

PARSHAS BESHALACH - DON'T BE SKEPTICAL ABOUT SKEPTICISM

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Don't Be Skeptical About Skepticism¹

They said to Moshe: "Are there no graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us to take us out of Egypt?"

Their cynicism is remarkable! Moments from what in their minds is certain death, they still have an inclination towards black humor.

Aside from the cynicism, their lack of faith bothers some people. But is this fair? How else could they have reacted? There was no visible escape route, other than the extraordinarily miraculous. How could they calmly assume that Hashem would engineer salvation for them in the way He subsequently did, contrary to all natural expectation? What happened afterwards had no precedent. It surpassed in its scope, according to Chazal, even the mind-bending plagues that they had recently witnessed. Could they have been expected to intuit the outcome, and not voice their natural fear and anxiety?

If you are still skeptical, and see room for a reaction of complete faith in Hashem and His servant Moshe (a faith that the Torah tells us did set in as a result of the splitting of the Sea, but not before), know this: their skepticism is of inestimable value in demonstrating the truth of Moshe's mission. We would be a poorer people without it.

Perhaps the most important theme of R. Yehudah ha-Levi's Kuzari is that Jews believe first and foremost in the G-d of history. We are loyal to Him not because we have no other way of understanding how the universe began, or how life was generated, or where universal concepts of morality come from[2]. We believe, says R. Yehudah ha-Levi, because we were witnesses to history. We experienced ourselves a relationship with Hashem, and saw the relationship with Him change according to the way we met His expectations.

Today, we are at the receiving end of a tradition that began with a large group of people who heard the voice of G-d at Sinai, and unmistakably experienced His Presence. This stands in sharp contrast to those whose faith is built upon the experience of a single purported visionary picked by G-d to convert his generation and those that followed. Belief in the veracity of his message is completely a question of personal preference, of how much the message resonates within the individual.

The strength of this tradition depends in large part on how we view that generation. If they were eager consumers of snake-oil, or if their loyalty to a charismatic leader could be achieved easily, their message to us would leave room for doubt.

At times of stress, when their inner natures were most expressive, they showed just the opposite. They were not easy marks or pushovers. A demonstration by Moshe one day was doubted the next. This was a difficult group to convince!

But convinced they were. By the end of the forty years of Moshe's leadership, they were so firmly committed to Moshe's message that they weathered persecution and privation for the millennia to come, rather than turn their back on what they knew was true. The national leopard of the Jewish people had not changed its skeptical spots. Insofar as their belief in Torah, however, the skeptics had come around, and become fierce believers.

Perhaps, you might object, the forty years in the wilderness broke their spirit, weeded out the creative thinkers who died along the way, and left only meek sheep to continue Jewish history. Look again at their biting reference to a shortage of graves in Egypt. Here they cross the line between skepticism and cynicism. Look carefully at that cynicism, and see if you do not recognize a national feature of our people, very much with us to this very day. No sheep, then or now.

Even some of our disagreeableness has an important function!

Forgetting By Remembering

Hashem said to Moshe: "Write this as a remembrance in a book and repeat it in the ears of Yehoshua - I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under the Heavens."

We are to remember, because Hashem will erase that remembrance? Does this follow, or make any sense? Which is it to be? Are we to remember the cunning and the evil of Amalek, or work towards the goal of wiping away any trace of his existence?

History does not need reconstruction or revisionism. Amalek's record need not be stricken from the books. What happened, happened, and people can study it till the end of time.

Awareness of Amalek's misdeeds is not itself a barrier to the moral progress of human civilization. Glorifying the agenda, the life-style of Amalek is indeed a barrier. The "remembrance" of Amalek in this verse means the honor human societies accord to those who rule by power and the sword. When we cover their memory with laurels, we turn the successful conquerors of history into objects of hero-worship and emulation. It is a small step indeed from venerating conquest to the cynical and determined ideology that demands that the strong obliterate the weak, simply because the world belongs to the strong.

There is only one antidote to this. It is not the celebration of pacifism or quietism per se; abhorrence of violence might be good for much of mankind, but it will not stop those who seek the glory of

conquest and know no moral barriers. Amalek will cease to exist when the glory attached to brute power is fully replaced by the glory of moral achievement. When all men, great and small, are judged by their neighbors according to how morally they act, there will be no room left for Amalek. The glory that used to follow in the wake of the conquest by force will vanish.

This will happen one day. We will know that we have arrived when we sense that the world is united in its commitment to a common platform of Divinely-ordained morality. This is, in short, the mission of Israel. It is the goal for mankind that Hashem has programmed for us; it is the way in which He will blot out the remembrance of Amalek forever.

Until that day arrives, we increase our resolve to get there by remembering what Amalek did, how deeply seated the power of evil can be. We remember what we need to do to overcome it.

[1] Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Shemos 14:11

[2] These approaches are sometimes referred to as "G-d of the gaps" arguments, where G-d's existence is necessitated by gaps in our ability to understand certain things. A problem with these arguments -unlike that of the Kuzari - is that the gaps sometimes shrink for some people, when new thinking is advanced - correct or even incorrect! - that claims to explain what previously was incomprehensible.
