bit by bit to the relentless march of militant

Islam from country to country and into the very entrails of the democratic body politic ... It is no secret that Israel is the only legitimate democracy in the Middle East, that it is a loyal compatriot of the United States, that its structural roots are planted in European soil, that it is a vigorous, advanced and technological and scientific leader among the nations, and that it is surrounded by bellicose and regressive Islamic states that wish to erase it from "the page of time," to cite Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

These are the same Islamic states that have embarked on a virulent offensive against the democratic West through the exercise of terror or the prosecution of "stealth jihad," or both. And yet, unable or unwilling to grasp that Israel is perched on the frontier of a world-historical conflict, exemplifying the values and usages of the West and coming under almost daily attack from a common enemy, so-called "freedom loving" nations have turned against the Jewish state, defamed it in the corridors of power, vilified it in the media, acquiesced to the corrupt and slanderous assaults on its moral and physical integrity via the offices of the United Nations, pursued boycott, divestment and sanctions campaigns, winked at Israel Apartheid Weeks suppurating on our campuses, imposed coercive measures to restrict building projects and the establishment of secure borders, and both subsidized and glorified the terror sponsoring cartels that go by the name of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas-ruled Gaza. It is as if Western-oriented Israel and not extremist, Western-hating Islam has come aberrantly to be perceived as the West's nemesis and scourge.

Many different reasons have been put forward to account for so strange a reversal of political sentiment ... There is no sensible way to explain such counter-intuitive and destructive behavior unless a potent, subliminal motive is at work, which is not particularly hard to detect. Israel stands as a perpetual rebuke to the craven and obsequious West that strives to accommodate and even to ingratiate itself with the forces marshaled against it. (Of course, there is a fiscal component as well; Western nations have succumbed to what we might call a condition of petrofaction.) Israel, on the contrary, has stood its ground, defending itself with martial courage and refusing to concede to an alien imperium. As such, it represents a searing condemnation of Western compliance and servility before a determined assailant, a J'accuse which Europe in general and influential elements in the United States cannot honorably answer or evade ...

The easy (and reprehensible) face-saving solution to the West's dilemma is to tumble reality on its head and label the Jewish state as the aggressor in the Middle East, as a moral delinquent and the historical source of the ongoing conflict, effectively denying its right to exist. The treatment meted out to Israel is the most obvious specimen of standard biohistorical practice. The "superorganismic" West, sensing that it is canyoneering down the global "pecking order" and incapable of summoning the resources to reassert its erstwhile paramountcy, has fallen back on the classic maneuver of all faltering collectives, namely, abusing a smaller member of the parietal community as the ostensible cause of its embarrassment ... In sum, the West, like

the ape and the rat, has adopted its own "endorphin strategy" to meet the predicament that confronts it. It engages in "perceptual shutdown," denying that it is under attack and directing its attention elsewhere, say, the banana peel of multicultural "outreach" and ethnic harmony with its more ominous immigrant communities. It revels in the warm feeling of moral enlightenment and lofty intentions, which are, be it said, merely the obverse of the real gradients governing its conduct, in short, moral decay and meanness of spirit. Simultaneously, it will apply itself to pummeling the most exposed and vulnerable member of the democratic company in an access of cowardice masking as self-righteousness and a concern for the greater good.

In this way a false ecumenicism is consummated in an act of desecration and betrayal, as well as self-betrayal. Meanwhile, the gypsy among the nations must see to it that it does not waver before the international campaign of delegitimation waged against it. The choice facing the Jewish state is, for all its palpable difficulty, paradoxically a very simple one. It is, in fact, an inescapable binary. Israel can accede to near-universal opprobrium and to its own left-wing fifth column and go down with the West before a triumphant Islam. In so doing, it raises the white flag of "peace, freedom and justice," which in Orwellian fashion translates for its bearers as persecution, bondage and iniquity. Or it can resist the declension along the slope of precedence and endowment toward the misery of life at the bottom. It can remain stalwart and impenitent, rejecting the condition of dhimmitude that the liberal West is "progressively" and feverishly embracing. In so doing, it raises not the rag of surrender but the torch of both dignity and survival.

But, that is not what is going to happen. The Israeli Prime Minister and most of his government will capitulate to the American government and its backers. Once again, the Arab world which has nothing to give will take much. Once again, mankind will feed truth to the lions; black will be treated as white, and vice-versa, and almost no one will complain.

How can they? They don't care about history. They don't learn from the mistakes of the past. They don't believe that the God of the Jewish people has anything to do with what goes wrong for mankind, anymore than did Kayin, the Generation of the Flood, the Persians, the Romans, etc. And, now the Western world, and in particular, the left-thinking part.

This is why there is not a specific mitzvah to learn history. There doesn't have to be. There is already a mitzvah to fear God, and see His hand in all that occurs. There is already a mitzvah to take care of ourselves, spiritually and physically. There is already a directive to choose life, that we, and our children after us, may live. These and others are all aspects of a broader mitzvah of learning history, and taking its lessons to heart, before we become victims of them.

Text

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