

A STIFF-NECKED PEOPLE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

People are hard to change. It is much easier to invent great technological innovations than to change people's minds, habits and attitudes. And since human behavior sets the tone of world society much more than does technological progress, very little has really changed in the story of human civilization over the past few thousand years. War, violence, unreasoning hatreds, moral failings, both great and small, are all the stuff of our daily newspapers and media reportings. It seems that little has changed in the human condition since the world of our father, Avraham . All of the problems that he had to struggle against are apparently still present with us in our modern era. And this truth is brought home to us in the Torah reading of Bshalach.

One would think that after the blows and plagues that Pharaoh and the Egyptian people sustained in the campaign of Moshe and Aharon to free the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage, Pharaoh and the Egyptians would have learned their lesson. They should have been happy and relieved to be rid of the Jews and the blows and plagues associated with them.. Then why do Pharaoh and the Egyptian army pursue them into the desert and attempt to return them to Egypt? What logic justifies such a suicidal policy? And the answer is that it is habit, stubbornness, hubris and the refusal to allow facts and changing situations to affect one's decisions and attitudes. Pharaoh was determined to crush the Jewish people by slavery and pain. The Lord intervened in a clear and impressive fashion to block the plans of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Pharaoh and the Egyptians knew that the Lord prevented the actualization of their plans. Nevertheless, in spite of this clear situation, neither Pharaoh nor his people change their behavior, alter their goal, admit their fatal error. Because people are stubborn and are not easily moved from their previously held opinions and plans, the facts of the matter rarely suffice to cause a change in behavior. Hence, Pharaoh's pursuit of Israel into the desert and his otherwise inexplicable headlong rush towards his own destruction.

This same rule of human nature applies towards the Jewish people as well. The Jewish people were and are notorious for being "stiff-necked." Ideas adopted by Jews, even when disproved by the facts of history and society are still not easily discarded in the Jewish world. God can split the Red Sea, rain down manna from heaven every day, preserve millions of people in a trackless desert, and there will always still be Jews who say "Let us turn our heads around and return to Egypt." Their minds are made up and they don't want to be discomfited by the facts of the situation. How else to explain that there are Jews in the world still committed to the Marxist dream, or who believe that Jewish continuity can be achieved by lowering all standards and requirements for Jewish marriage or conversion? The ideas of the Enlightenment, most of which have bankrupted in our time, the

bloodiest of all human centuries, are still treasured by a large section of Jewry whose ancestors fell victim to its siren song over the last two centuries. It is as though much of the Jewish world has learned nothing from the events and crises that have befallen the Jewish world in this century. All of the prattle of Secular Humanism, of the new better world of discarded ritual and unnecessary tradition, of easy faith and feel-good religions, of immediately obsolescent relevance, of hootenanny guitar-playing services of prayer, all of this is still promoted as effective Judaism even though it has all contributed to a mighty destruction of the people of Israel, both quantitatively and qualitatively. A large portion of the Jewish world yet insists "Let us turn our heads around and return to Egypt."

Stubbornness can be a positive trait. It is the very stiff-neckedness of the Jewish people that has preserved us through the long night of our exile and difficulties. Jews did not convert nor give up their faith because their powers of tenacity and stubbornness stood them in good stead. But stubbornness for the sake of stubbornness is wrong and usually purposeless. The lessons of past failures, of fallen gods and glittering but false ideologies, should serve to instruct us and allow us to leave the bondage of Egypt and its culture, and all of the other Egypts and their cultures, permanently. The miracles and hand of God in history should not be ignored because of misplaced stubbornness.

Shabbat Shalom.
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