

HASHEM'S PROMISE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God said to Noach and to his sons with him, " . I will establish my covenant with you and will not cut off all flesh any more by the waters of the Flood; never again will there be a Flood to destroy the earth." (Bereishis 9:8, 11)

Though we live in a world of heretics today, as the Talmud said we would at this time (Sanhedrin 97a), one in which even believing Jews do not always act consistent with their belief, it was not always like this. Once, even the enemies of the Jewish people believed in the God of the Jewish people, even if they didn't serve Him, and in His Torah, even if they broke it, as the following account portrays:

When Torah was given to the Jewish people, His voice went from one end of the world until the other. All the kings of the nations feared and trembled in their halls, and said shirah, as it says, "While in His Temple, all will proclaim, 'Glory!'" (Tehillim 29: 9). They all gathered by Bilaam The Evil and asked him, "What is this great voice that we hear? Perhaps a flood has come to the world, as it says, 'God sat at the Flood' (Tehillim 29:10)?"

He answered them, "God sat as King forever' (Tehillim 29:10): The Holy One, Blessed is He, has already sworn never to bring a flood to the world again."

They told him, "A flood of water He will not bring, but a flood of fire He will bring, as it says, 'Behold, with fire God will judge' (Yeshayahu 66:15)."

He told them, "He has already sworn not to destroy all flesh." (Zevachim 116a)

The Talmud seems to fall away from this idea, as if Bilaam HaRasha's final answer sufficiently disproved their claim that God can and will destroy the world by fire. However, just as we learn from the drowning of the Egyptian people at the sea that, though God may have sworn to never bring a water flood upon the entire world again, He can still bring one upon a single nation, or upon several nations at one time, likewise, though God may have sworn to never destroy all of mankind again, He can, and already has, destroyed parts of nations, and can destroy entire nations, if He so desires, and by fire, if that is His will.

At the time that Yeshayahu spoke his prophecy of the End-of-Days, the people probably thought a flood of fire meant that God Himself would rain down fire upon the world, just as He once did rain.

But, today, with massive amounts of WMDs (Weapons of Mass Destruction), especially in the hands of less-than-noble leaders, God can just sit back this time and let man do the work on his own.

Another question that can be asked regarding the above story in the Talmud is, did it really occur? Did the nations really hear God's voice everywhere in the world when He spoke to the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai, and even if they did, did they really consult Bilaam about what they heard and feared?

The answer is, it is irrelevant. If the rabbis recorded the discussion as they did, it matters less that it actually happened than the message they are actually conveying through the story. In the Talmud, stories are often vehicles to make a point more than they are actual historical accounts, even when they are credible. It doesn't mean that a Talmudic story is never true. It just means that if its being true is not necessary to teach its lesson, then its veracity is not crucial.

In the case of the above account, it is interesting that the nations of the world perceived a Gog and Magog scenario while the Torah was being given to the Jewish people, seemingly two very unrelated events. Until, that is, we consider the following, also seemingly unrelated connection between the giving of Torah and the nations of the world.

One of the rabbis asked Rav Kahana: "Has anyone heard why it is called 'Har Sinai'?"

"It was the mountain upon which miracles [nissim] were performed for the Jewish people," he replied.

"Then it should be called 'Har Nisai'. Rather, it was the mountain that was a good sign-siman tov-for the Jewish people."

"Then it should be called, 'Har Simanai'!"

He told him, "Why do you not frequent Rav Papa and Rav Huna, the son of Rebi Yehoshua, who study aggadatah? For, Rav Chisda and Rabbah, the son of Rav Huna, both said, 'Why 'Har Sinai'? It was the mountain upon which descended hatred-sinah-to the gentile nations. (Shabbos 89a)

True, the word Sinai begins with the Hebrew letter Samech, and the word sinah begins with the Hebrew letter Seen, but in gematria, phonetically identical letters can be interchangeable. Nevertheless, a question still remains: hatred of what, or of whom, and why?

Rashi at least deals with the why: They did not accept Torah on it, i.e. on Har Sinai. However, his explanation is vague, and only seems to intensify the need to know the object of all this gentile hatred, and why it resulted from their lack of acceptance of Torah. Was it simply straight out jealousy, or something far more profound, something inherently tied to the entire concept of Hashgochah Pratis?

The answer may emerge from an earlier event, one that greatly preceded the actual giving of Torah, as it says:

Eisav said to his father, "Is there only one blessing that you have, my father? Bless me too." Eisav raised his voice and cried. Yitzchak his father answered and said to him, "Your settlements will be in fat places of the earth, and you will also have from the dew of heaven above. You shall live by your sword, and serve your brother. But when the time comes that you feel justified to complain, you will break his yolk from off your neck." (Bereishis 27:38-40)

Feel justified to complain against serving Ya'akov? Eisav always feels justified to complain against serving his younger brother! Actually be justified to complain against Ya'akov? That is only when the Jewish people cease to live by Torah, cease to pursue its lofty goals, and when they cease to exemplify its ideals and to be living proof of its veracity. At such times, R"L, Eisav has Divine permission to reject his younger brother's God-given authority, permission to usurp his power, and, as we have seen, even the right to act as the instrument of Divine retribution to destroy many of his descendants.

In other words, Torah, and therefore, Har Sinai, represent the greatest shield against gentile anti-Semitism and aggression the descendants of Ya'akov can ever hope to have. It is the Divinely-given battle plan necessary to rout all enemies of the Jewish people. Har Sinai, and the Torah that was received upon it, is our WMP (Weapon of Mass Protection), our impenetrable shield that has frustrated the enemies of the Jewish people on many an occasion. No wonder they hate it!

For example, when Sancheriv assembled a massive and powerful army of 185,000 soldiers, the U.N. Force of his time, and laid siege to Chizkiah HaMelech and Jerusalem, greatly outnumbering the much smaller Jewish army inside the walled city, he was thwarted in one night by a Divinely-sent plague, and assassinated by his own sons as a result. The righteousness of the few greatly out-gunned, so-to-speak, the evil of the very many. The miracle and Kiddush Hashem that occurred could easily have resulted in Yemos HaMoshiach right then and there (Sanhedrin 94a).

However, this does not mean that many did not want to surrender instead; they did. This does not mean that fear did not run the ranks of many a Jewish heart within the city, until the miracle made them victorious; it did. This does not mean that the Jewish people didn't have to rise to the occasion in order to merit the kind of miracle that eventually occurred to save their lives; they certainly did.

In fact, from the Talmud elsewhere, it is clear that this is really a major factor in the reason for the War of Gog and Magog at the end of history, as it says:

Has it not been taught that in the days of Moshiach, converts will not be accepted, just as none were accepted in the days of Dovid or of Shlomo? There will be Gerrim Gerurim (literally, "dragged-in converts"), and they will place tefillin on their foreheads and on their arms, tzitzis

on their clothing, and a mezuzah on their doorposts. However, when the War of Gog and Magog will come about, they will ask, "Why have you come?" and they will answer, "Against God and His Moshiach," as it says, "Why are the nations in an uproar, and why do the peoples mutter in vain, etc." (Tehillim 2:1). Then, each of the converts will throw aside his mitzvah and flee, as it says, "Let us break their bands" (Ibid. 3), and The Holy One, Blessed is He, will sit and laugh, as it says, "He Who sits in Heaven laughs" (Ibid. 4). (Avodah Zarah 3b)

In other words, the War of Gog and Magog will be real, but it will be primarily for the sake of revealing the true commitment of each and every Jew to Torah and its way of life. It will be a spiritual litmus test, intellectually and emotionally pushing Jews, and gentiles as well, in the direction in which they have become most spiritually comfortable, to either reward them for their belief and commitment to truth, or to deal with them accordingly for their lack of it.

This is the ultimate message of the Talmud with which we began. The great voice of God that will be heard by everyone can either result in the beauty, wonder, and elation of a Har Sinai experience, or in hatred and terrible anti-Semitism, that will eventually lead to the destructive power of a flood of fire. Judging by current events, and the polarization of people and peoples that has been occurring over the last few years, it seems that the process is well on its way. So should we be, but not by fleeing away from God and the Jewish people, but towards them.

Text

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