

# SNOW, ASARA B'TEVES AND GEULA

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

*The engravers of hieroglyphics of Egypt also did it with their secret arts, which made Pharaoh stubborn. (Shemos 7:22)*

They seemed so innocent. At least, that is the way snowflakes appear when they first started to fall and blanket the earth in a velvety white. It was so easy to just sit by the window, transfixed, and watch them fall from Heaven Above, one after the other, to the earth below.

One week, and hundreds of millions of shekels worth of damage later, the snow had lost its innocence. My succah frame that had been up for years, around which I yearly built my succah, is gone, collapsed under the weight of about two feet of snow. The one year I left my schach up to shade the house from sun and rain was the one year it caught enough snow to bring down the entire succah frame.

Ironically, all of this seemed to occur on Asarah b'Teves, the fast day that recalls the beginning of the destruction of the First Temple. As I made my way to shul that morning, dodging massive branches that had broken off countless trees along my path and on the roads, it broke my heart to see what had taken years to grow be destroyed in just mere hours of blizzard. Unfortunately, most of them still had leaves, causing them to catch the snow and break from all the extra weight.

Some, of course, fell on power lines and snapped them, leaving ours and many other communities around Eretz Yisroel without power and phone service for four days. The saving grace was that our community, like many other similar communities, has a Shabbos generator, and in anticipation of the storm, the people responsible for overseeing its operation, filled up with enough fuel for three days.

They ended up being our heroes, thank God, providing us with a good measure electricity to get through the long blackout, allowing us to go into Shabbos well-prepared, and going through Shabbos like every other Shabbos, at least as far as inside comfort was concerned. Walking to shul Friday night in calf-height snow and water, it wasn't hard to see who was hooked up to the Shabbos generator and who wasn't.

Part of the irony of the storm hitting us on the fast of the 10th of Teves was that, the Haftarah at Minchah mentions snow:

*For, just as the rain and the snow fall from the heavens, and it does not return there, unless it has satiated the earth and fructified it and furthered its growth, and has given seed to the sower and bread*

*to the eater, so shall be My word that emanates from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, unless it has done what I desire and has made prosperous the one to whom I sent it. (Yeshayahu 55:10)*

Equally ironic (read: Hashgachahdik) was that the page of the day for those learning Daf Yomi also mentioned snow. It is the page (Yoma 35b) that recounts the story of Hillel who, being absolutely poor and unable to pay the entry fee to the Study Hall, climbed to the roof to hear words of Torah from the Bais Midrash below through the skylight. It snowed and eventually covered him, causing him to cover the skylight, blocking the light for those learning inside.

That was good news for Hillel, and the Jewish people who would later benefit from his Torah leadership, because it caused the rabbis below to notice the figure of Hillel above, and rescue him from certain death from the cold. They brought him down, brought him in, and even broke Shabbos to save his life.

And, as our snow melts and we begin our clean up of the residual mess, we read about snow once again, this time in last week's parshah:

*God said further to him, "Now put your hand into your chest," and he put his hand into his chest, and he took it out, and behold, his hand was leprous like snow. (Shemos 4:6)*

Leprous, as in tzara'as, the leprosy that occurs for spiritual reasons, not physical ones, such as for speaking loshon hara, derogatory speech about someone. By making his hand white as snow, God had indicated to Moshe Rabbeinu that his complaint about not being believed by the Jewish people had been, in fact, loshon hara.

Sheleg, the Hebrew word for snow, is itself an interesting word. It is spelled Shin-Lamed-Gimmel, whose respective corresponding numerical values are products of three: 300, 30, 3, for a total of 333. In reverse, it spells the word "galash," which I wore the entire week to protect me from the snow, one on each foot, but I doubt that has any Kabbalistic significance.

It wouldn't take much to find meaning in each one of these mentions of snow during the time of our actual storm. Would they be true, or even just relevant? Perhaps. But, for me, the main thing that caught my attention was how something so innocent could cause something so destructive on a day that recalls the exact same thing.

We read Lamentations on Tisha B'Av because it asks the question, "How?" How did we lose our Temple? How were we conquered by a foreign nation and taken into exile like slaves? How did we so weaken our relationship with God that He sent us packing for 70 years, from which we still haven't fully recovered?

The answer is obvious, is it not? Not really. People do not usually go from being righteous to evil overnight. They don't usually turn their backs on Torah and God in one shot. As the term implies, drifting is gradual and takes time, in increments so small that they might be imperceptible to the generation making the deviations. Only in hindsight generations later and after Divine retribution is

the dangerous and slippery path we descended clear to us.

The snow reminded me of all this. First it fell quite innocently, barely sticking to the ground as children and people who wanted day-offs prayed for much more. But it continued to fall, and so-much-so that it began to collect on trees and rooftops, transforming a multi-color scene into a monochromatic white. Near and far were being covered by a blanket of snow that was about to become too heavy for those trees and roof tops. I awoke at 3 am to emergency lights in our house, indicating that we were without regular power. I came downstairs to see what waited outside for me, and was shocked to see how much snow had fallen through the night. Worse, I was even more shocked to see all the damage that the heavy snow had caused so quickly.

As I made my way to shul shortly after, I was horrified to see how my path was blocked on all sides from major branches that had broken off during the night as well. Maneuvering through them, with an umbrella, was not easy, but that was just the beginning of my troubles. The main road was in even worse shape, and my usual five minute walk to shul took twice as long at least.

As I trudged through the snow, ice, and water, I kept thinking about Eichah, Lamentations. I kept thinking about how something so soft and innocent and seemingly harmless could result in so much destruction, and so quickly. I wondered how many things in life worked this way, and if history was in the midst of such a scenario now.

But, it works in both ways, for bad and for good. Redemption also works in a similar manner, in small, seemingly imperceptible steps so that most people do not even know it is underway until well down the path to freedom. This is what Moshe was being taught, and was about to teach in this week's parshah.

When Moshe Rabbeinu first showed up on the redemption scene, only small things happened. In fact, some things seemed to work in reverse, as Moshe complained at the end of last week's parshah. But, as the Vilna Gaon explains, when it comes to redemption from the side of judgment, when we haven't warranted a miraculous one from the side of mercy, it will often seem like it's two steps forward, one step backwards.

'Seem,' but not actually 'be.' It's all forward, even the things that seem to go in reverse, as we will one day see, in hindsight, once the redemption is complete.

Four-fifths died in the Plague of Darkness because, apparently, they couldn't see this, or even just have faith that this was the case. They saw a lot of things that caused them to doubt that the actual redemption was near, and planned for life in Egypt instead. In the end, redemption came for them as well, but not the way they had planned.

Perhaps, then, this is also part of the message of the snow. Just as it fell slowly and quietly and weakened that which was strong, perhaps redemption is doing the same thing for us as well. Maybe it is coming slowly and in increments too small to be noticed by most of us, but it is accumulating,

becoming heavier, eventually too heavy for the enemies of the Jewish people to bear, until they too snap and fall to the ground.

Text

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