

This Land is My Land

A Breslov Perspective on the Holy Land

Essay #22—Parshat Nitzavim (1) 5761

It is now time for Selichot (special penitential prayers said between now and the eve of Yom Kippur), to ask God to forgive our sins and to beseech Him for a happy, healthy and successful year. Considering God's Infinite Patience with the wicked, we've got a good chance to have it granted. After all, "I'm not that bad!" See what Yishmael has been doing: intentional, random killings of innocent men, women and children. But, are the killings really random? Didn't we say God administers justice. If a person is guilty he receives the death penalty. If not, not. Then why have these innocent people been murdered? If they're truly innocent, why do they suffer? Is it at all possible for an innocent person, who is not guilty nor subject to a death sentence, to die?

In one of his lessons, Rebbe Nachman speaks of faith and converts, those who have been distant from God and now draw close. A problem arises because converts bring to Judaism characteristics which were not developed under Jewish law. Therefore, many types of behavior based on immoral codes may find their way into the Jewish community. There are means to overcome these "behavioral disorders." However, the Rebbe states, when a perverted sense of *mishpat* (justice) prevails these behaviors, and the attitudes upon which they are based, are very difficult to conquer. This is because perverted justice itself also brings immorality and impurity. The main way to overcome these characteristics is to bind one's thoughts directly to God. An alternate means is the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. These ideas are explained at length in *Likutey Moharan* II, Lesson 5. For our essay, we will focus on the concept of *Mishpat*.

Mishpat is justice, and as the Rebbe explains, the perversion of *mishpat* is adjudicated by unworthy leaders. Until *mishpat* is rectified immorality will be able to reign. As we have seen in earlier essays, immorality is a thorny point when it comes to conquering the Land and, as we have just seen, *Tikun HaMishpat*, the rectification of Justice, is required to rectify immorality. Reb Noson takes a long, hard look at *Tikun HaMishpat* in order to help us understand the Rebbe's point. We have seen in the Chad Gadya song that only God knows how to judge properly. Of course the cat had no permission to eat the goat, but who asked the dog to intervene? The cat was properly punished, but punishment was administered by an intervening party. There is a Judge. There is Justice. Let the Administrator of Justice administer it on His Own. Here we have the crux of all suffering and judgments visited upon us, while we await Mashiach (who will perfect justice, as in, "He will judge righteously"; *Isaiah* 11:4; see also *Psalms* 72).

The prophet says, "For I [God] was a little angry but they [the Babylonians] added to the suffering" (*Zachariah* 1:15). God decreed that the Jews should endure exile. The Babylonians destroyed the Temple and led the Jews into captivity. Though the Jews were meant to be exiled, no one asked the Babylonians to brutally torture the Jews in the process.

So, the Jews suffered punishment for their sins. The Babylonians were the nation chosen for the task. However, they went beyond the boundaries of acceptable behavior. They chose to torture the Jews as

they were being led into exile. This was the free choice which the Babylonians exercised. They were chosen by God to perform the evil task of destroying the Temple and exiling the Jews. They weren't asked to brutally torture them. Did the Jews deserve it? Maybe. Maybe not. Could they have suffered what God did not decree? No. Certainly not. So the Babylonians had to torture them, they deserved it. But it wasn't decreed. How is this reconciled? And how come the Babylonians had free will to torture them or not, but no free will to destroy the Temple and lead them into exile?!

We'll answer this with a famous Talmudic teaching, "Good things happen through good people, bad things happen through bad people" (*Shabbat* 32a). Thus, if God has a good thing He wishes to bring to the world — e.g., a wonder drug or a successful business to gainfully employ others (not to squeeze them for every last penny) — He will choose a deserving person for the mission. If because of the administration of Justice God has decreed suffering, He will choose an evil person or nation for that task. Witness Germany, Hitler, Stalin, Russia, and our current "favorites," Yasir and the Palestinians. Still, our Sages teach that for 18 years a Heavenly Voice called out for the Emperor of Babylon to destroy the Temple and he was reluctant to do so. Even though he was the epitome of evil, he still had free choice. But when he did go, he went with a vengeance and brutally tortured and terrorized the people of Israel. He went above and beyond the call of duty.

Thus, the Babylonians, as well as the Crusaders, the Spanish Inquisitors, the Germans, and the Palestinians, were chosen for a task, which they did or do well. They were chosen for evil for they were/are evil. But they still have free choice to do the right thing or not. This answers the question about the free will of the "torturing nation." But didn't God decree that suffering? How would that suffering have come about had not those nations "chosen" to do so? But those individuals who execute the torture are evil incarnate and it is their own evil which leads them to perform evil deeds. They do have free choice. The Talmud teaches that Nevuzradan, the Babylonian general assigned the duty of conquering Jerusalem, murdered hundreds of thousands - perhaps millions! - of Jews during the destruction of the First Temple, Yet, he caught himself and realized the horror of his ways and repented (*Gittin* 57b). Thus, each individual has free choice, but the tendency to evil lures almost everyone of them beyond the threshold of human decency to willingly commit dastardly acts.

And what about the suffering nation? Why are the Jews shot at? Why are they being killed, innocent men, women and children? Why does this keep happening without any respite in sight? To put Gideon's plaint in contemporary terms, "If God is with us (i.e., if we do have a claim to the Land) why have all these sorrows befallen us? Where are the miracles which our fathers told us? Did not God deliver us from Egypt (Germany, Poland and the concentration camps). But God has now forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites (i.e., Palestinians)..." (see *Judges* 6:13).

This is a very sticky problem and we are forced to say, much to our regret, that not everything, or everyone, is as innocent as it/he seems. To understand this, we must cite the ARI's teaching which answers many questions (though introducing its own new set of questions which we won't deal with, at least not now).

The following concerns martyrdom and reincarnation and is culled from several teachings of the ARI. The objective of humankind is to perform mitzvot so as to cause unifications Above. However, due to people's sins, all attempts to effect a unification may prove futile. If unifications are not made, harsh decrees become prevalent. Then the only way to effect unification is by martyrdom — giving up one's life for God. One such period was the era in which the Second Temple was destroyed. Because of the

multitude of sins, many holy sparks were trapped in the realms of impurity. Thus, at the time of the destruction of the Holy Temple, the Ten Martyrs (Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues), accepted upon themselves martyrdom for God's sake. By submitting themselves to the Romans, who tortured and murdered them, they submitted their physical bodies in "exchange" for the trapped souls and sparks of holiness, releasing those sparks from their captivity and bringing about a unification Above (see *Etz Chaim* 39:1; this is explained in detail in *Likutey Moharan* I, Lesson 260, and the accompanying notes).

Thus, there are great tzaddikim who can effect purification of our sins, of our fallen sparks, through their ultimate self-sacrifice. But what happens when these tzaddikim are not amongst us? The Rebbe (*Likutey Moharan*, *ibid.*) writes that "occasionally, this necessitates that people die, God forbid; a considerable number of Jewish souls are killed...very many souls are required, God forbid..." for there are times when the decrees are so severe, that only the ascent of a very great number of souls in the sanctification of God's Name can effect a unification Above. This would answer the question about the terrible suffering of the martyrs of the Holocaust and why today, Jewish blood in Israel seems to be spilled as water. Invariably, it is those people who are known as good, decent people, people with great self-sacrifice, who are found among the victims of the dastardly killings of the Palestinians.

But there is more. The ARI also writes that God's Justice is absolute and nobody suffers what they don't deserve. He cites Midrashic teachings about the many Jews who were killed during the destruction of the two Temples. Where did they come from? The ARI answers that they were reincarnations of earlier generations who had sinned terribly and, though they had already passed away, had still not paid for their sins in full. Therefore, they were reincarnated in that era, when God knew He was going to destroy the Temple, to effect forgiveness for their sins. Those whose sins were relatively slight, died a quick death. Those who sinned more suffered more. Those who sinned a lot suffered much more. Each and every person received his just due and was thus cleansed of his sins (see *Shaar HaKavannot* 1, pp.1-2). Interestingly, the ARI explains this idea regarding our topic, the era of the Mashiach, an era of much and terrible suffering. As is understood from the ARI, the terrible suffering acts as a catalyst to effect the rectification of the souls, which actually hastens the coming of the Mashiach. In addition, the Talmud teaches that there are times when because the hand of justice is outstretched, innocent people will also fall into its grasp and suffer, despite the fact that justice was not intended to come their way (see *Chagigah* 4b).

What we have just learned is that each person receives his due according to God's system of justice, which is unfathomable to us. Despite that, there are those who deserve a punishment which might have been deflected or mitigated, but because of others around them, their case was cited and they died, or suffered, as well. But each has his own "balance sheet" written clearly before God, Whose justice is both inscrutable and unfathomable.

To go back a few lines, if the Babylonians tortured some Jews during the exile while others died immediately, it was according to God's Justice that was meted out against that person. The question that arises is that God did not intend the Babylonians to torture us, which they did. So, on the one hand, it was uncalled for. On the other hand, it was deserved for otherwise the person would not have suffered that torture. This is part of the paradox of God's *Mishpat* which we hope to provide at least an insight for in the next essay. (To be continued.)

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