

WORLD RECTIFICATION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

When Lavan heard the news of Ya'akov his nephew, he ran toward him. He hugged him and kissed him. He brought him into his house, and he related to Lavan all the things. (Bereishis 29:13)

It never ceases to amaze. The Avos were such holy people, and yet so often they had to deal with the Mob, the Mafias of their times. And, even though Lavan was at least a blood relative (Eisav was an even bloodier one), it is not so clear in this case that it was to his advantage. As the Haggadah points out, Lavan had no problem eliminating his nephew and stealing his family, perhaps because they were related.

There are several stories in the Talmud of great rabbis having to appear before the emperors of their times. One of the most famous of these stories did not end favorably, but with the gruesome death of ten of the greatest rabbis of the Second Temple Era, as we read about during the Mussaf Service on Yom Kippur.

Other times, great miracles happened, as in the case of Nachum Ish Gamzu and the great rabbis who accompanied him to Rome to save the Jewish community back in Eretz Yisroel. In the end, they went home richer than they came, and with the evil decree in hand to do what they wanted with it. Even the innkeeper who had stolen the ransom chest of gold and silver from the rabbis along their way was dispensed with by Divine Providence.

With the exception on Antoninus, the Roman leader who befriended Rebi Yehudah HaNasi, and the King of Kuzar, who converted to Judaism, gentile leaders have not had much respect for the Torah leaders with whom they interacted. Indeed, most despised the Torah giants, and had no problem treating them with great lack of respect. Today Torah leaders carry little weight, if any at all, in the eyes of the world at large, and are often seen more as parasites than as anything positive.

The Talmud addresses this issue, albeit in an indirect manner:

Rebi Yehoshua's son became weak and his spirit left him. When he returned, his father asked him, "What did you see?"

He answered him, "An upside down world: the esteemed were down, and those who were down were esteemed."

He told him, "My son, you saw a clear world!" (Pesachim 50a)

We've been walking on the ceiling for so long now that we're just used to living upside down. It seems as if a person has to die and leave this world to see what reality actually looks like before he can realize that this world defies gravity, figuratively-speaking. But, in the meantime, the esteemed remain down while those who deserve to be down are esteemed, and great people, like Roshei Yeshivos have to beg for money for their Torah institutions from some people who ought to be seeking out the Roshei HaYeshivos and begging them to take their money!

The best way, of course, to see if you are standing on the ceiling or if your feet are firmly planted on terra firma is by considering your priorities in life. Lots of people pay lip service to what is supposed to count most in life, but at the end of the day, unfortunately, it is the way one dispenses with their money that determines what they truly hold dear.

I remember an experience I had years back. I was in-between jobs and decided to try something new. Until that time I had been writing Perceptions for free, and decided to write something called "An Even Bigger Picture," a weekly commentary that would go deeper into current events from a Torah perspective. The idea was that, for \$50 a year, people would subscribe to this eMagazine as a way of helping to keep me in the writing business.

For the most part, the response was favorable. However, not only did one person dissent, but he gave me sharp criticism, asking me how I dared to charge people for the Torah I was writing, especially since he could get just about anything he wanted on the Internet for free. Boy, was he angry, and was I ever taken aback.

After recovering somewhat from his attack, I went on the counter-offensive. I explained how much I prefer to teach Torah for free, and how much I did, or for very little at all. But, if I was going to continue, I had to bring in some income, and this was one way of doing it, and my readers seemed to understand and were willing to help out.

Then I told him that his priorities were all off. I wondered how many material things he spent ridiculous amounts of money on, or at all, just because it physically enhanced his life. "I," explained, "should want to write and teach Torah for free, but you," I said, "should be willing to pay as much money as necessary to learn it." Little reveals a person's true priorities more than where he spends his money, and little reveals the worth of something to a person more than the amount of money he is willing to sacrifice for it.

Needless to say, he did not subscribe to my eMagazine, but I never heard from him again.

People complain about the quality of chinuch—Torah education—yet rebis, the teachers of our children, are some of the lowest paid people in the Western world. A Torah teacher provides his or her students with a portion of Eternity, and make almost nothing for it, while business people provide a temporal product, and make a fortune doing so. It's almost as if you have to be poor to be righteous.

Almost. It is not an absolute must, but given history, it seems to be more the rule than the exception. Indeed, it seems that the only way to be esteemed in the next world, the only place where it really counts, is to be disregarded in this world. Hence, Dovid HaMelech wrote regarding himself:

The stone that the builders despised became the cornerstone. (Tehillim 118:22)

To us, Dovid HaMelech is the ancestor of Moshiach, the greatest king that history has even known. But, in his time, he was reviled by all kinds of important people, and was disregarded by some of his own children, who even tried to interfere with his plans to give the kingdom over to his Shlomo. He had to fight tooth-and-nail just to survive, fleeing for his life from before Shaul HaMelech, who had wanted him killed to protect his own dynasty.

The Talmud says that he had begged God to vindicate him during his lifetime, but God refused, waiting until after his death to do so. And even today, Dovid Melech remains somewhat of an enigma, found only in the pages of Tanach, but not in archeological finds, causing many today to believe that he might have even been some kind of mythological figure in Jewish folklore.

And, of course, the situation is no different today for his ancestors, who, once again, are being vilified by the nations of the world. People who not only murder Jews, but raise and teach their children to do so and have no intention whatsoever of changing the course curriculum, are being held in esteem by the nations of the world. The Jewish people, who have a historical and legal right to their land, and who built it up and made it bloom, are forced to justify their existence on a daily basis.

This world may only be a corridor to the next one, but is a crazy dangerous one, at least for the Jewish people. It is like being a Jew, conspicuously looking the part, on a plane from Hong Kong to London which is forced, due to mechanical problems, to temporarily land in Tehran. Even if your flight is due to continue its journey to safety soon, how are you going to feel every second that you have to sit there in the Iranian airport waiting to leave? Probably wondering if you'll even get to leave!

But, the truth is, even God has to suffer through all of this. Not only do people not thank Him for the gift of life, many don't even believe that He exists! As a parent, I know what it is like when children disregard kindnesses you have done for them, even making you the enemy at times when you have been anything but that. It hurts a lot.

Okay, God isn't affected by any of that, certainly not like we humans. He at least has the luxury of zapping His enemies at will and showing them Who's really boss in this world. We, on the other hand, have to suffer through their insults and arrows, waiting for revenge to come in the future, if it comes at all. This makes it all the more painful for us.

On the other hand, God created man for a purpose, and that purpose was so He could reveal Himself to man, and do good for him. When man refuses to acknowledge the reality of God, and

therefore, prevent Him from doing good for him, it interferes with the Divine reason for Creation. And though even the bad is for good, still we have to act as if God is pained by the human setbacks of history, and work to rectify them. We have to be concerned about God's pain, so-to-speak, and help to alleviate it by getting Creation back on track.

This is what God was saying to the Jewish people when He freed us from Egypt and told us that we have to be a light unto nations. This is what He taught us when He revealed concepts such as Tikun Olam—World Rectification—to the Jewish people, via Kabbalah. He was saying to us, "Look, for Me everything is according to plan. But for you, history devoid of a close relationship between mankind and God must be treated like a disaster in need of immediate rectification."

Indeed, this is why the world is upside-down. In fact, Rebi Yehoshua ben Levi was not telling his son that it was a mistake that the world was this way, only that it was a mistake that people thought it was right-side up. The problem was not that this world requires ongoing rectification, for that is the way we justify our existence and earn reward in the World-to-Come. The problem is that people think that the world is doing just fine, so why fix what isn't broke.

So they don't. And, they get upset at anyone who tells them otherwise, like the Jewish people, for example. So, to make sure that we don't forget that we are walking on the ceiling, God spices history with people like Lavan, and Eisav, and all the insane people and nations that normal people have to contend with, either in person or through the media. So, before you put that hammer and screwdriver away ...

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