

THE GREATEST MIRACLE OF ALL TIMES

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Ya'akov settled in the land of his father, in the land of Canaan. These are the descendants of Ya'akov: Yosef was 17 years old. (Bereishis 37:1-2)

In Parashas Vayaitzai, Rashi explains that the birth of Yosef was Ya'akov Avinu's sign that it was time to leave for home. Apparently Ya'akov had been waiting for someone to be born who could oppose Eisav, and as Rashi explains, that was Yosef.

This idea is reinforced in this week's parshah, also by Rashi. Rashi asks why the story of Yosef follows the mentioning of Eisav's tribes and leaders in last week's parshah, and explains:

A certain flax-seller brought camels laden with flax, and a blacksmith asked, "Where will he put all that flax?" A clever person answered, "One spark from your bellow will burn all of it up!" Thus, Ya'akov saw all the chiefs [of Eisav] mentioned previously, and wondered, "Who can conquer all of them?" What is written after? "These are the generations of Ya'akov: Yosef," and it is written, "The House of Ya'akov will be fire, the House of Yosef will be a flame, and, the House of Eisav will be straw." (Ovadia 1:18): a spark will go out from Yosef and burn them all up! (Rashi, Bereishis 37:1)

This sounds quite nice and heroic, but it raises a few questions. First of all, what was so special about Yosef that he became the opposer of Eisav, and how did Ya'akov Avinu know this from his birth? Secondly, what does it mean that Eisav is straw? Historically, Eisav has included many empires, including the might Rome, and more recently, mighty America and Russia. For straw, many of Eisav's descendants have sure done a tremendous amount of damage, and murdered an awful lot of Jews throughout the ages! And, thirdly, what is so clever about a person whose suggestion just means a lot of damage to an innocent camel driver?!

Perhaps there is a connection between the story of Yosef and Chanukah, which is just around the corner, b"H. Because, the only mishnah to discuss Chanukah happens to deal with a similar topic:

If a camel was loaded with flax and pressed through the door of a store and caught fire from the storekeeper's candle, burning down the building, the camel owner is culpable. However, if the shopkeeper left his candle outside, the shopkeeper is culpable. Rebi Yehudah says, if it was a Chanukah candle, he is not culpable. (Bava Kamma 62b)

It seems rather coincidental that the only mishnah to deal with Chanukah should use as its example something so similar to what the Midrash uses to explain Yosef's ability to subdue Eisav, especially when we already know that Yosef and Chanukah are so inextricably connected, and both have to do with misperceived versions of reality.

First there was Yosef and his brothers. The brothers perceived Yosef as a terrible threat to the future of the Jewish people, and went so far as to kidnap him, sell him into slavery, and then lie to their father about his whereabouts and what happened to him. They did more than eat their hats when they later discovered that not only had they been wrong about Yosef all along, needlessly aggravating their father, brother, and themselves, but that Yosef was actually the hero of the family and future Jewish people.

In the time of Chanukah, it was the might Greek army versus a bunch of renegade Jewish priests, the mightiest weapons of their time against bows and arrows and other primitive forms of warfare. It should have been a quick and decisive battle in favor of the Greeks. Instead, the small and incredibly brave Jewish army pushed back the Greeks and regained control over their holy Temple, and eventually, their land.

Upon entering the Temple, they immediately sought to rekindle the Menorah, but found only one jar of pure oil bearing the Kohen Gadol's seal. Though it would take seven days to produce new pure oil, they had but one day's worth in their possession, and they immediately kindled it. What could they do but use impure olive oil until the new oil was ready?

Or so they had thought, on the second day, and on the third, and on the fourth day, etc. But, each day they returned to rekindle the Menorah with impure oil the original amount of oil continued to burn, and it did so until the eighth day, at which point the new, pure olive oil was ready for use. Apparently, not everything is what it appears to be on the surface.

Indeed, this is what made the clever person so clever, for this was his message. It was the Yosef-Chanukah message, and it said that big and powerful in this world is not always big and powerful in God's world. It was precisely this that gave Dovid HaMelech the courage to stand up to Goliath when the rest of the Jewish army would not, and what made him successful with a simple sling shot, when his fellow soldiers had more sophisticated weaponry.

In truth, Dovid HaMelech came with the most sophisticated weapon of all:

"You come to me with spear and javelin, and I come to you with the Name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the armies of Israel which you have taunted. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I shall kill you, and take off your head, and I will give the carcasses of the camp of the Philistines this day, to the fowl of the air and to the beasts of the earth, and the earth will know that Israel has a God! And all this gathering will know that not with sword and javelin does the Lord save, for the battle is the Lord's, and He will deliver you into our hand." (I Shmuel

17:45)

The Chashmonaim came armed against the Greek army the very same way, because naturally-speaking, they had been out-manned and out-gunned. But, if Moshe Rabbeinu could kill the Egyptian using the Name of God, why couldn't they defeat the entire Greek army using the Name of God? So, they went to battle in the Name of God, and won.

That was the secret to Yosef's success as well, as the Torah explains:

God was with Yosef, and he became a successful man, and he remained in the house of his Egyptian master. His master perceived that God was with him, and whatever he did God made him succeed. (Bereishis 39:2-3)

God was with him: The Name of God was a familiar word in his mouth. (Rashi, Bereishis 39:3)

All of this came to my mind when I saw the horrible pictures of the World Trade Center after it had completely collapsed. All I could do was stare, incredulous that so much steel, concrete, and glass could be reduced to so little in so short a period of time. I still find it hard to believe when looking at the pictures from that modern day of infamy.

This was especially so since, as a young architecture student, I had been taken on a tour of the Twin Towers and was told about the unique construction of the buildings. Technical specifications aside, the buildings were made to withstand just about everything, except, apparently, the hand of God. The WTC was the Titanic of buildings, representing the prowess of modern Eisav's world, in the heart of one his most important cities.

But, on September 11, 2001, the Twin Towers burned like straw. Other skyscrapers before and since have burned for much longer periods of time, but they have remained pretty much intact after the fires were put out. However, within 103 minutes since the impact of the first plane into North Tower, the North, South, and Building 7 had collapsed, leaving nothing behind to testify to the architectural grandeur that had once been WTC 1 and WTC 2.

The great unlikelihood of such massive and total destruction from two commercial jets flying into the towers is what gave rise, and continues to give rise, to conspiracy theories. However, regardless of how it actually happened, from a Big Picture point of view, all that counts is that it did happen, and in such a dramatic way, teaching many lessons, one of which is how big destruction can result from disproportionate sources.

This is what made Yosef unique from all of his brothers. He died at the age of 110, because that is the gematria of neis, which means miracle. Regarding Yehoshua bin Nun, who also died at the age of 110, the Arizal explains that this was to make it clear that his life had been miraculous from birth until death (Pri Aitz Chaim, Purim). So had Yosef's been as well.

In fact, the Talmud explains, Leah had already been pregnant with Yosef, potentially her seventh son, when she prayed for a gender change for the baby so that Yosef could be born to Rachel instead (Brochos 60a). Heaven complied, and Yosef became Dinah instead, only to be born shortly after to Rachel, as planned. Ya'akov probably knew this, and realized instantly that a son born by miracle could live by miracle, the advantage necessary to stand up to the power and greatness that was Eisav, and would be his descendants throughout history, and turn it all into straw.

For, clearly, Eisav is not straw to us, but to God. When you fight him in your own name, you better out-man and out-gun him. If you don't, you will lose the battle, and probably badly. History has testified to that painful truth countless times already.

However, when you fight against Eisav in the Name of God, the true Name of God as taught in the Torah, then a single spark can consume Eisav, and all that he stands for, in a flash. When you do battle in the Name of God, a single Yosef, or Dovid, can overcome the largest and most powerful of armies.

This is fast becoming an important and relevant message. As the Western world imposes sanctions on Iran, which is about as realistic an impediment to their nuclear bomb program as Chamberlain's 1938 agreement with Hitler, y"s, was to stopping World War II, Israel seems to be the only player with any sense of what is really going on at this late and precarious stage of history. And, rather than commend Israel for its willingness to put its entire country on the line to stop the Persian megalomaniacs from destroying most of the world, she is threatened by none other than her closest ally.

In the meantime, while the Palestinians continue on with their old ways of praying for and engineering the destruction of the Israeli state, the Americans get impatient with the Jews for not returning to the bargaining table to just talk, at least. Been there, done that, and we're tired of showing up just for show.

If that is the way our so-called closest ally regards the Jewish state, then what are our distant allies saying about us? Actually we already know that, ever since the mic was left on during a G-20 press conference. We already know what our sworn enemies plan for us.

And, as if that wasn't bad enough, we have mutiny on our own version of the Bounty. Between the hard core Jewish Leftists, and the misinformed or misguided anti-Israel Jewish supporters, many of whom may be the Erev Rav—Mixed Multitude—of our time, we are rotting from the inside as well. When U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta called Israel isolated, he didn't know the half it.

More than ever, it is us against them. In the beginning, it was only us against a single, massive country. We lost four-fifths by the time we left, but we survived through great miracles. Then it was us against an entire content, and by the end of it, we lost 6,000,000, but we survived that too, not without great miracles as well.

Now, it is us against pretty much the entire world, and when it is said and done, we'll survive that as well, with the greatest miracles of all. The question, as always, is how many, God forbid, will we lose along the way. Hopefully the losses will be minimal, as we have already lost Jews even by this point.

And, in spite of our dependence on modern-day weapons to save us, and some very intelligent people as well, at the end of the day, though they may help, they will not be the deciding factors. The Chashmonaim went to war with weapons as well, and used them too. But there weren't enough men carrying them to naturally overcome the Greek army, and likewise today, no matter how many nuclear bombs we launch against our enemies, if, in fact, we ever do, our enemies have far more than we do, more effective ways of delivering them, and a very small target to hit.

No, if the Jewish people have a Kippah HaBarzel—steel covering—to protect them against their enemies, it is not our missiles. It is the fact that we are a supernatural nation being led by supernatural Torah leaders, the extent to which will only become clear at the moment of truth. And, very likely, some of those leaders may not be the ones we look to today to guide us. They will be the Yosefs of our time, people who may have been rejected by their own brothers while secretly being elevated by God.

And, they won't come with weapons necessarily, but in the Name of God, and when they do, the unthinkable will happen, and the unimaginable will occur, but in a positive way. What will have seemed to have been a formidable enemy until that time will fast appear to be only straw, as it is consumed accordingly. Then we, the Jewish people, will have cause to celebrate our latest miraculous victory, one that will make all the previous ones pale by comparison.

That moment may be sooner than we think, but in the meantime, Happy Chanukah.

Text

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