

MAKE THE MOST OF IT

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The book of Bereshith ends this week on a seemingly upbeat note. The family of Yaakov, united and now more numerous, live in an apparently friendly Egyptian environment, rather smugly protected by their political influence and their growing wealth.

The last seventeen years of the life of Yaakov are the most serene of his existence. He studies Torah with his descendants and the Lord does not allow him, so to speak, to truly envision the disaster to his people and family that looms in the coming years. In the back of everyone's mind is the haunting vision shown to Abraham that his children will be enslaved and brutalized, but that prophecy apparently does not yet weigh heavily on the minds and behavior of Jacob's children and family living currently in Egypt.

The nature of humans is to postpone acting on troubling signs and biter forecasts. So the immediate troubles of the book of Shemot do not make their appearance or mark here at the conclusion of the book of Bereshith. The Torah itself apparently wishes to dwell on the good part of the narrative of Israel in Egypt before continuing later to detail the horrors of slavery and persecution that are already lurking in the wings.

Why is this so? Why is the Torah not more straightforward early on in the Egyptian section of the story of the Jewish people? And even more puzzlingly why didn't God speed up the process, so to speak, and begin the bondage sooner so that the redemption would also have happened earlier? What was this 130 year delay meant to accomplish?

There is a pattern set here that continues to appear throughout Jewish history. Our story always goes in waves and not in lurches. The problems that befall us may seem to be sudden and unexpected but in the long view that retrospective history provides, they arrive inevitably and gradually. The Lord, so to speak, provides us with respite between tragedies.

The 130 years of good times in Egypt enabled the Jews to somehow survive the eighty years of slavery and persecution. Spanish Jewry enjoyed a "golden age" of centuries before its three century decline into expulsion and forced apostasy. Polish Jews also enjoyed hundreds of years of autonomy and governmental favor and protection before declining in the three centuries which ended with its destruction.

Eighteenth and nineteenth century anti-Semitism clearly laid the groundwork for the murderous Holocaust. Yet, at the same time Western and Central European Jewry enjoyed civil rights and great social and economic success and achievement. In the constant turbulence of First Temple times, the Bible nevertheless records for us peaceful and prosperous times - forty years, eighty years - and diplomatic and military stability.

Nothing lasts forever but the history of Israel as a people provides us with the understanding that God's will will be done but that the periods of respite afforded us are necessary for our survival and development as a people. Far be it from me to analyze our current situation and what wave of history we are in. But whatever it is we should attempt to make the most of it for now and for our future.

Shabat shalom.

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com