

UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCES

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Unusual circumstances often yield unusual insights. I remember when, about 14 years ago, we lost our child one week before it was supposed to be born, how surreal it felt. These types of crises, until that time, had always happened to someone else's family, not to mine. Until that Erev Shabbos, tragedy had missed my own personal family, for which I had always been grateful.

Even more bizarre was the timing of the event: right after Tisha B'Av. As a result, as the rest of the nation was leaving mourning and preparing for the joy of Shabbos Nachamu and Tu B'Av, my wife and I, together with our relatives, went deeper into a state of mourning. It took a while for us to get out of it again.

So, I did what I always do, especially during emotionally confusing times. I wrote. I wrote about the loss, and what it meant to me, and how life now looked from the inside of a tragedy. I just let my emotions flow from my heart through my fingers and onto the page. Whatever resulted, that was going to be it, and hopefully, somehow, it would be meaningful for others as well as for me.

One thing that I had not been looking for was sympathy. I had just wanted to make sense of what happened, especially in terms of Hashgochah Pratis—Divine Providence. Were we to blame? Did we do something wrong? Could we have done something better to avoid the whole thing? Was there anything positive in any of it to hold onto while we weathered the emotional storm it created for us?

A lot of questions remain unanswered simply because no human being can answer them. We can suggest answers in the meantime, and all of us did while consoling one another. However, all I know for sure, at this time, is that the dvar Torah that emerged from the incident has been used countless times by others who have gone through similar crises, and have needed strengthening. On some level, it put some meaning into what otherwise had seemed like a meaningless pregnancy and pre-natal death.

Two days ago, my father broke his hip. Though he had been very active and healthy for most of his life, his health had not been so great towards the end of it. He had always taken good care of himself and was an example of responsible eating and exercise for the rest of us, but so many aspects of health are beyond our control, and some things are already set in motion before we are even born.

As a result of his fractured hip, it was decided that he needed a new one. Since his heart was not strong, the doctors ran many tests to see if he could withstand the operation, and they did whatever they could to strengthen him for it. Finally, it was decided that not having the operation was just as

dangerous as having it, perhaps even more so, and so they took him in for surgery Wednesday evening, Toronto time.

The doctor was confident enough that my father would survive the surgery that he tried to send my mother and sister home for some sleep in the meantime. My brother, who is also a doctor, was satisfied with the situation, and the surgery went ahead at about 8 pm Toronto time, 3 am Israel time. It was supposed to have lasted about three to four hours altogether.

I got up early this morning as I usually do, and headed for the Bais Midrash on schedule. I had my father in mind all the time, especially as I learned before dovening and during dovening itself. I learned a bit more after as well, and by the time I sat down at my computer to start the other part of my day, it was about 7:15 am. Everything was going as expected. Until 7:30 am, when I got a long distance call.

I recognized the number as being from overseas, and anticipating that it was my mother to tell me the surgery had gone well, I jumped in and told her that she could have called even earlier. However, it was a man's voice instead, which threw me for a moment, until I realized that it was my brother, calling from the hospital, to tell me that my father had not survived the surgery. Sometimes, towards the end of the surgery, his heart gave out, and they could not resuscitate him.

It did not take long for me to realize what I had lost. My father was not only a great father, but he was also my best friend. The teenage years were not always easy for either of us, but once I became Orthodox, and he accepted my change of life, our relationship just got stronger and stronger with each passing day. We had a lot of great times together, even after I moved to Israel, vis-a-vis Skype. He even helped me edit my weekly parshah sheet, until he became too tired to do so, listening patiently as I read it to him, each Wednesday morning his time, over Skype.

One of the amazing things is that, even after becoming religious, many of the things that my father taught me over the years remained true, and are still guiding principles in my life. And even though as my knowledge of Torah grew, he came, over time, to look at me as the teacher, and at himself as the student, so much of what is good in me remains from him. My mother is the reason for the rest of it, and Torah helped to tweak all of that.

But again, I am writing neither for sympathy nor condolences, but to derive a meaningful lesson from a difficult event that I can tie back to the parshah. If it wasn't for the fact that I am still in Israel, and that the laws of aninus don't really apply to me until I get Toronto, I wouldn't even be able to write any of this right now. It is such a human thing to look for meaning in important events.

As we discussed the reasons why the operation should have worked, but didn't, and how the doctors did everything they could to revive my father, but couldn't, it became increasingly clear that his moment to leave had come. They say that a person begins to sense his day of death, in order to be able to get his affairs in order in time, and it certainly seemed that way with my father. We were the ones who kept reading more years into his life, not so much out of intuition as much as out of

hope.

And, as I spoke to my brother and in my mind went through all the things I did yesterday that I could have done better, and began to blame myself for not taking the situation and risk more seriously, I also reminded myself of what I have learned through the years, especially on the level of Sod, and how one's moment of death is decided for a person even before he lives. Our choices can affect the circumstances by which we leave this world, but not the actual moment of departure.

That's when I thought of next week's (as of writing this) parshah. As the first Rashi of Sefer Vayikra points out, the fundamental difference between the prophets of the Jewish people and those of the nations of the world, like Bilaam in this week's parshah, is the way they relate to Hashgachah Pratis—Divine Providence. For the nations of the world, and those of us from the Jewish people who forget, life often looks random, as if God does not involve Himself in every detail of life. However, for the Jewish people, "not even a finger can be raised if not decreed first by Heaven" (Chullin 7b).

The fact that Bilaam did not understand this, and Pharaoh before him, meant his own destruction. He wanted to believe that God was not all-knowing, and that He was not orchestrating every last detail of history so he could make changes to the script to his liking. In the end, he just became a pawn in God's master plan to carry out that which he had schemed to stop, albeit it with some deviations along the way.

The Jew is supposed to look at history differently. This is why we pronounce, upon hearing of the death of someone, "Boruch Dayan HaEmes—Blessed is the Truthful Judge." It is as if to confirm that, as random as the events of life may seem to be, they are not. Though things happen in ways that do not seem planned or meaningful, every last second and act is planned by God, and made to occur because of how they fit into His master plan, even though they seem to interfere with ours.

This morning, as I was learning in the place where I doven prior to the arrival of everyone else, except for one other person, I experienced something that usually happens only once in a while, at least in this way. And, whenever it does, it is always exhilarating, and a reminder for me that, even when I learn alone, I do not learn alone.

Usually, when learning before dovening, I start off with a couple of pages from the Jerusalem Talmud, before doing the same in the Babylonian Talmud. However, since the latter is much longer than the former, it is not really possible to coordinate between the two of them, especially since not all sections found in the "Bavli" are also found in the "Yerushalmi," and vice-versa. Therefore, what I learn in one area of Talmud rarely overlaps what I learn in the other, at least in the same morning.

Today, however, was different. Today, I happened to come across, in Tractate Shekalim of the Yerushalmi, the following well-known statement of Rebi Pinchas ben Yair:

Torah leads to watchfulness; Watchfulness leads to alacrity; Alacrity leads to cleanliness; Cleanliness leads to abstention; Abstention leads to purity; Purity leads to piety; Piety leads to

humility; Humility leads to fear of sin; Fear of sin leads to holiness; Holiness leads to prophecy; Prophecy leads to the resurrection of the dead.

Now, normally, after learning from the Yerushalmi, I continue with two pages from the Bavli, which lately, has been from Tractate Sanhedrin. However, because of the length of the pages in Sanhedrin where I happen to be at this time in the tractate (Perek Chelek), and the shortness of time in which to learn them before dovening, I decided to change my order that morning and learn from a different tractate that I am also learning, this one called Avodah Zarah.

My starting point that morning was the the 20th page, and to my surprise, within about five minutes, the Bavli also quoted the exact same statement by Rebi Pinchas ben Yair, which delighted me to no end. In fact, I was so excited by the Divine Providence (the odds of this happening are very small), that I turned around to share it with the only other person in the Bais Midrash at that time. I only held back from saying something because I realized that by the time I explained what had happened, especially in Hebrew, the rest of my learning time would have been consumed. So, I kept the magical moment to myself instead.

That was about 4:20 am Israel time. According to the doctor, my father went into cardiac arrest about 5:40 am Israel, just as my minyan was stepping into Shemonah Esrai for Neitz (Sunrise). Even as I prayed for my father's welfare, and after dovening, learned for him as well, his soul had already begun its journey to a higher level of reality. The timing of both events was not lost on me, especially when my brother told me how rare what happened to him during surgery actually was. For me, it was as if the former had been preparation for the latter.

Though we talk about how Bilaam was so impressed with the level of modesty of the Jewish people, ultimately, what impressed him was our relationship with the Master of the Universe. He envied our frequently and easily we interacted with God. And, though modesty, as Rebi Pinchas ben Yair implies, is crucial for such a relationship with the Almighty, ultimately, it is our ability to trace all events of life back to Him, that allows us to build and maintain such a close and defining relationship with Him.

Indeed, it is only once we remove the illusion of randomness from our lives that we are able to see everything as being from God, as being part of a glorious master plan that supercedes the life-and-death cycle of this world. It is this knowledge, this approach to reality that allows us to transcend it, to find meaning where others only see tragedy, and to find Godly perfection where others think that they sense Divine flaw. Only then do the negative events of life stop appearing like broken threads in the tapestry of life, and instead, are perceived as necessary elements to help keep the bigger picture together.

And, it is only then that we can we truly find comfort amongst the rest of the mourners of Tzion v'Yerushalayim, and to gain from what, at one time, seemed only like loss.

Text

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