

THE MASTER SMELTER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Did ever God take a nation from the midst of another nation, through tests and signs, by wonders, by war, by a strong hand and stretched out arm, with awe, as God, your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? (Devarim 4:34)

The answer, of course, is no. The only question is, only in Egypt? Au contraire, Pierre. This seems to be the story of the Jewish people from start to finish, for every time we are exiled, which is about every 70 years or so from one place or another, we become a nation taken from the midst of another nation. And, when it happens, it usually happens through all kinds of tests and signs, by wonders, good ones and bad ones, and often by war.

The only parts that seem to be missing since then and so far is the strong hand, stretched out arm, and awe, which, if you ask me, is the most important part. Well, at least the nicest part, because then it is kind of like flying on eagle's wings, as the verse says:

You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. (Shemos 19:4)

Instead, we have usually gone by foot, beaten and broken, disgraced and empty.

Hence, even though the verses speak in past tense, in truth, they refer to an ongoing process, apparently. For, it seems, though God did His part to separate us from the nations of the world, we didn't actually do ours to completion. Four-fifths died in the Plague of Darkness, the one-fifth that actually went out died in the desert for wanting to go back to Egypt, and it didn't help that the Erev Rav tagged along as well, until this very day.

This is really the basis of a similar discussion in the Talmud regarding the Final Redemption:

"The smallest shall become a thousandfold and the youngest, a mighty nation. I am God, in its time-b'ittah-I will hasten it-achishenah" (Yeshayahu 60:22). If they are worthy, I will hasten it; if they are not worthy, it will be in its time. (Sanhedrin 98a)

Although the verse seems to be talking about a single time for the Final Redemption, the Talmud learns about two, a last-minute one, called b'ittah, and an early one called achishenah. Since the latter depends upon the merit of the Jewish people, it can be assumed that it is a far more pleasant

approach to redemption than the former, which does not depend upon merit, but upon time alone.

The follow-up statement in the Talmud confirms this:

Rebi Alexandri said: Rebi Yehoshua ben Levi raised the following contradiction: It says, "Behold like the clouds of Heaven came one like the son of man" (Daniel 7:13). It is also written, "Lowly and riding upon a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). If they merit it, he will come with the clouds of Heaven, but if they do not merit it, he will come upon a donkey. (Sanhedrin 98a)

It seems that when we left Egypt, it was as Daniel described. But everywhere else we have left since then, it has been on the terms described by Zechariah. Therefore, though the process of separation continues from the nations of the world, it tends to be without the kind of Divine protection and sound-and-light show that we witnessed on the way out of Egypt.

In fact, the Kabbalists compare the separation of the Jews from the gentile world to the smelting of a precious metal from rock. Since the metal is so integrated into the stone, the only way to cleanly separate it is by heating the combination. Since the melting point of metal is far lower than rock, it will liquefy earlier and fall away from the rock.

Likewise, when the Jewish people become so integrated with the rest of the nations of the world, it is not enough to simply pull them away. Rather, they have to be smelted, so-to-speak, which means heating up the entire world in such a way as to cause the Jewish people to melt away, while leaving the rest of the world intact. And, nothing does that better than world uncertainty and the anti-Semitism that comes in its wake.

For, as long as the world is happy, it doesn't feel a need to hate. When life is good, people choose to live it rather than to deny it to others. They even become generous and share the wealth, because it makes it easier to enjoy what they have when others can enjoy it as well, somewhat. Hence, even the Jews are allowed a piece of the pie and allowed to work shoulderto- shoulder with their gentile hosts.

But when it comes time for the Jewish people to be separate from the nations of the world, and if they do not do so on a voluntary basis, then separation has to be imposed from the outside. As a result, the gentile nations are agitated from above through events below, creating or fanning the flames of anti-Semitism, heating up the situation for the Jewish people.

But, as Kabbalah points out, when it comes to smelting precious metals, one heating up is not enough. Even after the precious metal has been separated from the rock, it has to be heated up several times more to remove increasingly finer elements until it is totally pure. Sometimes gold is heated up dozens of times to get just a single ounce of pure gold.

Likewise, the Jewish people, after being in exile for thousands of years, even after being separated from the gentile nations, still maintain psychological and emotional connections, some of which may

be productive, others of which interfere with the Jewish people achieving their ultimate mission as a Kingdom of Priests.

Hence, even the Jewish people who live separate lives, especially after having left the Diaspora and making aliyah, undergo difficulty. This is why, as the Talmud states, Eretz Yisroel is one of the three things that can only be acquired through suffering (Brochos 5a). But, since the other two are Torah and the World-to-Come, it is in VERY good company.

However, it is a more advanced stage of the spiritual smelting process, and therefore, more sophisticated. For, the distinction between rock and precious metal is quite clear, but the difference between precious metal and far more finer impurities is less so. Likewise, the difference between Jew and Roman was quite distinct, but the difference between Jew and, let's say, an American, is not as clear, which is why so much of American culture has followed the Jewish people to Eretz Yisroel, even in the Charedi communities.

The good news is that God is the Master Smelter here. That means that as random as events may seem to be, and even hopeless at times, they are far from it. As far away from the Final Redemption they may seem to take us, in truth, they are advancing the cause of redemption, in more ways than we know. And, because they are from God, they can change at a moment's notice, and all the good that they accomplished can become apparent at the blink of an eye.

And will be, though it may take time until that blink occurs.

It reminds me of the story of the Bnei Ephraim who left Egypt 30 years too early, and were cut down by enemies along the way. As a result, they did not leave Egypt with Moshe Rabbeinu and the one-fifth that left with him. But, for that reason, they were not part of the story of the Spies, who also died off in the desert over the 40 years.

As a result, when Yechezkel was later called upon to revive Jews in the Valley of Dry Bones, it was their bones that he brought back to life, after which, the Talmud says, they emigrated to Eretz Yisroel where they lived the rest of their lives, unlike the Jews who had left safely with Moshe Rabbeinu. What a bizarre twist of fate, or rather, of Hashgochah Pratis.

Most of life is like that. People do not plan to get divorced at the time they get married, but often it is the second marriage that works, not the first one. Some people struggle as children, which makes them better adjusted adults than other children who had a smooth childhood. Some people fail at business several times before finally succeeding big time, having built upon the lessons of their previous failures.

Hence, the rabbis taught:

According to the effort is the reward. (Pirkei Avos 5:26)

Until now, I have always used this statement in a context that means, simply, one's reward in the World-to-Come later is dependent upon one's self-sacrifice in this world now. That, of course, will always be true. However, there is another very simple and practical explanation as well, which is more relevant to this discussion.

It is true: Cheaters never prosper. Though it may look to the rest of us as if they do, they do not, because in this world, and the next one, everyone pays their dues.

It might be that they already did before we entered the picture, or it might be that they will long after we leave it. And, "before" can include previous incarnations, and "after" can include future incarnations, or Gihennom. Either way, nothing is free in this world, and any free ride we get will cost us in ways we haven't even thought about in the next world. So, as they say, "You can either pay us now, or pay us later, but pay you must."

When it comes to the Jewish people, one thing is for certain: we have paid our way. After thousands of years of history, we have paid a heavy price just to exist, even today. Though we may survive supernaturally and prosper even more so today, still, it has been after great sacrifice. Heaven has made sure of that, and still does.

We have been smelted and smelted again, and again, and again. And most recently, we have fought in so many ways just to keep a hold on our land, and have worked incredibly hard to become as developed and as advanced as we have become over the last 70 years or so ever since the Holocaust itself. And now there is talk, in the name of certain world leaders, of righting the historical mistake of even allowing the State of Israel to be formed back in 1948!

What they don't know is that it was already righted by allowing the State to be formed in the first place. That is why God made sure it was a Bible-toting President who made it possible, forcing the U.S. State Department to support that which it was really against, and remains against to this very day, which is all part of the refinement process, one which is just about to end.

For, historically-speaking, there is not much more refining that we can undergo, which means the Master Smelter is just about ready to form His refined precious metal into its intended shape. And when He does, in an instant, all dues paid by the Jewish people to date will finally appear to have been worth it, to such a degree that others will be sorry that they were on the wrong end of the process, or too far away to have been part of it.

Text

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