

THE ERUV RAV: THEN AND NOW

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

In some circles the Erev Rav is famous, but not for the right reasons. They are, and always have been, the proverbial thorn in the side of the Jewish people. What doesn't go wrong because of them? They are the reason why we went into exile; they are the reason that we are still there.

The Erev Rav, or Mixed Multitude in English, first appear in the Torah in Parashas Bo:

The Children of Israel journeyed on foot from Rameses to Succos, approximately 600,000 adult males, aside from the children. A mixed-multitude also left with them, as did flocks, herds, and a lot of cattle. (Shemos 12:37)

There is somewhat of a disagreement amongst the commentators as to just who the Erev Rav were. The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh, at the beginning of Parashas Shlach, says that they were spies and instigators sent by Pharaoh to intimidate and weaken the resolve of the fleeing Jewish nation. Though he had been told by Moshe Rabbeinu that the Jewish people were only leaving Egypt for three days, he suspected otherwise and sent the Erev Rav along to make sure they came back after serving God.

According to the Arizal, however, the history of the Erev Rav goes back much further than to Egypt. In fact, it goes back to Adam HaRishon, and the truth be told, it goes back to even prior to Creation, but we're getting ahead of ourselves for the moment.

The Talmud states:

Rebi Yirmiyah son of Elazar said: "All the years Adam was in excommunication he fathered Ruchin, Shiddin, and Lillin, as it says, 'Adam lived 130 years and he fathered a son in his likeness and his image . . .' (Bereishis 5:3), implying that until then, he fathered those unlike his form." This was questioned, for Rebi Meir said: "Adam HaRishon was extremely pious, because when he saw that he had brought about the punishment of death, he sat in fasting for 130 years, and separated from his wife for 130 years as well (seemingly implying that he could not father anything during that time)! He wore a belt of date branches over his skin for 130 years which forced him to emit seed (and produce the souls mentioned above). (Eiruvim 18b)

What is the connection between these damaged souls that Adam HaRishon created from his teshuvah, and the Erev Rav that came into existence over 2,000 years later? The answer to this question is a journey through history:

All the Shiddin and Ruchin that they created during the 130 years that Adam separated from Chava, as it is known, were all elevated and holy souls from the level of Da'as (in the Sefiros; according to the Arizal, erev rav is equal in gematria to the word da'as; Aitz Chaim, Sha'ar 32, Perek 2). However, they became mixed together with the Klipos (Impure Spiritual Forces), and, as a result, required many reincarnations to refine and whiten them. This is why the Jewish nation did not come into being until Ya'akov's time, because until that time most of the souls were intermingled with the Klipos, and were in a process of refinement and reincarnation from generation to generation. They didn't begin their rectification until Ya'akov, the 'chosen' of the Forefathers who rectified Adam HaRishon. That was also when his sons began their tikun . . . throughout the Egyptian exile. This is the underlying meaning of the verse, "Could any other god come and take a nation out from within a nation?" (Devarim 4:34). Chazal teach: "It does not say 'a people within a nation,' but rather, 'a nation from within a nation,' because that is what really occurred since they were well within the midst of the Klipos (in Egypt), and were a nation like them. They were then refined, purified, and taken out from the midst of that nation literally. The beginning of their reincarnations was in the Generation of the Flood . . . This is the deeper meaning of the verse, 'God regretted that He made THE MAN on the land' (Bereishis 6:7), which refers to the Generation of the Flood. This hinted to the fact that they were on the level of Adam HaRishon himself, emanating from him during the 130 years . . . Next, they reincarnated as the Generation of the Dispersion, and were evil like their fathers . . . This is what is written, 'God went down to see the city and the tower that the Son of Man built' (Bereishis 11:5). As the Zohar elucidates (Bereishis 75a): Literally, son of the Man, Adam HaRishon, to hint to the fact that they were literally his sons . . . The third reincarnation was as the people of S'dom, and therefore it says, 'The people of S'dom were evil and sinned greatly against God' (Bereishis 13:13), to hint that their evil was the result of the destroyed seed of Adam, which was called 'evil' . . . After these three reincarnations over three generations . . . they returned a fourth time in Egypt, in B'nei Yisroel, born into the generation of that exile, at which time the tikun finally began . . ." (Arizal, Sha'ar HaKevanos 1b)

That is, in brief, the long history of the souls that Adam HaRishon produced during his 130 years of purification. As to their connection to the Erev Rav, the Arizal explains:

All the souls that were rectified completely reincarnated into the Children of Israel and were the generation that went down to Egypt. However, there were souls that were not yet rectified, and they became Egyptians. Yosef had them circumcised, as it says, "Go to Yosef and do whatever he tells you to do" (Bereishis 41:55) . . . Also, Ya'akov, his father, made many converts in Egypt (Bereishis Rabbah 84:4). Those who converted and performed circumcision lived apart from the rest of Egyptian society, and stood out amongst the rest of the Egyptians. Pharaoh noticed these two levels, and it is with respect to the converts that he said, "The people, the Children of Israel are more numerous and greater than us"; they were the Erev Rav that left with the Children of Israel, and they were more than double the Jewish population. (Sha'arei HaPesukim, Shemos 1:8)

So, according to the Arizal, the Erev Rav were not spies, but unfinished Jews, so-to-speak, in need of at least one more reincarnation to complete their journey into the Jewish people. But that, Moshe Rabbeinu told God, would have taken too long, if their joining the Jewish nation was necessary for bringing the Final Redemption.

Apparently, it was a miscalculated risk, because the Final Redemption had to be pushed off for thousands of years because of their premature membership into the Jewish people. Even worse, they have become a huge obstacle to the Final Redemption, as the Vilna Gaon warned would be the case:

Our main service and battle is to break and to remove the strength of the Erev Rav, the klipah of Armelious the Evil, from the Jewish people; the Erev Rav is our greatest enemy, the one who separates the two moshiachs. The klipah of the Erev Rav works only through deception and roundabout ways, and therefore the war against the Erev Rav is the most difficult and bitterest of all. (Kol HaTor, Ch. 2:2:2)

As to who the Erev Rav is today, because as the Arizal explains elsewhere, they come back at the End of Days in force, that can be more obvious than some might care to think. One thing is for sure, before a Jew goes about changing Jewish tradition, or trying to make peace with the rest of the world, he or she should consider whether the driving force is Torah originated, or Erev Rav originated.

As the Talmud warns, the generation in advance of Moshiach will have the face of dog (Sanhedrin 97a), another way of saying that chutzpah will be rampant. Bravado has its place in life, but it can easily just be rationalized chutzpah, and often is.

Text

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