

WILL WE NEVER LEARN?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

*These are the names of the sons of Yisroel who went to Egypt with Ya'akov, each with his family.
(Shemos 1:1)*

And so began Golus Mitzrayim—the Egyptian Exile, the mother of all exiles:

This is the reason why only four exiles were listed: Babylonian, Median, Greek, and Roman (Bereishis Rabbah 16:44; Vayikra Rabbah 13:15); the Egyptian exile is not mentioned, otherwise there would be five, since Egypt was the root of them all, as the Rav has written (Likutei Torah, Seitzei) ... This is what it says in the Midrash: All the kingdoms are called Mitzrayim (Bereishis Rabbah 16:4), because it was the root of all of them and the root of all the Klipos. (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek 2, Drush 5, Anaf 2 Siman 4)

Apparently, though you can take the Jews out of Mitzrayim, it is far more difficult to take Mitzrayim out of history. And, this is even though most of the Egyptians of Moshe Rabbeinu's time were wiped away during the 10 Plagues and at the Red Sea, and what remained was conquered by neighboring enemies shortly after.

It is ironic that the Jewish people had to descend to Mitzrayim to become a nation. Until they went down there, they were but a large family of 70 souls. However, while in Mitzrayim, they greatly increased in number until Pharaoh had no choice but to recognize them as an independent nation:

Eventually a new king came to power over Egypt who had no recollection of Yosef. He said to his people, "Notice that the nation of the Children of Israel are more numerous and powerful than we are." (Shemos 1:7-8)

The question is, was that incidental, or essential? After all, the Egyptian Exile had been foretold to Avraham Avinu a couple hundred of years earlier:

[God] said to Avram, "Know that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and [the host nation] will enslave them, and afflict them for 400 years." (Bereishis 15:13)

In fact, the entire episode of Yosef and his brothers seems as if it was just one big Divine ruse to draw Ya'akov and his family down to Mitzrayim, specifically to become a nation there:

Yisroel and all that was with him traveled. He reached Be'er Sheva and made offerings to the God of his father Yitzchak. At night, God said to Yisroel in a vision, "Ya'akov, Ya'akov."

He answered, "Here I am."

He said, "I am God, the Lord of your father. Do not be afraid of going down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation ..." (Bereishis 46:1-3)

In fact, this is exactly what Yosef told his brothers upon revealing himself:

"It is not you who sent me here, but God who placed me like a father to Pharaoh and a master to all of his house, and a ruler in all the land of Egypt." (Bereishis 45:8)

It wasn't that Yosef was letting his brothers off the hook for what they did wrong; only God could do that. However, he was telling them that it wasn't an accident that he ended up, or rather, down in Egypt, but a function of a Divine plan that went far beyond their own sibling rivalry. Some way or another, the family had to go down to Mitzrayim to become a nation there. It was imperative:

Rebi Chiya bar Abba said: It was fitting that Ya'akov descend to Mitzrayim in iron chains [to fulfill the decree of exile], but his merit caused that he descended honorably. (Shabbos 89b)

The question is why? Every other nation in the history of mankind, with few exceptions if any, became a nation on their own land. Why was it so crucial that the Jewish people become a nation on another's land, and one that was so contrary to its *raison d'etre*. More importantly, what does it have to do with the current Palestinian problem?

Years ago I heard a story from someone who returned to Judaism later on in life. He told me about how he grew up with some Judaism, including a little kashrus in the house (treif outside the house), and how moving out, for him, meant moving up and leaving behind every last trace of Judaism, including going to shul on the High Holidays. Certainly kashrus was a dead issue for him.

And yet, when he moved into his non-Jewish dorm at a very non-Jewish university, he found himself gravitating towards Jewish friends. And, not surprisingly, shortly after, he found himself moving into an apartment of his own with his two Jewish friends. As assimilated a Jew as he was, and as many non-Jewish friends he had in the past, still, he found, he connected with other Jews better than with gentiles in terms of living habits.

However, what was surprising was how he decided to keep kosher in the apartment, for no compelling reason. His new roommates certainly didn't demand it, nor did his parents expect it. It was as if keeping kosher was a way of remaining connected to home, even many miles away. It was as if going to such a gentile environment caused his innate Jewishness to rise from within his depths, and that it pushed him in the very direction from which he had previously sought to flee. The power of exile.

Today he is an Orthodox Jew, who once told me that if you had told him but one year before he became religious that the next year he would be an Orthodox Jew, he would have considered you crazy. Little did he know how Jewish he was on the inside, and it took "exile" amongst non-Jews to

bring it out.

There is another more fundamental reason for the Jewish people to have established themselves as a nation while in another country, to avoid what has happened to other countries that became nations while on their own land. In fact, it is one of the reasons historians cite for Germany becoming such a source of trouble in Europe: nationalism.

Nationalism is such a powerful force in history that for many countries it even replaces allegiance to God. It is one thing to be proud of your country, but it is something altogether different when that nationalism drives its countrymen to extremes, for the sake of the Fatherland, or the Motherland, or whatever the case may be.

We have experienced some of this national pride over the ages, and every time we do, it costs us. For example, after the miraculous victory at the end of the Six-Day War, when the Jewish people should have turned their eyes heavenward with thanks to God, as many did, Moshe Dayan instead ascribed the credit for the victory to the IDF. I believe he was even quoted as saying that God had nothing to do with the victory; the Jewish army was just too good for their Arab enemies.

What a mistake. Such statements go up there with others such as, "A ship that even God can't sink," a banner that was held up by passengers before the Titanic left on its fateful voyage during which it sunk after hitting, of all things, an iceberg. Apparently it was a ship that God could sink. The history books are not so kind when talking about Moshe Dayan, but it was only seven years later, in 1973, during the War of Atonement, that the IDF came close to losing the war to their Arab enemies, and might have had not another great miracle occurred. Nationalism does not suit the Jewish people, because we are, first and foremost, a Torah nation, and Eretz Yisroel is part of the equation of fulfilling that mandate.

Having said this, it is uncanny that the Torah makes an interesting prediction for the End-of-Days:

They infuriated Me with a non-god; they angered Me with their vanities; so I shall infuriate them with a non-people, with a vile nation shall I anger them. (Devarim 32:21)

What does it mean to be a non-people, and why is that God's vehicle for Divine retribution? People are usually identified by the country in which they became a nation, often taking their name from the name of the country itself. Americans are from America, Canadians are from Canada, and the Swiss hail from Switzerland, etc.

To be a non-people means to be a people without a land. Therefore, God has threatened, that should the Jewish people overstep the guidelines of their nationhood, and rally around their borders rather than around God, a nationless people will be their reward, so-to-speak, measure-for-measure. And, of course, there is the following midrash:

Rabbah bar Bar Channah said: Once I was traveling on a boat and saw a fish upon whose back grass was growing. We thought it was an island, so we alighted, baked, and cooked upon it. When the

back of the fish became hot, it turned over, and had the ship not been so near, we would have drowned. (Bava Basra 73b)

Rabbeinu Ya'akov explained: Rabbah bar Bar Channah saw with Ruach Hakodesh that at the End-of-Days, the Jewish nation would rule over a people. The Jewish people will assume that this people has no hope of ever overcoming them, and will subjugate them. When the people have suffered much, they will "turn the plate over on its mouth" and resist the Jewish nation. If Moshiach is not close at hand, the Jewish people will drown from the many problems that will arise. (Tuvcha Yabiyu, Balak)

Sounds like the Palestinians to me. Even Arab religious leaders have been quoted as saying that their success against Israel has been due to the way Israelis have abandoned their Torah. And, for many Jews over the last 70 years, the State of Israel has become a religion unto itself, even defining the modern Jew in their minds.

So, true to the prophecy, for not being a non-land-based people, we are attacked and uprooted by a non-land-based people, who battle us over the land. As the situation worsens for the Israeli State on so many fronts, we would do well to contemplate our origins as a nation in this week's parshah, and return to the Torah approach to statehood, while we still have one.

The truth is, we're not going to lose the land again as in the past. To quote Rabbi Simchah Wasserman, zt"l, "God wouldn't allow us to built all that we have only to destroy it, or to give it away to others." But, that doesn't mean that we won't have to fight to keep it, and spill precious Jewish blood along the way, God forbid. Haven't we already?

Ironically, though, some Jews, particularly those in the Diaspora, seem to suffer from the reverse problem. Instead, they have too little pride in Eretz Yisroel, and at this time, it figures very small in those things that help to define them as a Jew. Indeed, they have no problem forgetting about what Eretz Yisroel ought to mean to them, even, and really especially, during times of exile.

However, that is less about being less nationalistic than it is about being attached to lands outside of the Holy Land. They have rejected Eretz HaKodesh and replaced it with the "Golden Medinah," with lands that are better suited for materialistic lifestyles. Some go so far as to become nationalistic about the gentile host counties in which they presently live, as if it is the most natural thing to do after living and prospering there for so long.

Will we never learn? Gentile nationalism rarely includes us in its national family, and when we line up to earnestly salute their flags, many line up to earnestly salute the day when Jews will no longer be part of their national picture. Yes, there have been exceptions to the rule that Eisav hates Ya'akov, but unfortunately, those exceptions are not always the ones holding the reigns of power, especially when Heaven determines that it is time to become less attached to our host nations in the Diaspora.

Hanging on for dear life usually results in just the opposite. For, there comes a time in every exile

when God says, "Okay, we're done here. Pack up and let's get going."

"What? We just got here! Can't we stay longer?" many Jews often respond, in one way or another, either consciously, or unconsciously?

"Not really," Heaven answers. "We have already stayed long enough. We've got a schedule to keep, and this land was just one stop along the way."

"Ahhhh, can't we just stay a little longer, huh, please?" some Diaspora diehards implore God.

"Not really ..." God says, as He turns around and heads for the door, waiting for us to follow Him.

Some do. Many do not, getting back involved in the party, as if doing so is acceptable as well. And, as God leaves, and closes the door after Him, many sigh a sigh of relief that that they have won, not knowing that not only will they not get what they wanted, but they'll even lose what they previously had.

Hey, but why worry about that now, just as they're about to serve the ice cream and cake?

Text

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