

What Hashem Wants from Us

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

We are familiar with pictures from the Holocaust period. The truth is that as gruesome as those pictures are, until October 7th, people viewed them and turned the page without the photos making a dent. When people look at pictures from eighty or ninety years ago, they think to themselves that it was a terrible period back then, but it happened so long ago that it is not really relevant to our lives in this modern period. Hitler was a once-in-history phenomenon. The Brisk and Kishinev pogroms happened so long ago that most people don't know anything about them.

However, after the terrible slaughter on October 7th, and after seeing the world's reaction to the wanton, senseless, brutal murder of innocent Jews, we have been awakened to the fate of Jews throughout history and forced to confront the reality of our existence in this world. The bubble in which we had been living has burst, and now we have become aware that what happened in the past can happen again and it can happen here.

Now, when we look at pictures from the Holocaust period and from Be'eri and Kfar Aza, we feel the pain and we sense the anguish. The message is fresh and it is clear.

We aren't blessed with the paytonim of old, who could powerfully express deep thoughts in a few timeless words. Sadly, the closest we come to the words of prophets nowadays are written in anonymous screeds and rants, with kernels of truth here and there and heavy doses of fiction and ignorance. They are passed around and discussed as if they were scripture.

When we see the society and culture of Western civilization breaking down and under attack, we know that we are living in serious times, from which we will be saved only by Divine interference.

We don't have anyone to interpret for us the current gezeirah. But we do know that Hashem sends us reminders to prod us to do teshuvah.

The problem is that we forget them. How many remember the kidnapping of the three boys in 2014 enough to give it much thought? How about the attack on Yeshiva Merkaz Harav? How about the Number 12 bus on the way back from the Kosel? How about the five tzaddikim of Har Nof who were killed at shul?

Tragedy shakes us up a bit and then we get on with life. Perhaps that is the doing of the Soton, for he seeks to prevent us from engaging in teshuvah to prevent serious tragedies from occurring in the future. We are sent reminders, because we continuously forget the previous ones.

We have to know that to the extent that we recognize that all that happens is by Divine decree and plan, to that degree Hashem watches over and protects us. The sefer Chovos Halevavos states at the beginning of Shaar Habitachon that Hashem removes his protection from one who puts his faith in others and only protects those who place their faith in Him.

In Shaar Cheshbon Hanefesh, the Chovos Halevavos states that someone who puts his faith in Hashem is rewarded. Hashem “opens his gates of understanding, reveals to him secrets of His chochmah, places an eye on him to guide him, and will not abandon him only to his own powers and abilities.”

The Rambam in Hilchos Taanis writes that it is a mitzvas asei to cry out and blow shofros for every tzarah that befalls the Jewish community. This is one of the paths to teshuvah. When a tragedy befalls the community, everyone must acknowledge that it is due to their sins. However, if instead of crying out they ascribe the threat facing the community to “the way the world works,” such an attitude is an outgrowth of the middah of achzoriyus and ends up deepening and multiplying the tragedy.

The purpose of tragedy is to inspire us to do teshuvah.

The Ramban at the end of Parshas Bo writes that the foundation of the Torah is that every occurrence in this world is a miracle brought about by Hashem. Nothing happens at random. Nothing can be attributed to the forces of nature or “the way the world works.”

One who doesn't believe this has no share in Toras Moshe, the Ramban affirms. People who observe the mitzvos will succeed, and those who don't will be punished with destruction.

He also teaches that the daily hidden miracles are more evident when you examine the actions that affect the entire community. As the posuk says (Devorim 29:23-24), “And the nations of the world will say, ‘Why did Hashem do this to the Holy Land?’ And they will answer, ‘Because the Jews let go of the covenant that was made with Hashem, the G-d of their forefathers.’”

The Ramban explains that this is the foretelling of the destruction of Eretz Yisroel, which will be understood by the nations as a punishment for the Jews forsaking the Torah.

However, if we think about what is happening now in Eretz Yisroel and examine the sources, what we find is a much deeper perception of the news and maybe something even more frightening than it appears superficially.

We have been in several goluyos since sinas chinom destroyed the Bais Hamikdosh, but the golus of Yishmoel is totally different. The Maharal writes in his sefer Ner Mitzvah that Yishmoel is the only one of the subjugating nations whose malchus and strength are his own. Yishmoel derives his koach from Avrohom Avinu and from milah. He doesn't depend on Am Yisroel to falter in order for him to rise. [See also the Ramban in Parshas Bolok, 24:21, and the Maharal in Netzach Yisroel, perek 21.]

Last week, in Parshas Toldos, we read that Yitzchok told Eisov, “Ve'al charbecha tichyeh ve'es achicha taavod vehaya kaasher torid uforakta ulo mei'al tzavorecha,” (27:40). Eisov is only strong when we are weak in our observance.

This idea also appears in Rashi at the beginning of the parsha on the posuk of “ule'om mile'om ye'emotz verav ya'avod tzo'ir” (25:23). When one falls, the other rises.

Thus, when we are oppressed by Eisov's offspring, we know that the way to overcome them is by engaging in teshuvah and maasim tovim. However, in addition to teshuvah and Torah, which is “magna umatzla,” to overcome Yishmoel we need bitachon and tefillah.

In his kuntrus Kol Dodi Dofeik, Rav Aharon Dovid Goldberg, rosh yeshivas Telshe in Cleveland, compares this power of Yishmoel to that of Mitzrayim during the period of the Jewish enslavement there. The Medrash Tanchuma (Shoftim 14) states that Hashem wanted the Bnei Yisroel to daven for redemption, and therefore He allowed the Mitzriyim to torture them. When they cried out to Hashem, He redeemed them.

We must place our faith in Hashem and daven not to be subjected to further attacks and to quickly merit the geulah.

The Gemara in Maseches Avodah Zarah (2b) states that when Moshiach comes, the nations of the world will protest the punishment they are about to receive for their treatment of the Jews. They will all proclaim that everything they did was only to benefit the Jews and their service of G-d and the Torah.

The Gemara says that Poras, Persia, will cry out that everything they did was to help the Jews. “We built many bridges, conquered many towns, and waged war,” they will say, “to enable the Jews to learn Torah.”

We understand the grounds for claiming that they built bridges and other infrastructure to enable the study of Torah, but how does waging war help the Jews learn Torah?

Perhaps this can be understood to mean that they waged war in order to scare the Jews into doing teshuvah and to engage in Torah study.

Poras, Persia, is the present-day country of Iran. When the ruler of that nation rises up and repeatedly proclaims, publicly, to the entire world, that he intends to destroy Israel, we can believe him that he intends to do so. When he continues his maniacally feverish race to arm himself with nuclear weapons to carry out his bloody intentions, the world stands by and pretends to engage in a process to curtail his ambitions. As he continues on, every day getting closer to attaining his goal, he funds his proxies to battle and torment us.

We must raise our voices in passionate prayer that Hashem spare us from the evil intents of the anshei Poras, Yishmoel and Edom.

We should use every opportunity to study more Torah, better ourselves, and do more for the downtrodden to create more zechuyos for our people. And we must continue to build and support Torah.

Learning the parshiyos of Sefer Bereishis, we find that the world's antipathy toward Jews began when Avrohom Avinu determined that the world had a Creator. The loathing of Jews has continued throughout the generations ever since.

Avrohom's father wanted him dead. Nimrod tried to burn Avrohom alive. Yitzchok Avinu was treated as an outcast by his neighbors.

Wherever Yitzchok went, his wells were filled with sand. In those days, without wells, one could not live. Yitzchok was therefore constantly on the move, encountering a hostile reception wherever he went. Though he was blessed with wealth and was an unquestionably kind, peaceful and spiritual man, nobody wanted to have anything to do with him. They drove him away by plugging up the sources of his water supply.

In this parsha, we learn how Yaakov Avinu was repeatedly lied to and tricked out of what was deservedly his. After working for Lovon for two decades, Yaakov is finally instructed by Hashem to return home. He gathered his wives, his children and his flocks and departed for home.

Lovon chased him down and accused him of stealing his property and running off like a thief. Yaakov responded by confronting Lovon, the paradigm con-artist, with the history of his subterfuge and dishonest dealings. Yaakov listed everything he had done for Lovon during his years of servitude to him. He enumerated all the ways that Lovon had robbed him, reminding him of how he altered the terms of Yaakov's employment one hundred times in order to shortchange him. Lovon was as unmoved as today's Jew-haters, who deny that Hamas is evil and blame Israel for the mess that is the Middle East.

The avos demonstrated how to respond to those who plot our downfall, seek to kill and destroy us, and accuse us of the very crimes they themselves have perpetrated against us.

Despite the enmity and harassment, Avrohom and Sorah continued with their mission of kindness and holiness. Yitzchok moved on and dug new wells. Despite all the attempts to shut him down, Yaakov persevered with his mission of raising twelve shevotim.

In these times of tragedy, we must not forget what is going on. Hashem doesn't bring these occurrences so that we should ignore them or say that they happened only to a certain type of Jew but won't happen to our type. He brings them so that we all learn from them and seek improvement.

We all know that the Bais Hamikdosh was destroyed because of sinas chinom, and until that sin is rectified, we will be in a state of churban, golus, terror and pogroms. It won't end until Moshiach comes. In order for that to happen, we have to stop hating each other and looking down at Jews who are different than us.

If we have an argument with someone, we need to make up with them to help ourselves and our neshomah and to bring Moshiach. The sefer Ner Mitzvah v'Torah Ohr discusses that "when a person makes an enemy of someone, he brings upon his nefesh tribulations on High...and this is also the reason for the lengthy golus, because there is no place where sinas chinom does not exist..."

People are accepting upon themselves kabbalos as a zechus for themselves, for the hostages, for soldiers, and for people in danger. I think that it would be most appropriate to make a kabbolah not to hate other Jews, to think kindly about others, and to treat everyone with respect.

A small kabbolah can go a long way.

My dear friend, Rav Zvi Schwartz of Rechovot, told me something that he just experienced last week. He received a call from a person he was mekarev thirty years ago. "Hello, Rav Schwartz. This is Chaim X. Do you remember me? You were mekarev me to a life of Torah thirty years ago. Since then, I got married and moved to Yerushalayim, and now I have a large family of children and grandchildren.

"You are probably wondering why I am calling now. It is because of the war. My brother, who is not religious and lives on an irreligious kibbutz, heard me speak about you in the early years after I found religion. He is shaken up from what happened on Simchat Torah and called me to ask you about a kabbolah he can undertake at this time."

Rav Schwartz is not one to let such an opportunity go. He said to the fellow, "Give me your brother's number. I will call him and go see him."

And that is what he did. He called the man and went to visit him on his kibbutz. After exchanging pleasantries, he told the man that first they would learn Torah for an hour, and then they would discuss an appropriate kabbolah.

When they finished learning, he asked the man if he made a Shabbat meal each week. When he said that he did, Rav Schwartz told him to make a kabbolah to eat more food than usual at the Shabbat lunch and that his chamim – cholent – should be prepared before Shabbat and kept on a platah (hotplate) until it was time to eat it.

The man said that he was looking for something more intense, but if that is what the rav prescribed for him, he would do it.

The next Thursday, Rav Schwartz received a call from the fellow, asking him if he would be able to come again to learn with him. The tzaddik put aside what he was doing, got in the car, and drove to the kibbutz.

While the first time they met the week before the man was a bit uncomfortable when he opened the door, this time he was excited to meet the rabbi and they sat down to study. When they were done, the man began to tell his tale.

“Kevod harav, ten li lehagid lecha mah karah hayom. Let me tell you about my day. There was a meeting today in the lunchroom. Everyone had to be there. The guy in charge got us all together to announce that since all the foreign workers had left because of the war, everyone would have to show up at the feilds on Shabbat morning to pick the crops or else they will rot and the kibbutz will have a tremendous loss.

“I stood up and said that I wouldn’t be able to be there because it is Shabbat and I won’t do work on Shabbat. He said that anyone who does not show up there will be thrown out of the collective and would have to hand over his key. And that is what I did. After living here my entire life, I handed in my key and will be looking for a new place to live.

“Kevod harav, I never kept Shabbat in my life. I barely know what it is. Something stirred inside of me, so I asked for a small kabbalah that I could make. I didn’t think that what you told me made much sense, but I must tell you that when I made that kabbolah, it made me feel good. And when I ate that chamim last Shabbat, I was a changed person. When that man got up and said that everyone must work on Shabbat, I was so incensed. My neshamah was on fire. I said that I would never work again on the holy day and want to study more Torah and find out about the mitzvot.”

The power of one little kabbolah undertaken with sincerity.

Let us all make some kabbalos to improve in shemiras hamitzvos and ahavas Yisroel. Hopefully, we will be changed and the world will be changed. The war will be won, good will triumph over evil, and Moshiach will be on his way bekarov.