

EMUNAH IN GALUS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

It's just another parshah, right? Last week's was VaAira and next week's will be Beshallach, b"H, and this week's just happens to be Parashas Bo. Technically, yes, but that should not detract from what it is going to tell us about God, life, and the world in general. It's a lot like a second Parashas Bereishis, except this time it is the Jewish people that are being born, not the world, at least not in any obvious way.

The trouble is that, like Parashas Bereishis, Parashas Bo comes and goes so quickly that it is easy to miss important clues right under our noses, the worst place for clues to show up, right? Clues for what, you ask? Clue as to what to expect to happen at the End-of-Days which, apparently, might also be right under our noses.

This week's parshah has the formula for synthesizing what our prophets have predicted and what our journalists report. The rise of ISIS. The international push for a Palestinian state. Growing anti-Semitism. Terrorist attacks in Paris and who knows where else next. Random and chaotic as they seem they can't help but be part of the unfolding of the Final Redemption. They are an integral part of what has to happen just before the end.

Let's start by asking an obvious question. In conventional warfare, sometimes, it is only possible to defeat the enemy in stages. For example, to defeat Iraq and push them out of Kuwait in 1990 the Coalition forces had to use bombing raids and then ground troops. They couldn't just "nuke" the Iraqis because the physical and political fallout would have been far too great. Therefore, the American-led forces had to resort to conventional means to bring down the enemy.

It was a different story in Japan of 1945. World War II had already gone on far too long and the casualties had already been unbelievably high. Furthermore, Japan is a small and mountainous island which made conventional means of attack-and-destroy too difficult or too risky. Though the collateral damage would be horrendous, the Americans opted to drop two nuclear bombs because they could.

One of the lessons of the plagues is how totally God can destroy the enemy and how precisely He can do it. Man can be every bit as destructive but not every bit as accurate and specific, even with all the latest military technology. God "nuked" Sdom, so-to-speak, so why did He not do the same to Egypt?

The answer to this question appeared in last week's parshah:

*I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and I will increase My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt.
(Shemos 7:3)*

In other words, the redemption from Egypt could have been quick. God could have executed a precision "nuclear" attack on Egypt and redeemed the Jewish people at the same time. Instead He baited Pharaoh, strung him along in order to make a spectacle out of the redemption.

The reason for all of this is the subject of this week's parshah:

God said to Moshe: "Come to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his servants, in order that I may place these signs of Mine in his midst, and in order that you tell into the ears of your son and your son's son how I made a mockery of the Egyptians, and [that you tell of] My signs that I placed in them, and you will know that I am God." (Shemos 10:1-2)

There are a couple of questions to ask on this. This is not about questioning the ways of God. We already saw what happened to Moshe Rabbeinu at the end of last week's parshah for doing that. This is about coming to terms with what God wants from His world and us.

First of all, from our perspective at least, the exodus from Egypt was about putting a bully in his place and sparing his victims from further abuse. From God's perspective, however, it seems that it was more about showing the world how powerful He can be.

Secondly, we'd like to believe that the story reveals how far God is prepared to go to take care of the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov. Come to think about it though, Who sent us packing to Egypt and then allowed the Egyptians to enslave us in the first place?

If we were dealing with a human protector we could say that, not knowing the future, he did not know how things would turn out in Egypt until it was too late. But we're not. We're dealing with God Who knows the future before it even happens, which means He deliberately allowed us to sink into the depths of despair before pulling us back up again. Why?

Thirdly, if the Exodus account was for the sake of creating a tradition that would later impress our descendants, why not just impress them directly? If history could talk, and does in its own way, it would say that the experiment did not quite work. Many dropped the tradition, and even those who still tell it do not take it serious enough. God must have seen that coming.

There is a mitzvah called "Tzepisa l'Yeshua." It means "looking for redemption," and it is one of the six things we'll be asked about on our final day of judgment (Shabbos 31a). In essence this means living in anticipation of the Final Redemption, as if it can happen any day, and at any moment. At the very least, one should dream of it on a daily basis, and be ready when it comes.

This is not as simple as it sounds. As we know four-fifths of the Jewish people died in the Plague of Darkness because they were not ready for redemption. They wanted to remain in Egypt even as late

as the eighth plague, which is why they were taken out of the redemption equation in the ninth plague. According to the Talmud, the situation will be similar in the Messianic Era as well (Sanhedrin 111a).

The Sefer Mitzvos HaKatan, or SM"K for short, asks regarding the source for this mitzvah. It's not one of the Taryag Mitzvos, the 613 mitzvos with which we are familiar. If not, is it a mitzvah at all, or just a good thing to do?

He answers that, not only is tzepisa l'yeshua a mitzvah, it actually comes from the first of the Ten Commandments to believe that God is our God, the most fundamental of all mitzvos. What's the connection?

The first of the Ten Commandments reads like this:

*I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.
(Shemos 20:2)*

The question is, would it not have been sufficient just to have said, "I am the Lord, your God," without mentioning anything about redemption from Egypt? Does God need to justify our loyalty to Him? Not really, since He could have wiped us out at a moment's notice had we rejected His offer of Torah.

Why then does this mitzvah of belief in God also mention the Exodus from Egypt? Explains the SM"K: so that we will couple belief in the Final Redemption together with belief in God.

The mitzvah tells us that just as we must believe that God is God, Maker and sustainer of Heaven and Earth (and everything else for that matter), and that He took us out of exile at the beginning of our history, we must likewise believe that He can and will do it again at the end of our history. Thus, explains the SM"K, anticipating the Final Redemption is part-and-parcel of the mitzvah to believe in God, and that He is the Creator of the world.

To not anticipate the Final Redemption therefore, means that a person is in violation of the first of the Ten Commandments. This makes it easier to understand why one of the six questions that Heaven asks on a person's day of judgment is if they anticipated the redemption.

It is very hard to do. We have been waiting for the Final Redemption at least since we went into exile about 2,000 years ago. For over 1900 years of that it has been hard because we have suffered so much. We have watched our enemies rise to power and get into positions where they could do whatever they wanted to us, seemingly with impunity.

They spilled so much Jewish blood. They tortured so many of us. So many Jews were forced to convert. We became so worn down that eventually many Jews converted of their own volition, not understanding or appreciating what they were destroying along the way. The amount of righteous

Jews has become increasingly smaller with each passing generation.

Lately, the problem became the opposite. Since World War II the world became more civil to the Jews, especially in the West. Jews have been given, for the most part, equal opportunity and have enjoyed unprecedented prosperity in exile. This started with assimilated Jews but eventually spilled over into the Torah community as well.

Thus, whereas in the beginning the question may have been, "How can the redemption ever come," it has become, in our time, "Who even needs it?" For most of exile it was difficult to have faith in the coming of the Redeemer because it seemed like such a distant reality. Today it is hard to believe in his coming because people want it to be a distant reality.

It does not change the mitzvah, however. Whatever the reason for the lack of faith in redemption, we are obligated to develop emunah in it. When we were downtrodden it meant identifying with the enslaved Jews and taking to heart how, within only a few months, their situation changed for the better dramatically. It might have even occurred earlier had they not waited so long to cry out to God.

When we are up, then we are obligated to sit down and contemplate what it is that we are missing by not being in a state of redemption. We have to be able to say, "All this success is great, but what can it possibly mean while we're still scattered around the world and the Temple has yet to return? What value does this level of redemption have if the Divine Presence still lives in exile?"

If these words seem foreign, then stage one is to become more familiar with them. It is to develop a spiritual sensitivity to what they mean with the goal of feeling a spiritual lack while the Temple is missing even during a time of such material success. You don't have to be down- and-out to need emunah. In fact, as the Torah states, it is during times of plenty that people need to work on their emunah the most. It is the hardest to have faith in something when you do not feel the need for it at all.

This is why God did all the miracles back then as opposed to now. He was not interested in impressing us now. The time is coming when He will, and even more so than He did back in Egypt. At that time He only had to be one or two up on the greatest sorcerers of the generation. Today He has to beat Hollywood and modern technology to be impressive.

Until that incredible moment in time that has been waiting to burst onto the historical scene Creation itself, it will be life as usual. Life will be mundane: 9-5 jobs, super rich and super poor people, incredible technology, wars and terrorists, mildly religious people and religious fanatics . . . all the things you see today around the world.

As for the Jewish people there will be the Torah committed and the assimilated and intermarried. There will be groups that work well together and those who tear each other apart. There will be some who are impeccably honest and others who not even come close it. Some will love Israel and

some who shun it.

From amidst all of this, we're expected to build our emunah. We're supposed to look at the first of the Ten Commandments, which is supposed to make us consider the first redemption. We are expected to study and contemplate the Exodus from Egypt. Having done so we must examine our world and wonder how God will save us in our time. Then we're supposed to consider what we can do in the meantime to prepare for when He does finally bring the Final Redemption.

Judging by the chaos rocking the world, it would be wise to get started.

Text

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