

FACING GOD'S CHALLENGES

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Ephron was sitting among the sons of Chet, and answered Avraham in the presence of the sons of Chet, so that all those who came to the gates of his city could hear. (Bereishis 23:10)

As of this writing, the President of Iran is in Lebanon, surveying the Israel-Lebanese border, meeting with the leader of Hizbollah, and planning the destruction of Israel. I suppose to Iranians he looks normal, but to me, a Westerner, having come from Canada, and not just as a Jew, he looks and sounds dastardly. Really dastardly.

I wonder what his IQ is. I could make fun of him out of my great disdain for the man, and assume that he is as unintelligent as he sounds and looks, but there is no benefit in doing so if he is actually smart. I would only be fooling and endangering myself, because I would be assuming that he is far less dangerous to the Jewish people and the world than he might actually be. You don't become the President of Iran, no matter what you think of the country, by being a complete imbecile, or even a partial one.

People made that mistake about Hitler, y"s, and paid dearly for it. At first, people, his own people, thought he was a "nut job," and wrote him off. He showed them by becoming Chancellor of Germany, one of the more intelligent countries of that time, in nine short years since being released from prison for having instrumented a failed coup.

The world wrote him off as well for the next six years, totally underestimating the threat he posed to the world at that time. They paid with World War II and an estimated 78 million deaths, and the Holocaust, with six million Jews being brutally and meticulously murdered. One can still see then British Prime Minister Chamberlain, after meeting with Heir Hitler, ysv"z, face-to-face in Munich in 1938, declaring that the German leader has no plans to conquer Europe and that there would be peace instead! (Have the British always been such a poor judge of character?)

Today, the Israelis aren't taking any chances. They are on high alert, and if I'm not mistaken, reserves have been called up this morning. Even the U.N. is not taking this visit sitting down, also tensing up in the event that a war breaks out, especially since one Israeli Knesset member has "suggested" that if the IDF gets the Iranian President in their crosshairs, they should kill him.

Avraham Avinu, in this week's parshah, apparently took the same approach. It is very unlikely that Avraham Avinu thought highly of Ephron, instead seeing right through him. Indeed, in the Talmud, he is the prime example of how evil people say much but do little good (Bava Metzia 87a). Avraham

Avinu knew exactly who he was dealing with, and dealt with him accordingly.

And, how he dealt with Ephron is extremely important, and very instructive, especially when understanding the nature of anti-Semitism and the anti-Semite. In other words, once again, what seems to be a side show is really a main event, and it must be understood for what it is. For our own good.

After all, Avraham Avinu had just returned from the Akeidah, which was responsible for his beloved wife's death. The Akeidah itself had been a harrowing enough experience, intellectually and emotionally, to make Avraham Avinu worthy of at least a day off. Instead, he came home to find that his wife had passed away, and rather than unwind, he had to get immediately involved in preparations for Sarah's burial.

Unlike today, that wasn't a simple case of calling up the local Jewish funeral home and working out the details. Instead, Avraham Avinu had to purchase the burial place of his wife — even though he knew the land would be his in the future as an inheritance from God — and from a local con-artist. Did this man get no breaks?

Sure it was a test. But, according to the Midrash, after the Akeidah had ended, God agreed to Avraham Avinu's request to be tested no more. And besides, what kind of God tests a man by taking his wife through the very test that he passes (that had to sour the outcome), and then testing him again by trying his patience even more by making the burial process a humiliating experience?

However, more than a test, it was a lesson, an exposure. This was not a front row seat to the Theatre of the Absurd, but a front row seat to history, which unfortunately, is often the same thing (that the Iranian President spoke in NY to the U.N. General Assembly, coming and going as he pleased, is proof of that). Because, at the end of the day, Ephron worked for God, just as Haman did in his time, Hitler, y"s, in his, and Achmana-what's-his-name does in our time.

Knowing this is what gave Avraham Avinu the patience and the genius to deal with Ephron, and we, today, and quickly, need to know what he saw and understood, for the tour of the Lebanese border of the Iranian President is more a lesson from God than it is one from Iran, Hizbollah, or the world in general. Just as God spoke to Avraham through Ephron, He is speaking to us through the evil leaders of today.

The message, obviously, is not necessarily the same in every generation. Indeed, more than likely it is different, so understanding it has much to do with the theme of a particular period of history. Clearly the message being transmitted through the leaders of the world to the Jewish people at any given moment in history is part-and-parcel of what God is making happen at that particular time.

In the case of Avraham, it was the conclusion of his 10 tests, the concretization of everything he had been trying to instill in the nation that was evolving from him. Ma'aseh Avos siman l'banim—the actions of the Fathers are signs for the children—means that they were the trailblazers for us; we

survive because of what they survived, and what Avraham Avinu survived is extremely relevant to us at this stage of history.

Choosing God, for Avraham Avinu, meant almost dying in a fiery furnace. Choosing to follow God meant going to a strange land, and then being forced to go to Egypt to survive famine, only to almost lose his wife to Pharaoh. And, though he got rich along the way, he almost lost it all in a battle for the land, after which he was asked to bring his long-awaited and cherished son up as a sacrifice.

He got to keep his son, but at the cost of his wife, and he only was able to bury her where he wanted by paying for land that was destined to be his one day. In-between, he lost his nephew to an immoral place, only having to rescue him later on at great risk to his life and loyal followers. What a life. What a journey.

I know of many families who have made similar journeys with similar difficulties. They have left behind success in the Diaspora for struggle in Eretz Yisroel. Not all such families, but enough that it is difficult not to take notice of them, and turn to God and say, "What's going on? They have made a supreme sacrifice to be closer to You, to expedite the Final Redemption, to show others that it is a better place to be a Jew! Why so hard on them?"

Indeed, we can say the same thing about the entire Jewish people today. First we came from the poverty and persecution of Europe to make a barren land into a suitable place to live, and did at great speed and against the odds. Then we survived a Holocaust and rebuilt ourselves in different places around the world, including in Eretz Yisroel, only to be asked to surrender the fruits of our successes to people who did nothing but murder us to get them. And, we're called all kinds of nasty things when we don't.

To make matters worse, 60 Minutes runs a show about archeological digs around Jerusalem in search of the City of David and King David himself, forcing one believer to call him an "enigma." However, what comes out is that little exists to prove his existence and reign, and in fact, there is no concrete evidence for any of the kings of the Jewish people, including Shlomo HaMelech. With the help of a Jewish archeologist, the interviewer emphasizes this point.

Just what the world needs to hear at this time of history, as the battle for East Jerusalem intensifies, with the world supporting the Arabs against the Jews.

Hey God, a little help please!

One of the most instructive teachings in the history of mankind is this one:

This world is like a corridor before the World-to-Come. Rectify yourself in the corridor in order to be able to enter the Banquet Hall. (Pirkei Avos 4:16)

This is the fundamental disagreement of all of history, going back to the beginning and continuing

on until this very day. The vast majority of mankind is barely aware of this at all, and even many of those who take it seriously do so only intellectually, and not emotionally. Let's face it: we want it good and smooth in this world, and rarely give much thought to what we might be losing out in the World-to-Come to make it so.

How many people give much thought to being righteous? And, why should they, when so many people around them are eating cake? Billions of them!

But, consider this as well. How many of the people of history are actually going to the World-to-Come, and if they are, how many will get a significant portion of it? So, so few, which may be the very reason why they are succeeding in this world: unable to make it to the World-to-Come, pay-off time is now and temporal.

Anyone who thinks that it is coincidental that the most righteous people of Jewish history have lacked and suffered is tragically mistaken. It is not they could not pray and change their situation; they could. It is not that they couldn't use their merits to impose upon Heaven for a better material lot in life; they wouldn't. They have always been just passing through, focused only on where they were heading, not so much on where they were traveling.

Spiritual tests are not just to see how good we are. They are also God's way of reminding us that we live in a world that does not work out physically, in order that it can work out spiritually. And, though it may not be easy to put up with them, especially when they last for extended periods of time, we are only expected to do our best given our situation and abilities, which, sometimes, just means coping, and doing one's best to not turn against God when we are not one of those who get to walk around with smiles on their faces as if they are already living in the World-to-Come.

This is what Avraham Avinu learned from his life; this is what he was all about. And, it gave him the ability to deal with the insane and the inane, because being a Ben Olam HaBah, everything was from God, and a stepping stone to a higher level in Eternal Life.

Text

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