

DIVINE INTERVENTION IN OUR WARS AGAINST OUR ENEMIES

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

And the angel of God said to her, "You are pregnant, and you will give birth to a son. You will call him 'Yishmael,' because God has heard your affliction. (Bereishis 16:11)

It is the butterfly effect in action. There was Hagar, in the middle of nowhere, pregnant and dying. Sarah, her mistress, had been hard on her and she had fled to the desert, and left up to her own devices, she and her future son Yishmael would have died then and there, and what a different world it would be today!

In next week's parshah, history will get a second chance. This time Yishmael will already be a young man when Avraham sends him away with his mother, this time on command from God, and they will come close to dying. And, even though the angels will protest against any kind of Divine survival effort, because of how he will later treat the descendants of Yitzchak in the future, God reminded them that He judges a person based upon his current spiritual status only, not his future one.

Amazing, is it not, how such a seemingly insignificant event, comparable to the simple fluttering of a butterfly's wings, could have such a dramatic result thousands of years later, like a raging storm caused by the same butterfly half a world away? Most people do not almost die as he once did twice, and yet, look at what he has become and what he has done over the millennia, because he did not!

And he is only just warming up.

Even God, according to the Talmud, had second thoughts, so-to-speak:

There are three things that God regretted creating: Kasdim, Yishmael, and the yetzer hara. (Yerushalmi, Ta'anis 15a)

A little later on, the Talmud brings the story about how when the Jewish people were on their way into exile to Bavel and dying from thirst, they turned to the people of Yishmael for relief. Feigning sympathy, the Yishmaelim instead fed the Jews salty fish to intensify their thirst, and then gave them empty water pouches from which to quench themselves, causing them to die immediately. With relatives like that ...

But, how does God regret anything? Regret is something you feel when you did something you thought would turn out well, but happened to turn out bad. For God, such surprises are not possible, since He is omniscient, and always knows the outcome of an event before it even begins. Indeed,

God wouldn't cause something to happen unless He intended for the end result from the start.

Rashi, answering a similar question, says the following:

God repented-vayinachem-that He had made man on earth, and it pained His heart. (Bereishis 6:6)

Vayinachem: It was a consolation-nechamah-for Him that He created man on earth, for had he been one of the Heavenly beings he would have incited them also to rebel against God.

It pained Him: In the mind of God man became an object to be bothered (i.e., punished).

In other words, it wasn't that God was surprised by the outcome of history; He knew what would eventually occur long before man was even created. However, once history fulfilled its destiny, necessitating a Flood, God turned from Divine mercy to Divine judgment, in order to decide what to do with mankind who had become so corrupt (Rashi). The verses are noting the historical change of Divine thinking, which had always been planned. This has to be the case, because with respect to the yetzer hara, the Midrash says:

Rebi Nachman the son of Shmuel said: "... And behold, it was very good" (Bereishis 1:31); "And behold," this refers to the yetzer tov; "very good" refers to the yetzer hara, for the yetzer hara is very good. Were it not for the yetzer hara, a man would not build a house, marry a woman, do business ... (Bereishis Rabbah 9:7)

After all, as the Talmud states, "God created the yetzer hara, and He created Torah as its spice" (Kiddushin 30b). Hence, without the yetzer hara, what would there be for Torah to spice?

But then again, why would God 'regret' having created it, if its purpose is so central to everything the Jewish people strive to accomplish? The answer to this question is also in the Talmud:

Rav Shimon, the son of Levi said: Every day the yetzer of a man strengthens itself seeking to kill him, and it would succeed if Heaven did not help him. (Kiddushin 30b)

Confused? No need. The Midrash is talking about the yetzer hara prior to Adam HaRishon's sin, when man was perfectly balanced between good and evil (Derech Hashem 1:3:1). The Talmud is talking about the yetzer hara after man sinned and spiritually 'absorbed' the yetzer hara into his very being. Long gone is man's perfect balance between good and evil; he is like meat for the vultures now.

The situation is the same with respect to the descendants of Yishmael. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world today, going far beyond the effects that Christianity once had. And, the strange thing about it is that when Christianity spread, it brought a more advanced message about God than the paganistic world at that time had ever known. Islam seems to be a large step backwards for the Western world, and one that many would not take if the Arab world wasn't so incredibly intimidating.

The Yerushalmi made its statement in fifth century. We are living some 15 centuries later, and during the time since Bnei Yishmael have had time to grow, build, and conquer. And conquer. And conquer.

some more. And today, what they do not take through war they take through diplomacy and diplomatic intimidation. They have greatly upset the equilibrium of Creation, and for that reason, God changed his heart, so-to-speak, with respect to his creation.

But that is just a Divine warning to man to be aware of Bnei Yishmael just as he should be aware of his yetzer hara. And, in each case, he must turn to God for help, for clearly the power that each wields is more than anyone can counter on his own. Indeed, that is the very reason why both exist in the first place: to turn man back to God.

Hence his name: Yishmael: God will hear, as in:

Eventually the king of Egypt died. By that time, the Children of Israel were broken because of the servitude, and they cried. Their cry for help came to God, who heard their groaning. God remembered his covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, and saw the Children of Israel. God was aware of their suffering. (Shemos 2:23-25)

That is the job of Yishmael. Like the yetzer hara, they exist to make the Jewish people turn to God for help, Who is only too willing to give it. The problem is that we are not too willing to ask for it, instead turning to politicians or technology to solve our problems. Or, we simply adapt to the situation and say things like, "Nu, it could always be worse." Hence, the Talmud says:

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 is certainly no coincidence that the Arab world is compared to the chamor-donkey-for a number of reasons. Hence, when the Talmud says that if we are not worthy of Moshiach arriving like clouds of Heaven, that he will arrive lowly and riding upon a donkey, it is safe to assume that this means on the back of Yishmael. Yishmael, the Talmud indicates, and all the trouble he will cause us, God forbid, will trigger Moshiach's arrival.

Why? The answer is obvious. All hypocrisy aside (which is not an easy task), the Arab world, for the most part, shuns the modern world. Turning a blind eye to the Arab aristocracy, which most seem to do, Muslims, in general, see modern technology as a device of the devil, and deplore and fear it. They'll use it to carry out terrorist attacks on innocent civilians, but they won't use it that much in everyday life.

It is just the opposite by the Jews. They'd rather not use technology for military purposes, but instead just enjoy its multiple and often addictive opportunities in everyday life. Jews, for the most part, love the good life, and they'll use the modern world any way they can to get more of it, sometimes at the cost of important spiritual values, like God, for example.

Indeed, explains the Shem M'Shmuel (Parashas Vayishlach), the number one obstacle in the path of

the Final Redemption will be materialism. It already is. In fact, find me a deviation from the long term goals of the Jewish people, and I will show some form of materialism that is causing it. And, as a result, for the umpteenth time in our three-millennia history, it is endangering us all over again, leaving us, once again, in harm's way.

Fascinating, is it not, how the more technology speeds up and tries to dominate people's lives, the faster Islam and Sharia Law tries to dominate the world? It is a such a counter-culture, with some aspects being reminiscent of certain Torah values. But, like all the religions that have used Judaism as their base, the Muslim adaptation has become extreme in its interpretation and application of the original Word of God, until it has become anything but that.

One thing is for sure. Like the yetzer hara, which is all over us and trying to kill us every chance it gets, Yishmael is all over the world, and capable of doing very much the same, one way or another. In each case, we aint going to win this war on our own, not without a formidable amount of Divine intervention. There are just too many of them, they have too much chutzpah, and the West tends to be intimidated by them to no end.

And to think, all we have to do is ask for God's help.

And to fear, we won't, at least not until, as was in the case of Egypt, we are forced to scream out for Divine assistance.

And, we didn't even get a chance to deal with Persia-Iran-yet.

Rav said: "All the keitzin-end dates-have passed, and the matter depends only on repentance and good deeds." But Shmuel maintained: "It is sufficient for a mourner to keep his mourning." This matter is disputed by Tannaim: Rebi Eliezer said: "If Israel repents, they will be redeemed; if not, they will not be redeemed." Rebi Yehoshua said to him, "If they do not repent, will they not be redeemed! Rather, The Holy One, Blessed is He, will set up a king over them, whose decrees will be as difficult as Haman's, whereby the Jewish people will repent, and He will thus bring them back to the right path." (Sanhedrin 97b)

Oy vey.

Text

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