

PARSHAS NETZAVIM & VAYEILECH - REBIRTH OF A NATION

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Rebirth of a Nation ¹

Now write this song and teach it to the Bnei Yisrael. Place it in their mouth, so that this song may be a witness for me against the Bnei Yisrael. When I will have brought them to the Land...and they will eat, and be sated, and become fat, and they will turn to other gods and serve them, and they will mock me and break my covenant. Many oppressing evils will befall them. Then this song will testify before them as a witness, for it will not be forgotten out of the mouths of their descendants.

Getting half the picture can be completely unsatisfactory. So it is in our parshah, describing the reaction of the Bnei Yisrael to the calamities that befall them. "Is it not because my G-d is no longer in my midst that these misfortunes happen to me?" Arguably, the statement is true. The calamity took place because HKBH withdrew His beneficent Providence. But it is only half the picture. This explanation is completely and woefully inadequate to arrest the downward turn in the fortunes of the Nation.

It is convenient to be able to blame G-d when things go wrong. "He should have been there for us. He should have bailed us out, just as He did when the Patriarchs found themselves in trouble. If He had not withdrawn His assistance, we would not be suffering the ninety-eight curses of the Tochechah." It is more painful to ask, "Why did He say 'no'? Why didn't He respond? Why did He withdraw into silence and distance when we needed Him?" Not always, but sometimes, we can take an educated guess, based on what He has taught us: a long, persistent record of misdeeds has driven away His Shechinah. He told us that this would happen, that He could not abide living among us if we became mired in sin. The blame is with us, not Him. Failing to take this extra step - in other words, noting Hashem's withdrawal without understanding why He withdrew - is a grave error.

The Torah here predicts that the Bnei Yisrael will find themselves in such a rut, and tells us precisely how they will get there, and what will lead to the first - even if mistaken - assessment of G-d's role in their predicament.

"They will eat, and be sated, and become fat." The culprit will be a life style incompatible with the demands of the Torah mission. Living with abundance and luxury, of eating not only to the point of satiety but of growing fat, does not lead to a life of sanctifying the mundane and material. It comports quite well with pagan licentiousness, with the turning to other gods and serving them that

our pesukim speak of. Interestingly, Hashem counters this abundance with "many oppressing evils." The word tzaros/ oppressing really means limiting, confining. The antidote to defection from Torah because of possessing too many choices is to have that field narrowed down and restricted to too few.

How will Klal Yisrael extricate itself from this two-fold error - mediocre performance, coupled with faulty theology? Our pesukim tell us that the Shirah of Haazinu will provide the witness to answer the complaint of the people. We don't instantly understand how this will happen. Certainly, the Shirah removes the element of surprise and shock. In a few dramatic lines, it recounts all of history. It predicts the dire straits in which the people find themselves. They will not be able to say that they were not forewarned. But what about it prevents them from going half way - accurately seeing G-d's withdrawal as the immediate reason for their misfortune, but not following up and determining the reason for His distance?

The gemara[2] extends the narrow meaning of "shirah" to include the entire Torah. (In other words, the mitzvah of "write for yourselves this shirah" means the entire Torah, not just the Song of Haazinu that follows.) This makes sense. The antidote to recognizing G-d's withdrawal while remaining clueless as to the reason can only come from a grasp of the entire Torah. Studying all of it, the Bnei Yisrael can take note of their failure to observe the fullness of all His commandments.

But how does this make any sense at all? Can it be that the guarantee that Jews will remember that they have forgotten the Torah is the Torah that they have forgotten? Had they stayed fully engaged with the Torah's dictates, they would not find themselves in such a perilous state. Now that they are there, can the very Torah they rejected lead them back?

Surprisingly, the Torah says, "Indeed." The Shirah - including its broader understanding as the totality of the Torah - will be able to help heal the spiritual malady of the people, even though it will fail to prevent it. "For it will not be forgotten out of the mouths of their descendants." In the worst of times, in the blackest times of history, when the spiritual trajectory of the people seems to have turned irreversibly away from Hashem, our parshah testifies that the Torah itself is the guarantor of teshuvah and progress. No matter what, the Torah will not be forgotten from the mouths of Bnei Yisrael. Something of Torah consciousness will endure and lead the people back. Klal Yisrael will remain the People of the Book till the end of time. Rebirth is assured.

The gemara[3] sees the pasuk, "You will lie with your fathers and arise [the people and stray[4]]" as somewhat indeterminate in meaning. The arising, on the level of the plain meaning of the text, refers to a future generation rising up in rebellion against Hashem's demands. The position of the word "arise" in the pasuk allows it (and therefore demands) that it be read with the words that precede it. In other words, those to whom Moshe speaks will die, but they will arise again at the time of techias ha-meisim. The gemara sees this as a clear allusion to the resurrection of the dead.

The elegance of placing such an allusion here is overwhelming. Resurrection means that death is

not final; something of a person endures that can be teased back to mortal life. The upshot of our parshah is that the nation can plunge itself into a spiritual death, but that death, too, is not final. Our pesukim, the run-up to the Shirah, promise that the nation as well will bestir itself from its sleep, and come back to life. What techias ha-meisim offers the individual, our parshah guarantees will happen to the Nation.

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1. *Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Devarim 31:19-21*
 2. *Nedarim 38A*
 3. *Sanhedrin 98A*
 4. *Devarim 31:16*
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