

# DOING OUR PART

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

*Listen heavens, and I will speak! Hear earth, the words of my mouth! My verbal lesson will drop like rain, my speech will flow like dew, like a mist upon the herb, like a rainstorm upon the grass. When I will proclaim the name of God, ascribe greatness to our God. (Devarim 32:1-3)*

Even in non-leap years, HaAzinu and Zos HaBrochah are never read together. Nevertheless, I am dealing with them as one because the latter is always read on Simchas Torah, and getting to write about it is not easy because of the holiday and its mitzvos.

It is finally 5772. I say finally, because after 5766, it is the next year for which there are reputable predictions of major history-altering events. And, true to the previous prediction, right before 5766 went out, with almost no time left, the Israelis suddenly went into Lebanon and fought Hizbullah in response to kidnapped soldiers, a war that clearly had the potential to be something much greater.

"War is not uncommon in the Middle-East," you may argue.

"Yes," I will counter, "but uncommon war is not common."

In other words, it had been a war that had come unexpectedly, and even Nasrallah was quoted as saying that had he known at the time that kidnapping the soldiers would have resulted in such a war, he would have held off. And, when justifying the war to the Knesset, Prime Minister Omert quoted from Tanach, something that was even less expected than the war itself, giving the whole thing a kind of other-worldly feel.

Six years later, the world has changed dramatically. The economy has dropped out, and has yet to recover. The Palestinians are on the verge of unilaterally declaring an independent state, with the support of many nations world-wide. Turkey has gone from ally to pain-in-the-neck, and the Arab Spring is resulting in a political winter between Israel and one of its only Arab partners-in-peace.

Arab spring? Arab anarchy, and again, totally unexpected.

And it appeared in England as well. Not the Arabs, but the anarchy. Rioting there got pretty serious and shook the usually calm British world. It has since been contained, but like putting scotch tape over a crack in a glass vase that has the potential to crack even more.

In Israel, tents adorn public parks as sectors of Israeli society fight to make their voices heard in the

Knesset, demanding a higher quality of life. Lots of Israelis do not make that much money, and yet the cost of living is quite high. That's nothing new, but camping out in public areas for weeks to change the status quo is.

It was also a year, 5771, that saw the tragic and gruesome death of an eight-year old New York Chassidic boy, as innocent as they come, by a fellow Jew who had feigned participation in a search for the very boy he had kidnapped, murdered and mutilated. As if that wasn't enough off the religious Jewish grid, a man stabbed a great rabbi to death in Israel, Elazar Abuchatzera, zt"l, as he was given blessings.

There was an earthquake that centered in Virginia but was felt all the way up in Toronto. Not common. There was a Hurricane that worked its way up the eastern coast of the United States as far as New York, also not so common. Terrible forest fires have destroyed huge forests in the south-west, while extreme summer heat did the same to the crops. They ought to rename the United States of America and call it the United States of Emergency.

Then there's Greece. As I write this (September 14), they have not yet defaulted, but chances are, by the time you read this, they will have done so. The only question is, how controlled a default can the controlled default be? What will be the ramifications throughout Europe, and then around the world?

Japan, in the meantime, once the third largest economy in the world, is too busy digging itself out from its tsunami of problems to consider those of others, though they are bound to be affected as well. Parts of Japan are still battling just to get electricity once again, while other parts are dealing with the potential radiation poison emitted from its damaged nuclear reactors.

That was 5771. Will 5772 see the reversal of all this bad fortune and put the world back on track? Will the sun break through the clouds and provide good weather once again, politically, economically, atmospherically? What do you predict? Yes? No?

Of course I can't hear you, and I will not be able to provide a tally of the votes. I can only guess what most of you will say. So, why don't we just ask history itself, by hearing its voice through this week's parshah. It's the threshold to the last parshah of the year, and the brochah about which it speaks and which we seek.

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Why did Moshe Rabbeinu turn to the heavens and the earth to act as witnesses to his testimony? Obviously they are merely creations of God, and at best, His emissaries. And besides, what can they really see or hear, even if, as Rashi points out, they will live on long past Moshe Rabbeinu himself?

Perhaps, Moshe Rabbeinu was hinting to us that should we stray too far and for too long, heaven and earth will turn against us. It is one thing when humans turn against one another, also a function of Divine Providence. However, since evil is so prevalent in the world, we often just assume that the attack was not about us, but about them, meaning that they live to harm others, and odds are, they're bound to succeed now and then.

But Acts of God are different, as their name implies. Some may replace the word God with nature, but either way, they are events that are not evil but which can cause evil. Therefore, they tend to make us think and reflect, and wonder if they are more about us than about them. For example, one rabbi in New York went so far as to associate the recent earthquake there, based upon the Talmud, with the recent passage of a law permitting same-gender marriages.

But that is where he stopped. Everyone oohed-and-ahed when they heard the Talmudic connection, and couldn't help but be convinced that the unusual earthquake was probably connected to the unusual circumstances. But where were they supposed to go from there? Was the only relevant reaction to ooh-and-ah?

That's like the angel showing up in Sdom and saying to Lot:

*"You know why we're here? We were sent by God to destroy this place, because there is so much evil going on here. That's why we're here. Any questions?"*

"Ah, just one," an astute Lot would have had to say if he was on the ball and wanted to survive, "Do you have any further instructions for me, as in, how I can personally avoid this disaster, or did you only come to tell me when and how I was going to die?!"

"Well," the angel might have continued, "have you tried changing the laws of this place, you know, to make them more amenable to God?"

"You're kidding, right?" an incredulous and realistic Lot would have had to ask. "As it is, they barely tolerate me. If I so much as suggest they change their ways they'll run me out of town, at the very least! They just finished tarring-and-feathering a young girl who was kind to strangers!"

"So I understand," the angel of God would have probably said. "How about moving, you know, to a better neighborhood?"

"Hmm," a reticent Lot might have replied. "Not really. I mean, I'm so invested in the place, and though it has its drawbacks, look at the pluses!"

"Pluses?" the angel would have had to have asked, his turn to be incredulous. "It's all about to become a big negative, and you want to talk about the advantages of remaining here?"

"Well ..."

"Well, what?!" the angel might have pressed. And, seeing Lot's inability to face the facts and to accept that his exile was indeed coming to an abrupt end, he would have to have added, "It must be, then, that we only came to tell you when and how you are going to die."

When in New York a couple of years ago, I saw a billboard ad for a movie, the caption being, "Every beginning has an end." So I thought to myself, so too does every exile. Every exile has an end, and this one is already 2,000 years old, so why don't we Jews suspect the same thing? Why don't rabbis in the Diaspora (and in Eretz Yisroel) get up and tell their congregations, "You know, we might be approaching the end of our exile, thank God, so let's discuss what that might mean, and what we can do to get ready for it?"

This is especially true since we do not have a good track record of correctly anticipating the ends of exiles, and the potential beginnings of redemptions. We have, almost without fail, been caught flat-footed each time, and have paid the price for being so. Might we not try and avoid such a mistake this last time?

For, the Shechinah that accompanies us into exile to protect us and to allow us to prosper, moves on at the end of an exile. You know all that brochah we enjoy while there? It is now because of our genius (brilliant Jews have also been massacred countless times), or our ability (they abuse the talented with the untalented), or the civility of the gentile world (which, to the Jewish people, is usually more miraculous than natural). It is because of the Divine Providence, our Heavenly protectzia in exile.

*"But I asked my rabbi about making aliyah" people tell me, "and he told me not to do it now!"*

"Fine," I answer them. "But anything that requires putting yourself on the line for God is called an act of zealousness. And, according to the Shulchan Aruch, if a potential zealot has to ask first before performing his act of zealousness, the answer must be 'no.' The message: Either you are a zealot and driven to do what you feel you must regardless of the consequences, or you are not a zealot for God and the wrong man for the job!"

Indeed, the Malbim predicted that at the end of the final exile, most Jews will still be living in the Diaspora finding it difficult to leave, while the Zealots will be in Eretz Yisroel precipitating the Final Redemption. Welcome to the Geulah b'Rachamim Seminar I am now presenting everywhere I can.

If we learned anything about Divine Providence from Parashas Ki Savo a few weeks back, when the Shechinah moves on, so does Hashgochah Pratis, personalized Divine Providence, leaving us on the same level of Divine Providence as our gentile hosts. And, when that happens, then whatever affects them can affect us as well. Their fate becomes our fate, their earthquakes become our own, as so do their hurricanes, etc.

Hence, Moshe Rabbeinu's message in this week's parshah: When God speaks to you, you are safe. But, when Heaven and earth start talking to you, it is time to start asking, "If the secretary is now giving us messages that we used to get directly from the boss, maybe it's time to move on. Maybe it's time to follow the boss to His next location."

For that is the source of brochah, being with the Shechinah wherever it may be. Just as safety for the Jew is defined as being where God wants you to be when He wants you to be there, so too can brochah be achieved the same way. May we always merit to be with the Shechinah, and merit the Divine protection and prosperity that comes with it.

According to the Zohar, the zos of Zos HaBrochah refers to the Shechinah, for which Zos is another name. In other words, the Shechinah is the brochah with which Moshe Rabbeinu blessed the people, which is why another name for the tribes was Shivtei E"l, the Tribes of the Almighty. For, if they remained loyal to Torah then the Shechinah would remain loyal to them, so-to-speak, blessing them in all that they did.

Moshe Rabbeinu had to give them this blessing because he was about to die, and until this point, he was the glue between the Shechinah and the Jewish people. The closeness to the Shechinah that the Jewish people had enjoyed throughout the 40 years was in his merit, a merit that was about to end with his death.

That is why the Torah makes a point of ending off not only with his death, but with the perfect health that he enjoyed until his final moment. Why did we need to know how strong and capable he was until his very last breath, if he was leaving this world in any case? Because, the Torah wants us to understand one of the side benefits of being attached to the Shechinah: protection from the elements that weaken body and soul.

This is the blessing that Moshe Rabbeinu passed on to the Jewish people just before he left the nation he loved. He wanted to guarantee our longevity and ability to endure history, so he blessed us with the Shechinah, a blessing that has kept us in history until this very day.

However, even the great Moshe Rabbeinu could only guarantee the success of such a blessing if we do our part to be worthy of it. When we have been, the results have been nothing short of miraculous and remarkable. But, when we haven't been, then the results have been disastrous, reminding us once again that ultimately, all blessing depends upon our willingness to do that which makes us fitting to receive it.

Chazak, and Shannah Tovah!

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