

THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE LINE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

"He could have unleashed His power and destroyed you and your people with pestilence, exterminating you from the earth. However, He has allowed you to survive just to show you His power, and so His Name can be declared throughout all the earth." (Shemos 9:15-16)

At least, this is what Moshe Rabbeinu told Pharaoh in advance of the seventh plague of hail. The only question is, what's the point? What's the big deal that Pharaoh needs to see how powerful God is? Isn't it good enough for us to see how powerful He is, by blowing up Pharaoh and his lowlife cohorts to smithereens?

Obviously not, or that is what God would have done. If so, then what was the reason to reveal God's greatest to Pharaoh if, in the end, he kept relenting and instead kept the Jewish people captive until he could no longer hold them? The answer to the question may have to do with human nature, and a not-so-well-known historical fact.

Regarding human nature, shock is rarely a positive educational tool. True, it can bring about some very important and crucial results quickly, which, sometimes, are necessary. However, it rarely results in positive behavioral change as a function of intellectual understanding and free-will, and that is what God desires the most.

In other words, God didn't just want to show Pharaoh how powerful He could be. He wanted him to learn how powerful He can be. He wanted Pharaoh to integrate the knowledge and make it a part of his consciousness, so that when all was said and done, and the Jewish people finally left Egypt, the message of God's greatness would remain with him.

As to why, that may have more to do with another story, one that we usually do not connect to the story of Yetzias Mitzrayim.

Then the word of God came to Yonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

Yonah obeyed the word of God and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Yonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." The people of Nineveh believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

When Yonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes,

covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction He had threatened. (Yonah 3:1-9)

That was quite a reaction for a city on the brink of destruction after having earned Divine wrath for its immoral behavior. Usually cities so far down that path don't even believe in God, let alone take threats in His Name seriously. And yet, not only did the people instantly do teshuvah, the king of Nineveh even humbled himself and donned sackcloth and sat in the dust. What was his story?

It turns out that after Pharaoh watched the last and the best of his troops perish in the sea, he knew he couldn't return home. What was there to return home to? So he didn't, heading east instead, to Mesopotamia, and the great city of Nineveh, where he eventually became king.

That is why when Yonah came through the city and proclaimed in the Name of God that their end was near unless they did teshuvah, he believed him. It wasn't worth the risk, because the last time he stood up to God he lost everything but his life. This time Pharaoh, a.k.a. King of Nineveh, took nothing for granted, and took the prophet of God at his word, and called for national teshuvah.

Perhaps this is how Yonah knew in advance that he'd be successful, and declined the mission. Perhaps he knew that the king of Nineveh had firsthand experience with the wrath of God, and would instantly make amends, unlike his own brothers back in Eretz Yisroel. By comparison, the Jews of Eretz Yisroel would look bad.

What a strange twist of history. The Pharaoh who, as a result of his chutzpah, had been bent on defying God and destroying the humbled Jewish nation, became the king of Nineveh who, because of his humility and fear of God, was the reason for God to be angry at the Jewish people because of their chutzpah. There must be some important message in all of that.

Indeed, it is a message important enough that Sefer Yonah is read as the Maftir for Minchah on Yom Kippur. Apparently, it is a short story with a tall message, one that had been born not in Nineveh, but back in Egypt as God was unleashing His power, and making clear to the Pharaoh of Egypt just how powerful He can be.

However, to understand that message it is not enough to understand who the king of Nineveh was, and where he came from. We also must understand who Yonah the prophet was, and where he came from.

It seems to me, the author, that the two of them reincarnated into Eliyahu of Binyomin. The level

called the "Drop of Yosef" Eliyahu gave to Yonah ben Amitti HaTzarafis when he revived him (I Melachim 17:17-23). This is the sod of what is written in the Zohar (Vayakhel 197a): It was taught: Yonah came from the legion of Eliyahu, which is why he is called, "ben Amitti" ("son of Truth"), as it says, "and that the word of God in your mouth is truth!" (I Melachim 17:24). This is also the sod of what Chazal write: It was taught in the school of Eliyahu, "The boy that I revived was Moshiach ben Yosef." Since he came from a drop of Yosef he will therefore be Moshiach ben Yosef, may it happen speedily in our time. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 32)

As it is well known, for the Jewish people, the transition to the Messianic Era is a one-two punch, initiated by Moshiach Ben Yosef and completed by Moshiach ben Dovid. The Shem M'Shmuel explains:

When the Jewish people are in exile, they are humbled, which is necessary for removing material baseness and bodily desires from them ... This is the ability of Yosef, and this is what Moshiach Ben Yosef will do for them. Once the materialistic aspect and desires are removed from them, then the yetzer hara of pride and status gets stronger. It is against this that Moshiach Ben Dovid, which is Dovid HaMelech—the leader of those who humbled themselves —comes, to humble them for the service of God, may His Name be blessed. (Shem M'Shmuel, Parashas Vayishlach 5671)

This is very insightful. One might ask: Why are two Moshiach's necessary for redemption? The answer has to do with the process of redemption itself, and in particular, the mindset of the Jewish people historically. We say in the Shemonah Esrai:

The offspring of Your servant Dovid may You speedily cause to flourish, and enhance his pride through Your salvation, for we hope for Your salvation all day long.

The Hebrew word for offspring is tzemach, which means sprout, something that is planted in the ground and meant to grow. However, a seed can't be planted in hard land, because it won't take root, even if it is constantly watered.

It is the job of the ox to plow the ground and prepare it for the seed. Since, traditionally, Yosef is compared to an ox, It is Moshiach Ben Yosef's job to do the same thing to the Jewish people, to prepare them for the planting of the tzemach, or Moshiach Ben Dovid, so that the Messianic Era can take root and grow.

Hence, materialism is the first obstacle to overcome along the path to the Final Redemption. Materialism leads to a less spiritual lifestyle, even if the money is used for the sake of Torah-like causes. Ultimately, it creates complacency, and removes any longing for Yemos HaMoshiach, resulting in an artificial sense of redemption instead.

Hence, Yonah's mission had not simply been one of inspiring the Jewish people of his time to do teshuvah, but of preparing them for redemption. It was his job to spiritually break them away from the materialism that was drawing them in the direction of exile, in order to make them eligible for

Moshiach Ben Dovid.

Yonah knew that it was not an easy job, so he fled instead, rather than make the Jewish people look more unworthy than they already did. Because, knowing that the king of Nineveh was someone who took the threats of God seriously, he suspected that the people would drop their materialistic ways there, and repent instead, and avert a Divine decree of destruction. Yonah knew that his success in Nineveh would obligate the Jewish people to act likewise, so he took himself out of the equation.

The rest is history, or rather his story, the story of Yonah.

There are many points that could be discussed here, but one of the main ones is how, in the process of one redemption, God was already laying the foundation for another one, much further down the road. Furthermore, even more remarkable, is how God turned a great antagonist into a great protagonist, a lesson that makes it clear that the door to teshuvah is never really closed, just the people who don't use it.

Also, this shows how resources for redemption can exist where we least expect them to, and are available even when we can't see them. This is what bitachon—trust in God—says: Just because you can't see a way out of crisis at the moment doesn't mean that God can't. Just because you haven't found a solution to your problem doesn't mean that God isn't sending one, about to pop in your head any moment, if you'll let it.

And finally, for now, there is the original message. Too many people act contrary to the will of God, and have convinced themselves that they are getting away with it. Their rationale? They haven't suffered for it that much, or at all. They assume that either God looks away, or sees but just doesn't care that much, or has low expectations for them, and therefore allows them their weaknesses.

Though it is true that God does take into account our personal weaknesses when judging us, not only does He see what we do, but He cares very much as well. Why hasn't He let us, and the world know, in no uncertain terms that we need to do teshuvah, or just wipe us off the face of the earth instead? Because, as Moshe Rabbeinu tells Pharaoh in this week's parshah: God has His agenda.

Sometimes that agenda means swift and direct punishment for our spiritually-lax behavior, sometimes it means being allowed to choose the path of sin in the meantime for the sake of a result in the future. It could simply be to allow our debt to accumulate until we become worthy of, God forbid, a severe punishment in this world, the next world, or both. Or, it can simply be because God, being all-merciful, holds out the hope that some day soon we'll wake up and do teshuvah while it is still possible.

Whatever the reason, we don't do right and avoid wrong out of fear of punishment. One thing is for certain, if we don't get our act together in time, it will come, and in a way that will make us wonder why we ever doubted that it would. Rather, we do the right thing because it is the right thing, even if, God forbid, we are suffering as if we are doing the wrong thing, as God told Iyov (Job).

God gave us the Torah so that we could learn what right is, and what it is not. Yes, there are promises of good for the right behavior, and threats of punishment for the opposite. However, history has proven that, especially during non-Temple times, it is not always so true, or at least not always so obvious, and therefore, a person can't measure the moral quality of his behavior based upon how successful or unsuccessful he or she is in life.

There is right, Torah-right, in this world, and there is wrong, Torah-wrong in this world. We measure up based upon on which side of the line our actions fall, and leave the Hashgochah Pratis—Divine Providence—to God. God has His agenda, which can dictate how He deals with us at the moment. However, that has little to do with how well we learn Torah, and adhere to its laws and practices.

Text

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