

UNDER GOD'S CONTROL

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

When you go to war against an enemy, and you see horses, chariots, and a nation that outnumbered you, do not feel intimidated . . . (Devarim 20:1)

While doing research on the last 2,000 years of anti-Semitism for a project of mine, I noticed a somewhat frightening pattern. In some periods of history over the last two millennia, anti-Semitism has basically been non-stop; only recently, has it slackened a bit so that Jews are treated, for the most part, as equals, at least in some parts of the Western world. Anti-Semitism will never go away completely before the Messianic Era, but in some parts of the world, it has become submerged—for the time being.

However, even during times in the past when acts of anti-Semitism never stopped, some periods were "milder" than others. Catastrophic levels of anti-Semitism could last for years, but very often, after they ended, there was somewhat of a reprieve before another catastrophic anti-Semitic event occurred, and very often that reprieve lasted about 70 years. Seventy is a familiar number, for a couple of reasons. To begin with, it was the number of years foretold both by Yeshayahu and Yirmiyahu that the Jewish people were destined to be exiled in Babylonia, the first exile. This, as Rashi explains, corresponded to the number of Shmittah cycles the Jewish people did not keep before being exiled.

It is also the gematria of sod, which means secret and which refers to Kabbalah, and the Hebrew word for wine, resulting in the following connection:

Anyone who becomes settled through wine has the knowledge—da'as—of his Creator . . . has the knowledge—da'as—of the Seventy Elders. Wine was given with 70 letters (i.e., it has a gematria of 70) and Sod was given with 70 letters (i.e., it has a gematria of 70): when wine goes in, secrets go out. (Eirubin 65a)

However, the Talmud attaches another level of significance to the number 70:

Rebi Chanina said: Once every 60 or 70 years The Holy One, Blessed is He, brings something to the world to destroy the mamzerim and takes the kosher people with them so as to not publicize their sins . . . This teaches you that even when The Holy One, Blessed is He, brings evil to the world, He does it with wisdom. (Yerushalmi, Yevamos 49b)

This would be a rather disturbing concept if not for the fact that you can be assured that when the "kosher people" die as well, it is because it is their time. And, even the way they die has to be part of their personal tikun—rectification, otherwise they would not have die in that manner. Part of being God is being able to orchestrate history in such a way that things that seem impossible to coordinate are perfectly coordinated.

Hence it says that when God brings evil to Creation, He does it with wisdom, meaning in such a way that everything that has to be accomplished for the sake of fulfilling the ultimate goals of Creation is accomplished, no matter how chaotic and out of control history seems to get. This way free-will can be maintained since no one is the wiser that what is occurring is part of God's way of cleaning house.

Why every 60 or 70 years specifically? Aside from the Kabbalistic significance of the number, if you think about it, less than this would be too much for Creation to bear, and more than this, few people would be around to emotionally remember what has happened previously in order to be able to warn others about what might be coming up. It is the Holocaust survivors today who are concerned about the direction of events, because they have seen what results from that, while those of who were born after the war live with the illusion that as bad as things are, it will always get better before it gets worse.

The Talmud doesn't say if the 60 or 70 years is counted from the beginning of the previous catastrophe, or from the end of it. If from the end of it, then 60 years would be the year 2005, and 70 years would be the year 2015. If the time is counted from the beginning of the previous catastrophe, then 60 years would 2002, and 70 years would be 2012, the current year. Hmm.

Technically, a mamzer is a child born from a relationship that the Torah forbids for which the punishment is either kores—excision—or misas Bais Din, death by the Bais Din, that is, capital punishment. Examples of such relationships include having a child from a sister, or from a married woman before she has been halachically divorced (even if she has already been granted a divorce by the secular courts).

Clearly, when the Talmud speaks about mamzerim, it means the real thing. However, perhaps, in the process of ridding the world of actual mamzerim, other less-than-desirable elements are removed from the gene pool at the same time, even if they were born in a kosher manner, which can include more people than we might care to consider.

Essentially, that is what the War of Gog and Magog is supposed to be about. In fact, we find an example of it in history, when Assyria attacked the Jewish people, and laid siege to Jerusalem. The leader of the army was Sancheriv, and he commanded 185,000 officers, who controlled countless others taken from different countries around the world of that time.

As they joyfully lay in wait for their sacking of Jerusalem during daylight hours the next day, a plague broke out the night before and decimated their ranks (Sanhedrin 94a). This forced Sancheriv to flee for his life, which he lost anyhow when his own sons assassinated him. Without lifting a finger,

Chizkiah HaMelech defeated a massive army by simply trusting in God and going to bed that night.

We know about the miraculous defeat from Tanach. What we do not know about is how God went about selecting each soldier, and all of the personnel necessary to support such a massive war effort, who were destined to die by the plague. We can't see how God put the idea to attack the Jewish people into Sancheriv's head, which caused him to recruit his army, one that included soldiers from other nations as well, so that they would all come to Jerusalem as a single, massive unit.

This might have been hard to imagine, but you can watch science videos that show you how the world may work, right down to sub-atomic strings that vibrate at different frequencies in to make up the complex matter of which this entire physical universe is composed.

Too hard to fathom how one can lead to the other? Well, that these so-called strings can result in a Creation as complex and diverse as ours, while at the same time allowing for life, mankind, and even free-will, is completely beyond comprehension. And, as awed as all of the scientists might be by their conclusions, many of which, amazingly, are arrived at purely through mathematics, they have nothing on us, since they take for granted that it is the way it is, whereas we hold that God is orchestrating the entire show every single moment. You can blow a couple of mental fuses just thinking about the idea.

This idea sheds a different light on the following:

The law-enforcers should then ask, "Is there one who has built a new house but has yet to dedicate it? Let him go and return to his house, in case he dies in battle and another man dedicates it [instead]. Is there one who planted a vineyard, but has yet to eat from it? Let him also return, in case he dies in battle, and another eats from it [instead]. Is there one who became engaged to a woman, but did not yet marry her? Let him return, in case he dies in battle, and another man marries her." The law-enforcer then adds, "If anyone is fainthearted, he too should return to his house, otherwise he will [affect the rest of the people who fight with him], making them fainthearted too." (Devarim 20:5-8)

At first this might seem quite unfair, especially the last one. War is tough on everyone, and there are probably at least a dozen other good reasons besides the ones mentioned here for a soldier to consider himself exempt from army duty. Why should these people be sent home while their brothers go off and risk their lives on behalf of the Jewish nation?

The answer has to do with Hashgochah Pratis—Divine Providence. This was not just any army, but the Jewish army. And, unlike the Jewish army of today, in those times, everyone was a believer, and relatively learned as well. They not only believed in God and Torah from Sinai, they also believed that God ran the world, and every aspect of it. Man may wage war, but God is the One who arranges it, and determines who will die in battle, when, and how. Men may strategize beyond friendly lines,

but it is Heaven that draws up the true battle plan, arranging success and failure according to the Master Plan of Creation.

Hence, if someone was sent home from the battlefield, then it was Hashgochah Pratis. If someone had to go and fight, then that was Divine Providence as well. The guy who was sent home could end up dying in an accident on the way home, while the soldier who fought dangerous battles survives to tell the story countless times the rest of his long life.

At the end of the day, everything is orchestrated by God, every last detail, every last second. Whether the world is quiet and orderly or loud and chaotic, it is all really the same thing, since God has His fingers on all the buttons at all times. The only question is how man perceives the situation, the result of which either makes him act responsibly or recklessly. Order breeds order, and chaos breeds chaos, but one who believes that God is the Maestro running the show at all times knows and sees both as a function of Divine will, and acts accordingly.

Seventy years since the last catastrophe is coming up soon, if it hasn't already. It may be the reason why the world seems to be so unstable, promising to become more chaotic as time moves forward. However, whatever happens, it is from God, and even the most chaotic situations are under His control. The one who finds comfort in that idea may find safety as well since it leads to trust in God, and as the Leshem points out, nothing stands in the way of trust in God.

Text

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Rabbi Winston has authored many books on Jewish philosophy (Hashkofa). If you enjoy Rabbi Winston's Perceptions on the Parsha, you may enjoy his books. Visit Rabbi Winston's [online book store](#) for more details! www.thirtysix.org