

# A DANGEROUS VICTORY

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

A great military leader is reputed to have once said that the only thing more dangerous than defeat is victory. By that he meant a military or even political victory rarely settles the matter. It only provides an opportunity to the victor to come up with a plan how to best exploit that victory and convert it to a more permanent accomplishment. This point is well made in the entire story of the Exodus that reaches its climax in this week's Torah reading. The fact of the Exodus itself would be sufficient cause for celebration for the generation that experienced deliverance. But, by itself, it would mean little if nothing to later descendants and generations. The Jewish people, exiled and physically defeated many times over in its long history, would hardly commemorate a victory as temporary as the Exodus if it did not lead to a more permanent and lasting triumph. It would be comparable to the Confederate States of America-the South- continuing today to celebrate its victory at First Bull Run! And yet it is the Exodus that remains as the centerpiece of all Jewish history, and the Pesach seder which commemorates it remains the most observed ritual in Jewish life. So, it is obvious that the Exodus must be about more than the departure from Egyptian bondage alone.

When Moshe encounters the God of destiny at the burning bush at Sinai at the beginning of his mission, the Lord informs him that the purpose of his mission is to bring the people of Israel to Mount Sinai, there to serve God and accept the Torah. The Exodus is the necessary preparation for the acceptance of Torah at Sinai. But the Exodus is the means to the end, not the end in itself. The Exodus without Sinai is the First Bull Run. It would have been a temporary and unexploited victory, an even that would dim and disappear in time, losing relevance and meaning to later generations. For only the spirit lasts and gives permanent meaning to physical and temporal occurrences. And for Jews, spirit and spirituality are permanently meaningful only if they are based in Torah and Jewish tradition. Thus the Lord's message to Moshe that when Israel is redeemed they will "worship me at this mountain" is the essence of the entire meaning of the story of the Exodus.

The Jewish people has experienced abysmal defeat and destruction in this, the bloodiest of all human centuries. We have also been witness to great and unpredictable triumphs and successes. We have somehow been able to survive and rebuild ourselves, personally and nationally, after the defeats and destruction. But we have as yet been unable to truly exploit the triumphs and successes of this century. The State of Israel, the crowning Jewish physical achievement of our time, is still embroiled in a conflict for its soul and direction and purpose. This struggle is as important as is the physical struggle to survive and prosper, for without meaning - spiritual, Torah meaning-the Israeli War of Independence and all of the subsequent victories can, God forbid, become as First Bull Run.

The test of wills, the search for national meaning, the unexpressed but omnipresent inner disappointment and emptiness of Israeli life, are the underlying causes for the divisiveness and political turmoil that characterize current Israeli life. As of yet, there is no Sinai to give meaning to our modern Exodus. The wondrous Exodus of our time has not as yet been translated into terms- ritual, spiritual, traditional terms- that are truly transmittable to later generations. Only when this goal is finally accomplished will a sense of "normalcy" be achieved in Israeli and Jewish life. And it is this task and goal that is the order of the day for all segments of the Jewish People. By creating Sinai to accompany the Israeli "Exodus" we will be guaranteeing the permanent blessing of the Land of Israel in the lives and hearts of the people of Israel.

Shabbat Shalom.  
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