

SET IN MOTION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God told Moshe, "Speak to the kohanim, the descendants of Aharon..." (Vayikra 21:1)

Rebi Yehoshua from Sichnin said in the name of Rebi Levi, "We learn that The Holy One, Blessed is He, showed Moshe each generation and its wise people, each generation and its people of understanding, each generation and its public servants, each generation and its prophets, [and] each generation and its kings. When he showed him that Shaul [HaMelech] and his sons would die by the sword, he asked Him, "This is the honor of Your sons, that the first king You place over Your children will fall by the sword?"

"You ask this of Me?" The Holy One, Blessed is He, replied. "Speak to the kohanim, descendants of Aharon, that he killed. They are the ones who accuse him, as it says, "God told Moshe, 'Speak to the kohanim, the descendants of Aharon..." (Vayikra 21:1). (Vayikra Rabbah 26:7)

A VERY INTERESTING midrash," Rabbi Edelstein told his students. It wasn't his regular daily shiur, rather a few students from it. They had asked to be part of a small chaburah once a week, late Thursday nights, to go over some of the deeper midrashim. It was their third session so far, and the discussions kept getting more interesting with each passing week.

"First of all," the rabbi pointed out, "we need to know what the midrash is talking about. Obviously it is alluding to the destruction of Nov, 'Ir HaKohanim,' that Shaul HaMelech had Doeg wipe out. Dovid HaMelech had fled there, where the Mishkan was located. He ate the lechem hapanim and received the sword of Golios, which was kept there. He also consulted the Urim v'Tummim, which gave Shaul the impression that Dovid was acting like a king. That infuriated Shaul, and led to his sending Doeg, his chief herdsman, to kill Avimelech and the other kohanim who had given refuge to Dovid. Then he killed ALL the men, women, children, and animals of the town."

"Wow, what a massacre!" Binny, nee Binyomin, said.

"Yeah, really!" Yoel seconded.

"How are we supposed to look at things like this?" Shmuel asked. "If that happened today..."

Rav Edelstein cut him off mid-sentence. It was not the discussion he wanted to have right now, but perhaps later on. "It is difficult to understand," he said. "The entire story of Shaul HaMelech is complicated...and something we should discuss...but not now. For the moment," he said looking at each of the five students individually as he talked, "I'd like to focus on a different point."

There were no complaints, so he continued.

"Everything Moshe saw or heard was by way of prophecy. Nothing had happened yet. He saw the future. Dovid had yet to be born. Shaul had yet to wipe out the city of Nov. The kohanim had not yet accused him, and the battle he died in wasn't even close to being fought. There was still time to remedy the situation, perhaps make some small changes to history that might have allowed Jewish history to sidestep such a tragically confusing event with, I might add, so many painful consequences."

"You mean like secretly pass down some kind of message that would have told Shaul, in the future, not to do what he planned to do?" Eli asked

"Perhaps," the rabbi said.

"So why didn't he?"

"Yeah, why didn't he?"

The rabbi smiled, and said, "Because of a different midrash."

"Which one?" Eli asked.

"The one I want to discuss today," the rabbi said, reaching across the table for the book he had left for that moment. He opened it and turned to the page he wanted. Although it wasn't bookmarked, he knew exactly where it was.

"This midrash is in Koheles Rabbah...and it begins with a posuk from Tehillim, which says, 'Go and see the works of God, awesome in deed'—the Hebrew word is alillah, which means pretext, a blood libel being an allus dum—'toward mankind' (Tehillim 66:5). The midrash interprets the verse as follows: 'Go and see how, when The Holy One, Blessed is He, created the world, He created the Malach HaMaves on the first day as well...Man was created on the sixth day, and yet death is blamed on him!'"

He paused for a moment and continued to explain, "True, the Malach HaMaves could have been only a potential that Adam actualized through his chet. However, it would have remained only a potential had he NOT sinned, and therefore he is blamed for its existence."

"The midrash continues with a mashal. 'To what is this similar? To a man who decided that he wanted to divorce his wife, so he wrote a bill of divorce. He came home with it in hand and waited for a pretext to give it to her. He told her, "Prepare me something to drink," and she did. Taking it, he said [to her], "Here is your Get." She asked him, "Why?" He told her, "Leave my house! You made me a warm drink!" So she said, "You were able to know [before coming home] that I would prepare you a warm drink, so you wrote a bill of divorce in advance and came home with it?"'"

"In other words," he explained, "the wife caught on to his trickery, and told her husband so. The warm

tea was just an excuse to do what the husband had planned to do all along. The midrash continues and says, 'Adam said something similar to The Holy One, Blessed is He. "Master of the universe. The Torah was with You for 2,000 years before You created the world...What is written in it? 'This is the law when a man will die in a tent' (Bamidbar 19:14). If You had not wanted Your creations to die, would You have written this? Yet You blame death on me!'"

There were a few moments of silence, as the boys considered the message of the midrash and its implications. Finally Binny asked, "So Adam was saying that he was FORCED into his chet just to actualize death...that it was inevitable?"

"If that's true," Eli said, "then what about bechirah? That would imply that the whole Aitz HaDa'as thing was really just a setup!"

"Can't be," Yoel said. "Clearly we make choices...otherwise why are WE here and no one ELSE from our shiur?"

"Because," Eli answered, playing devil's advocate, "Hashem wanted us here and made it happen. We may THINK we have free will when in fact we're just being moved around like chess pieces!"

"I have a hard time accepting that," Dovid said, speaking for the first time. "I mean, everything we are taught says that we DO have free will, and now we're saying that we DON'T? And what about schar v'onesh? How can we be rewarded or punished for something that wasn't OUR fault because it wasn't really OUR choice?"

"Maybe that's all part of the game!" Rabbi Edelstein cut in.

"Game? What GAME?" Eli asked.

"GOD'S game," Binny said.

"God plays games?" Eli questioned, a slight concern in his voice.

"That's what some people have said," the rabbi answered. "Some people like to think that if God DOES exist, He expects nothing from us. He just made us for entertainment purposes, and we're forced to do whatever HE tells us to do."

"So they don't believe in free will?" Yoel asked.

"Nope."

"Hmm, that's a pretty depressing point of view."

"We can all agree to that," the rabbi said. "But they'd rather believe that there's no free will, relieving them of moral responsibility, than be held accountable for their actions..."

"Wait a second. Just because they THINK like that doesn't mean that they WON'T be held accountable for their actions."

"That's right," their rebi agreed. "They're only deluding themselves...Maybe they think that PRETENDING to be ignorant of the truth will get them off the hook later, while now they can enjoy themselves."

"Verrrry risky," Yoel said.

"Very." Dovid agreed. "I have a relative like that. A couple actually, and I've pointed this out to them more than once."

"What do they answer?"

Dovid shook his head, still amazed by their faulty logic. "They're willing to take that risk!"

"THAT is the power of the yetzer hara," the rabbi interjected. "But we should know that we all do the same thing on some level, like coming late to dovening on a regular basis...or speeding through it...or speaking loshon hara...etc., etc., etc. Boruch Hashem, we have our foot in the door, a great zechus! But even after being on the inside, we're still subject to the yetzer hara and its delusional way of thinking."

"Well, that's a scary thought," one of the boys said.

"As it should be!" the rabbi said, knowing it was time to steer the discussion to his intended conclusion. "The person who FEARS the yetzer hara FIGHTS the yetzer hara, right? The posuk says, 'For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.' That is the whole POINT of HAVING free will!"

"See! I knew we have free will!" Eli exclaimed.

"I don't think that was ever a question for us," Binny said. "The question was and is how our having free works with the midrash...and this whole alillus thing."

All eyes turned to the rabbi, and he took that as his cue to bring the point home.

"First of all," he said, "good discussion. Important issues have surfaced that we should discuss at some point. We're talking fundamentals. But for now, this is how we can understand the midrashim, and life for that matter."

"What we learn from these midrashim, and others just like them, is that history is a book that was written long before man came onto the scene. What has happened had to happen for reasons we may not comprehend, what the Gemora calls 'Kavshei d'Rachmana,' or secrets of God. How can we possibly even begin to fathom why Hashem does what He does? We're fortunate that He has told us as much as He has. But we should never forget that whatever we know is but a tiny fraction of a fraction of a fraction of what God knows and how He thinks."

He paused to study their faces, which, if he was accurate as usual, seemed to reveal humility.

"The EVENTS may be fixed," he continued, "but not necessarily the people who make them happen, or are a part of them. Our choices in life are what determine how events will impact us, if at all."

He tried to think of an analogy, and came up with one.

"It's like writing a script for a play. Everything is written, from the beginning to the end. The characters have names and they do whatever the writer has them do. In their roles in the play they have NO choice but to act as they have been told. They do not have the opportunity to end a scene as they choose or act in any way other than what the writer has predetermined."

"But in order for the play to be acted out, it will require actors for the various parts. Who will be the hero and who will be the villain? Who will be among the good guys and who among the bad buys? Actors are chosen who are best suited for the different roles."

"In other words," Yoel said, "if someone usually plays the part of a good person, he will get the part of the good guy. If he's used to playing the bad guy, he'll get the part of the villain."

"Good!" the rabbi said. "That's EXACTLY what I mean. And the same thing is true about life. The events of history may be written in stone, at least to some degree. But WHO makes them happen, and WHO will be impacted by them...that's a function of who we are in everyday life. Good people will be 'cast' by God to play good guys, and bad people will play the bad guys."

"So what the Gemora means," Binny said, thinking as he spoke, "is that God merits the worthy to do worthy things, and has the unworthy do the unworthy things?"

"That's EXACTLY what the Gemora means," the rabbi said, excitement in his voice. "Pinchas did what SOMEONE had to do. But by living the life of a zealot, he EARNED the right to be THE zealot, first as Pinchas and later as Eliyahu HaNavi. Bnos Tzelofchad taught a halachah about inheritance that HAD to be taught. But their love of Eretz Yisroel earned them the right to be the voice of that halachah...forever!"

"And Shaul HaMelech?" one of the students asked.

"Well, that's the thing," the rabbi said. "We excuse him for much of what he did because of his condition...but the kohanim of Nov didn't. Maybe what happened in Nov was destined to occur since Ma'aseh Bereishis, just as death was. But through our choices we decide what kind of people we become, and THAT determines what kind of role we play in Hashem's history."

"Someone may be born with a certain kind of soul that makes stealing easy. But instead of stealing \$1,000, which he could easily do, he chooses to steal only half that amount, fighting his yetzer hara and not taking the entire sum. That impresses Hashem. Or consider someone born with a soul that makes stealing next to impossible, who 'borrows' a small amount of money without permission. That disappoints God."

"Or it may have to do with which family we are born into, or which friends we have when we are

growing up...There are many factors that influence who we become without much input from us. But what we DO with what we are dealt in life...that determines who we are and where we're going in life. We can't judge people, because we don't know what they CAN or CAN'T do. But Hashem can and does, and the very fact that the kohanim Shaul arranged to have killed had a say in his death means that, at some point along the way, he could have chosen better, but didn't."

All the young men looked at one another, clearly impressed and moved by the discussion. Then they looked at the rabbi, speechless...until one of them said, "Well, that was...AMAZING."

They all nodded in agreement.

"And inspirational," another one added.

Rabbi Edelstein smiled, closed his books, took a deep breath, and said. "For me too."