

JEWISH REACTIONS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The paradox of Jewish life, of the faithful and the agnostic alike, is revealed in the almost final words of Moses to Israel as recorded in this week's Torah reading, the concluding one for the year 5761 which is now coming to its end. Moses tells Israel that terrible and evil events will befall them in their journey through history. In fact the events and brutalities, the blows and humiliations, are of such a severe nature that they cannot even be described in words alone. Moses tells Israel that they will endure "blows and punishments that are not even recorded in this book," "this book" meaning the book of Dvarim, which is anyway replete with detailed descriptions of tragedy, punishment and curses. Moses' words do not fall on deaf ears. The Jewish people was always aware of the consequences of the covenant with God into which they entered at Sinai.

But that realization was pretty much theoretical for Moses' generation. The awful unrelenting reality of the consequences of the covenant of Sinai would be unable to be visualized in its full extent before the blows actually descended upon the people of Israel.

Every Jewish generation reacts differently to the "blows and punishments that are not even recorded in this book." Half of Spanish Jewry converted to Christianity (most of them only pro forma) in face of the blows of the Inquisition, while the other half willingly forsook the land which had hosted them for eight centuries and embarked on fateful and dangerous wanderings. As a reaction to the Chmielnitzky massacres that claimed about 250,000 Eastern European Jews in 1648-9, and the subsequent spiritual debacle caused by the apostate "Messiah," Shabtai Zvi in 1653-8, the Chasidic movement arose and intensified Jewish Torah observance amongst the masses of Eastern European Jews, while Western European Jews in the hundreds of thousands turned first to Reform and Enlightenment and then to full assimilation into the non-Jewish society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Approximately 250,000 German, Austrian and French Jews actually converted to Christianity in the nineteenth century, not so much out of religious conviction as out of a longing to belong to the "brave new world."

Of course, no one of the new Christians saw that their enlightened assimilated grandchildren would be obliterated less than a century later in the same manner as their Eastern European Chasidic cousins. This pattern of differing, almost opposite, reactions to the troubles of Israel has remained valid until today.

The terrible events of the Holocaust served to strengthen many Jews in their faith and loyalty to Judaism as well as shattering any ties to that very same faith and loyalty for many other Jews. Rabbi

Meir Leibush Malbim in a letter written a century ago said that Moses told Israel "that great and awful troubles and events will befall you," Israel will respond by saying "That is because God is not in my midst, therefore did these troubles occur." Malbim states that a portion of Israel will say "God is not in my midst" - we were not pious enough, we did not observe His Torah, we strayed after the gods of modernity, therefore He did not protect us from the consequences of our breaching the covenant. But, Malbim continues, other Jews will say "God is not in my midst" means that for us there is no God, that we are a secular and cultural nation and not bound by any Sinaitic covenants. Now, over fifty years after the Holocaust, this diversity of interpretation is being acted out within the Jewish people. Assimilation, self-hatred, intermarriage, ignorance of Torah and Judaism are the lot of the many. But a strengthening of Torah knowledge is spreading from the few to the general Jewish society. It will continue to grow and spread and the loyalty of Israel to its covenant of Sinai will again prevail.

Shabat Shalom.
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