

FAKE NEWS A SIGN?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

The problem with a virus is that you can have one well before you become aware of it. Whether we're talking about a computer or human body, either way a virus can enter a system and start operating behind the scenes, in the background and undetected at first.

By the time a virus reveals itself, it is usually too late to do anything to stop it. When it starts to break down a system it is already so well set up that fighting it becomes an almost impossible battle. Usually some very extreme and inconvenient counteraction is required. If it is a human body, a person has to take the time to doctor their illness. If it is a computer, they usually have to reformat their entire hard drive.

The problem is that everything can seem normal on the outside while havoc is beginning wreaked on the inside. A person can still feel healthy as the virus sets up shop and begins its takeover of the body's cells. A computer can still function normally as the virus infiltrates the operating system in order to execute its planned coup.

There are early warning signs. They might be very subtle, but nothing enters a system without leaving some kind of telltale sign. You just have to know what to look for, which is what many anti-virus systems do. You can't always see a virus in the beginning, but you can sometimes see some of its early footprints and mount a defense early in its attack, before it has control over the entire system.

The same thing is true of the Final Redemption. Like earlier redemptions, it's one of those things that look like it is not happening, when in fact it really is. It's because as the redemption picks up speed, most of life goes on as it usually does. There are anomalies, but most seem explainable in everyday terms. It is not clear at all in the beginning that they are part of something far greater and more historical.

That happens later when it is already too late to prepare for what is happening. By the time redemption is in full swing, people are only beginning to take theirs. When they finally wake up and realize what they have to do, it is already too late to do it.

This is why the rabbis left us some signs. They told us some clues with which we can ascertain if redemption is close or not. It is only now that I realize the signs are important because they are things that we otherwise might have just taken in stride, and missed the point. The rabbis of yesteryear are telling us not to.

One of the most important, perhaps, is this:

The generation in which Moshiach will come . . . truth will be lacking, as it says, "The truth will be missing" (Yeshayahu 59:15). What does the expression "ne-ederes" (missing) mean? It was said in the college, they will form into various groups (adarim) and disappear: He who leaves evil is regarded as foolish. (Yeshayahu 59:15). In the school of Shilah it was explained to mean that he who turns away from evil will be considered foolish in the eyes of the people. (Sanhedrin 97a)

At first, this does not seem like much of a clue. After all, as long as man has walked the face of the earth, he has lied. There has not been one generation in which truth was not missing here and there. Why is it such an important clue for the arrival of Moshiach?

The answer is in the Talmud's application of the word "ne-ederes." This is why the Talmud itself makes such a big deal about its usage. The word does not imply just that people will lie in the final generation before Moshiach's arrival. They do that all the time. It means they will lie in a unique way.

Unique in which way? Elsewhere the Talmud told us that falsehood, if it is to have any traction, must be built upon some element of truth. For example, in order to convince the nation that Eretz Yisroel was not for them, the spies brought back fruit of the land to support their claim. If the people didn't have to reject what they saw, they wouldn't reject what they didn't see either.

Normally when people completely falsify the truth it is as a joke, or acting. For a person to pass off complete falsehood as truth, and is able to live with himself, represents a new level of depravity. Since the same Talmud also says that this too is part of the clue that Moshiach is very close, it can be assumed that such a level of lying will become commonplace.

So commonplace in fact, that we have a name for it: Fake News. Fake news is not just distorted truth, it is the absence of any truth. It is the result of people who have told themselves that the ends justify the means, allowing them to make up news and present it as fact.

Disgusting? For sure. Immature? Completely. Confusing? Very. But, a sign of Moshiach's imminent arrival? Apparently yes.

It's a more profound way of looking at the events of history. It is easy to forget that everything is Divine Providence, and therefore a message from God. It is so easy to get upset about what is happening, especially when it seems so dishonest. We have to be bothered by falsehood and try and stop it, but never lose track of what it really means.

This is a lesson from this week's parsha as well. When Moshe Rabbeinu saw the captive Midianite women after the war against their people, he became incensed. So much so, says Rashi, that he forgot the laws of kashrus that Eliezer ended up teaching instead. His reaction to what he saw caused him to lose the prophecy.

As with respect to anything to do with Moshe Rabbeinu, there was more going on than meets the

eye. He did not lose perspective that easily, and he certainly didn't have temper tantrums. A lot of time it has more to do with the people than Moshe himself.

But the message is still the message. Fight for truth, but never lose perspective that even though the "seal" of God is Truth, even a world of falsehood still belongs to Him. He still controls it, which should force us to think more deeply as to how to respond to it.