

ALL WE HAVE TO DO IS ASK

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

"God says, by this you will know that I am God, because with this staff I am holding I will strike the waters in the river, and they will turn to blood." (Shemos 7:17)

HERE COME THE PLAGUES. It's kind of like the Torah version of the cavalry. If only Pharaoh had done his homework, he could have saved himself, and his people, a lot of anguish. Instead, he went the full nine yards, and became the vehicle through which God made it clear Who runs the world, and the Jewish people.

However, the way that it looked historically, God just showed up one day and freed the Jewish people. To the onlooker, and even to the reader of the Torah, it looks as if the Jewish went down to Egypt as 70 souls, with the approbation of God, only to go their own way while there, as God went His own as well, with an agreement to meet up once again at a future time.

It sounds like two friends, who after living together for a long time, decide to go their own ways to make lives for themselves, each hoping for the success of the other as well as for himself. Separation is difficult, but the needs of the future require it, and so after saying a heartfelt good-bye, they head out in the directions they have chosen.

As time passes, each friend makes his start, but as often happens in life, one succeeds while the other struggles. As each man tries to build his world on a foundation of success, he periodically thinks of the other, wondering if he as already succeeded and made a name for himself, oblivious to the true reality of his friend, that while one becomes richer, the other becomes poorer.

After many years have passed, the poor friend receives a letter from his successful friend, catching him up on all of his successes, and inquiring about his welfare. There is even talk of a visit, which both lifts his spirits and reduces them when he realizes what his successful friend will find once he arrives.

So, embarrassed, he forestalls humiliation by lying about his situation, pretending to have been just as successful, which delights his friend to no end. Good friends delight in the success of each other, and run to the cause of one another when he is need. But, you can't help someone who won't admit he needs it.

However, as more time passes, the poor friend becomes so destitute that his family can no longer survive without help. "Turn to your wealthy friend!" his wife pleads with him, and looking around at

his home and his family, he realizes that his wife is right. So, with a heavy heart, he writes a letter to his wealthy friend, telling him the truth and begging for his compassion and his help.

It takes time for the letter to reach its destination, so the poor friend and his wife just assume that the wealthier man has no intention of helping them out. Until one day, that is, when there is a knock on the door, and after answering it, a well-dressed man appears at the threshold.

For the moment, there is only silence and shame. The poor friend, upon recognizing the other man, holds his head down in embarrassment, not knowing what to say next. The wealthy man, silent because he is overwhelmed by the extent of his friend's poverty, feels shame that he did not check out the reality earlier, and let his friend suffer until that moment.

Finally, the visitor runs to his friend and embraces the poor man, crying, promising to help him from that point onward, so that he can stand up on his own two feet. And, his friend cries as well, but his are tears of joy. All of a sudden, his life has a happy ending.

But, that can't be the way it worked with God and the Jewish people. Though, the Jewish people may have gone their own way in Egypt, God never does. And, though they may have been oblivious to what God was doing for the 209 years since they came down to Egypt, He was certainly not oblivious to what they were doing, or what it meant to their future.

God watched every second of their lives in Mitzrayim, knew everything they did, and everything that was done to them. There wasn't a moment that God was not aware of their troubles, and where things were going. As the Haggadah says, we were only meant to sojourn there for a while, and therefore, you can be sure that God sent the Jewish people messages about wrapping things up and moving on.

But, as in the case of the story above, you can't help someone who won't admit that he needs help, how much so someone who thinks he doesn't need any help. For example, there is the rabbi who stood up at the pulpit somewhere in the United States a few weeks ago and proclaimed to his congregation, lest they get any funny ideas about leaving and making aliyah, as some were already doing, "This is our homeland!"

It reminds me of the atheists. They say that they don't believe in God, even though no one can ever prove that He doesn't exist. Indeed, there is far more evidence for His existence than for the lack of it. But, that doesn't stop them from acting as if they have proven to themselves that God is not there, allowing them to live a Godless life.

If they do it for that reason, to be able to justify anti-Torah behavior that allows them to satisfy their personal desires, then there are plenty of places where they can live and do their thing without human retribution. If it's secularism they want, they can get it just about anywhere these days, without having to parade their beliefs in public and antagonizing those who believe and live otherwise.

But, no, it is not enough. Rather, not only must they let the world know what they believe, but they do it in an in-your-face-way. They literally take on God, taunting him by doing that which challenges Him to prove they are wrong. I mean, why bother? Why take the risk, when you can have the life you want without make a public spectacle of your beliefs?

Likewise, if you're a rabbi who likes his job in America, which requires a congregation to make it work, then fine. If you're a Jewish leader who cannot cope with the level of mesiras Nefesh necessary to make a go of it in the Holy Land, then I understand that. If you are someone to whom people look up, and you sincerely believe that aliyah is not in the best interest of those people, then of course you have to let them know what you think. What kind of leader would you be if you didn't?

However, to call America a homeland? Are you kidding, when the reason we're still stuck in exile, suffering in each generation at least somewhere in the world, is because the first Jews to have the chance to make aliyah en masse called their exile their homeland! I mean, why bother? Why taunt God like that? No matter how deep we may be in exile at the time, exile is never a Jewish homeland.

Anyone who thinks otherwise needs help. That's why God has been sending us all kinds of signs to help us out, to make us realize that we are Jews, that we need to be loyal to Torah, and that we don't belong in the Diaspora, even during times when we cannot get back to Eretz Yisroel for one reason or another.

When we observe Tisha B'Av, is it because we know the return of the Temple is imminent that year? We always hope that it is, but the real reason we observe the national day of mourning is so that we will never forget what we have lost. You can't yearn for what you don't know is missing, and though Tisha B'Av is only once a year, in truth, its message is one that applies all year round.

The same is true about redemption and Eretz Yisroel. It doesn't matter how well the exile is going, a relative term. It doesn't even matter if Eretz Yisroel is in the hands of the Jews at the time, which, thank God, it is. What matters is that we know that, as long as we are not on the land, we cannot really be happy or complete:

How can we sing the songs of the God while in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy. (Tehillim 137:4-6)

These words are from "Al Naharos Bavel," or "By the waters of Babylon," Tehillim 137. The halachah is that on days that we do say Tachanun in the daily prayer service, we are supposed to begin Birchas HaMazon with this chapter of Tehillim, and therefore, it appears in most birchonim, with the exception of those that might only be for Shabbos and Yom Tov.

Yet, it is amazing how many people skip right over it when bentching, as if it is optional, something that may only be true if one is in a big rush to bentch, hopefully not because one did not leave

oneself sufficient time to do so. Otherwise, it should be said, and with tremendous sincerity, as if the words are true: we don't want to forget Jerusalem, or Eretz Yisroel, or redemption, of the Temple, etc., and that we cannot possibly be content until all of the above are returned to the Jewish nation once again.

Let's take a little test. On a scale of one to five, where do you hold on the following question: How incomplete does your life feel when you think about the fact that the Jewish people are still in exile, still subservient to the nations of the world, still in danger from the Islamic-Persian world, still without a Temple and the Divine Presence, still with a mosque on the holiest site in the universe, still at an 80 percent (if not higher) assimilation rate (and who knows how much intermarriage!), and still lacking peace amongst Torah adherents (not to mention the recent scandals affecting this part of the Jewish people)?

Zero is not affected at all, and five is very affected.

And the people ask, why is God forcing us to give land away to the Arabs? Why are being forced to bargain with people who only want our destruction? Why is anti-Semitism rising in the world? Why is Jewish philanthropy being so affected by the economy? And, we can now add to the list, why is water becoming such a rare and expensive commodity in God's land?

Because, we have a date with destiny. We went our way, even though God did not go His, since His is ours. No matter where we go in exile, the Divine Presence goes with us, to look after us and to allow us to survive amongst otherwise hostile nations. But, now He wants to return home, and He wants His people to return with Him.

However, you can't help those who don't know they need it. Exile has been good to us, and we don't mind if it continues. Therefore, God has to re-educate us about redemption, which is the result of exile becoming a more bitter experience. And, as it becomes more bitter, and the reality of the Jewish people becomes the reality of the individual Jew, ancient goals and terminology begin to return, once again.

I find it amusing how Heaven makes all of this work out. For instance, I happen to read a review of author Dan Brown's new book called, "The Missing Symbol," and the synopsis that came with it. This was not because I was contemplating buying the book, for that is not my world. It was because the article was about eBook piracy, which began with his latest book, and which could affect mine as well.

To my utter surprise, a central part of his story revolves around the Akeidas Yitzchak, and the knife that Avraham almost used to slaughter his beloved son. I thought to myself, "Now, why in the world would a gentile author who cares little about Jewish history decide to use that obscure detail in his worldwide best seller?"

One thing is for certain. A lot of readers, many of whom will be secular Jews, some of whom may

have absolutely no background in Torah learning, may find out, for the first time, about the Akeidah. How bizarre. Kiruv rechokim, Jewish outreach, can come from the strangest sources, sometimes.

But then again, if we're as close to the Final Redemption as we seem to be, then we can expect more of this. Some of it will be friendly. Some of it, unfortunately, not at all. But, we can affect that, by taking the time and energy now to realize who we are, where we are supposed to be going as a people, and how much we depend upon God to get there.

He's just waiting to help.

And, He's just waiting for us to realize that we need His.

Text

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