

Light Through Darkness

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

The world is moving so fast that we can barely keep track of what is going on. After experiencing four years of a weak, ineffective, and incompetent leader who caused the world's leading country to suffer economically, politically, and morally, last week Hashem brought us a new leader, albeit one with whom we have become familiar.

With a whirlwind of action, he set about undoing the damage his predecessor had wrought and repositioning the country on a trajectory of greatness. He returned common sense to government, replacing years of progressive wokeism detached from reality, science, honesty, decency, and the truth. It will take some time for the changes to sink in, but we should be thankful for the apparent return to morality and openness in government.

We must realize that the change was brought about by Hakadosh Boruch Hu, as the president himself reminded the nation in his inaugural message. Nothing happens by itself. Everything that occurs is caused by the Creator for a higher purpose than is often readily apparent.

It is our obligation to make ourselves worthy of Hashem's beneficence and appreciate what is being done for us. Certain people have been quick to pounce on actions they don't comprehend and immediately condemn the president or his assistants, accusing them of being Nazis or anti-Israel, along with other unfounded allegations.

Israel has been fighting a war with the ragtag terror organization that governs Gaza and perpetrated an awful large-scale assault, which included vicious attacks on civilians, wanton killings, widespread violence, destruction of every sort, and abductions. The Jews in Israel have been suffering at the hands of Arabs for the hundreds of years, but the attacks on October 7, 2023, were the worst there in modern history and the worst anywhere since the Holocaust.

Israel declared war on Hamas, saying that its goals were the eradication of that evil group and the return of its captives. After over one year of fighting, Israel has not been able to achieve its objectives, and the new president decided that the war must end – enough spilled blood on both sides, enough fighting with no end in sight. He pushed through a ceasefire tied to a staggered hostage return and freedom for despicable, murderous terrorists.

There are some in this country who accuse the president of betraying Israel, because they don't appreciate the larger dynamics at play and the daily wounding and deaths of young Israeli soldiers. The image of the invincible Israeli army and soldiers, which was born from the miracles of the Six Day War, is deeply ingrained in the minds of Israelis and Jews the world over, and nothing that happened since has tarnished that picture.

This column is not meant as a screed against the army or anyone else, but as a realistic view of what is happening now. As believers, maaminim bnei maaminim, it is our duty not to get sucked

in by propaganda and wishful thinking, but to rationally examine that which takes place and has taken place, seeing how everything that happens is done by Hakadosh Boruch Hu for reasons He understands that will one day be evident to us as well. When He wants the Israeli army to win, they are invincible supermen, and when He does not want them to win, they don't.

Some wars were miraculously won, as any objective study can show, while others were lost by an army that couldn't get the job done for a variety of reasons. These included poor intelligence, inadequate planning, weak generals, tactical errors, and the like. This past war was an exhibition of all of the above.

People still wonder how it can be that the Israelis didn't see the terrorists coming and how it can be that they weren't able to stop them. Why did it take so many hours for soldiers to finally arrive on the scene? How can it be? They don't understand. Some from Yidden also don't understand, and whenever the topic comes up in conversation, they wonder aloud how it can be.

But for true believers, it is obvious what happened. At other times, Hashem helped them out, opening their eyes and ears to what was going on. This time, they didn't merit the Divine assistance, and therefore they didn't see and didn't hear what was going to happen and then what was happening.

There is no other answer, no other explanation.

These weeks, as we study the parshiyos of Vo'eira and Bo, they should serve to reinforce in us the basic concept of Jewish belief – that Hashem created the world and causes everything that happens in it. Nothing happens by itself. When Hashem wants water to remain in its natural state, it is colorless, odorless, cool, and refreshing. But when He wants to teach the world a lesson, that same water can have the color and consistency of blood. Frogs, lice, wild animals, and grasshoppers can appear out of nowhere and swarm everywhere, eating all the food, torturing the populace, and making normal life impossible.

Each time a makkah was inflicted on Mitzrayim, Paroh realized that Hashem rules over him, as well as the heaven and earth. He brought himself to that realization, but then, when he wanted to go about life according to his wishes, he put out of his mind that Hashem ruled over him and all. Even when it is obvious that success necessitates subscribing to Hashem's code and living life the way He has prescribed, people seek to compartmentalize and do as they please and as they understand. But it doesn't work. Just as Paroh invited more destruction and pain upon himself and his people each time he ignored Hashem's wishes, so do we.

Although there were many reports of soldiers saved by Divine intervention, in this war, overall, Hashem did not cause the Israelis to win, and thus the same army that is widely praised for its prowess, as hard as it tried and as courageously as its men fought, could not put away its enemy. Therefore, it was forced to enter into a lopsided deal to stem the bleeding, end the fighting, and gain back its hostages.

While all of this is going on, the country is convulsing over the attempt to draft yeshiva students, as if that is the problem. If only the chareidim would give up learning and join the army, everything would improve, they say.

At a time when Divine mercy is so needed, the spiritual should be encouraged, not discouraged. Instead of seeking to find favor in the eyes of the Creator, so that He will help secure advances and victories, the country's leaders seek the opposite. It makes no sense. Once again, they are failing to see and understand the situation they are in.

Paroh and his people lived hedonistic lives, predicated upon their ability to enjoy themselves as they saw fit. Their identity was assumed from the pleasures they enjoyed, from the games and sports they excelled in, the neighborhoods they lived in, and the size of their homes and chariots. All outward manifestations of a people without a core. When facing challenges, they endeavored to ignore them and persist in the pursuit of physical enjoyment, for that was their life.

Chazal teach that the Bnei Yisroel in Mitzrayim didn't change their names, language, or clothing. Their lesson to us is that, as challenging as it was, the Jews remained a spiritual people of destiny, who lived for a higher purpose and followed the Creator. The physical subjugation and the oppression of servitude were unable to change them, for they remained focused on fulfilling their eternal missions in life.

They hailed from great people and knew that following Hashem's word would allow them to merit redemption.

And so it is in our day. Those who cleave to Torah, studying it and following its every word, remaining loyal to its mitzvos, concentrate on fulfilling Hashem's will and seeing His Hand in the happenings of the world and in their own lives. They seek perfection and engage in penitence when they sin or veer off track. As in Mitzrayim, those people will be redeemed and will not perish in darkness they have caused themselves by dimming the light of Torah in their lives.

Vacuous people who live selfishly and hedonistically, with a superficial coating of religiosity, jeopardize their connection to the Chosen People, for when challenges and tough times come, they risk not having the strength to maintain the necessary commitment.

Emunah and bitachon are the very foundations of our faith, and as the Ramban writes at the end of his peirush on this week's parsha, the basis of our belief is to know that everything that happens, regardless of whether it seems to be a miracle or follows the natural course of human life, is all from Hashem. Someone who doesn't believe in this concept, known as Hashgocha Protis, can be the biggest masmid and medakdeik b'mitzvos but is not considered a believer in Hashem and His Torah.

As we discussed last week, quoting from my rebbi, Rav Dovid Cohen, rosh yeshiva of Yeshivas Chevron, we are now in the period known as ikvisa deMeshicha, literally translated as the heel of Moshiach and loosely translated to mean the time preceding Moshiach's arrival.

My rebbi, Rav Moshe Shapiro, explains the term, quoting the Gemara (Shabbos 31a), which states that the word emunah, faith, is a reference to Seder Zeraim, which includes the halachos pertaining to planting, the proper conduct vis-à-vis terumos, ma'aseros, and other obligations. The farmer is "ma'amin b'chayei olam v'zoreia," he has faith in the One who sustains creation and he plants. Why does a farmer need more faith than any other worker? Doesn't a doctor need faith to heal people?

The seed is unique in that, to cause growth, it must first decompose and disappear. This week, we marked Rosh Chodesh Shevat. On the 15th day of this month, we shall observe Tu B'Shevat, the day when that rebirth begins, deep beneath the earth. It is still winter, but beyond our view and perception, there are stirrings of new life, the perfect example of true faith.

The farmer needs extra conviction, because there will be no yield for him without the necessary breakdown of the seed. Darkness leads to light. As Chazal say, "Leka nehora delo nofik migoy chashucha—There is no light that doesn't first come through darkness."

The emunah of the farmer is the emunah of our nation as we wait for the final salvation to sprout like a seed.

Like a seed that appears to have withered and died, the heel is far from the center of the body, callous and insensitive to feeling. This period is called "ikvisa," the heel of time. We will have to exist on faith alone, seeing and feeling nothing.

It's the moment of utter darkness, the blackest part of night before dawn breaks. The seed appears completely destroyed because it's on the verge of taking root and creating new life.

Great challenges come along with the hope this thought provides. These challenges increase as the time of Moshiach's arrival gets increasingly closer. The challenges are physical, causing us pain and losses. Things happen to us, the community, and the world that appear to be destructive and dark. Ideological challenges are also increasingly prevalent, seeking to cast doubt on the faith we must maintain to be redeemed from golus. Our bond to the Torah is in jeopardy.

One of the 13 foundations of our faith as laid out by the Rambam is that "zos haTorah lo shehi muchlefe," the Torah will never change, and each word is as relevant today as it was 3,500 years ago.

A new light will soon shine over the world, a light that will be recognized by those who are devoted to the Torah. Those who have not been swayed by false promises or misleading interpretations but remain loyal and steadfast in their commitment to the truth will merit the

geulah. Those for whom the eternal light of Torah dimmed along the way, as they sought to adapt it to fit modern ideas and sensibilities, will be lost in the dark and never merit seeing the great light that will shine very shortly.

May we study the parsha seriously and absorb its messages so that we and our children will merit the redemption of Moshiach quickly in our day.