

Vayetze: Remembering Krystallnacht

- Nisson Shulman.

4th of Kislev 518 BCE, Zechariah commands the people not to abolish Tisha B'Av. We need to remember. That is a lesson in Galut, and after Geula as well. It is the message of Jacob's dream where a different kind of angel is needed to protect him in Galut as had protected him in Eretz Yisrael. Why is Jacob terrified? He sees the nations ascending, descending... Hashem's promise reassures him.

VAYETZE: Remembering Krystallnacht
Nisson E. Shulman

Last Shabbat was the anniversary of Krystallnacht, marking the beginning of the holocaust.

There are other anniversaries, this week, - some equally tragic, as just yesterday, November 15, 1939, when the first Nazi mass murders took place of Jews in Warsaw; and there are momentous events making history right at this time; events and changes that will be remembered for centuries, perhaps even longer. Just so we saw before our eyes a decade ago, the fall, the shattering of the greatest idol of our time, the idol of communism with its proven feet of clay.

A long time ago - on the 4th of Kislev corresponding this year to last Monday the 11th of November, Remembrance Day, and to be precise on the 4th of Kislev in the year 518 before the Common Era, 2,509 years ago - a delegation of Jews came to the prophet Zechariah to ask whether the fast day of the 9th of Ab should be abolished, since the second Temple was about to be completed. The prophet answered no. He refused to allow them to forget Tisha BeAv, because tragedy, and tyranny, may not be forgotten. If we forget the sorrow, we may begin to take our joy for granted. And if we forget the tyranny, we may forget how to resist it as well. That is the reason for the importance of the observance of these days today, and in my heart I feel that was the intention of Zechariah the prophet when he refused to allow them to abolish Tisha B'Av, even at a time of supreme national joy. Only when all tyranny and all evil will be abolished from the earth will Tisha BeAv change from sorrow to joy.

The Torah reading today teaches that same lesson. God revealed Himself to Jacob in a dream, at the lowest, saddest time in his life. Jacob was in flight from Esav. In the dark night after his day of wandering, he chose a stone for a pillow and slept. God came to him in his dream, and spoke to him. He promised him that he would bring Jacob safe home.

There is wonderful imagery in this dream. The picture painted of the ladder, set upon the earth, angels of God ascending, descending on it, and the Lord over Him, teaches lessons as important as the promises of God themselves.

Rashi teaches that the angels that kept watch over him in the land of Israel gave way to a new group of angels that would guard him as he started on his exile.

Rashi's lesson is that a different kind of angel is needed for Galut than for Israel. For Galut we

need different powers and talents and different kinds of efforts to meet the challenges of exile. Israel's challenges - such as security, resisting implacable enemies, learning to live together within our own society even though we are comprised of many groups with different ideologies, the challenge of maintaining economic viability despite horrific hardship, the challenge of achieving a life of physical well-being and spiritual greatness – these challenges in Israel are different than the diaspora challenges of assimilation, ignorance, and the spread of Jewish education. So Rashi's lesson is that we need different sorts of angels for Israel and for Galut.

One could expand such a lesson for all humanity, since each age has its particular challenges, its tyrants and its evils, and its particular way to fight those evils.

But the Midrash Tanhuma goes further. The Midrash adds a new dimension to the ladder and the dream; that this ladder represents history; and the angels ascending and descending represent the nations of the world, who ascend in history, become strong, sometimes tyrannical, but then descend, decline, and ultimately fall away from the stage of history. And each ascends to a different height on the ladder, this one fifty rungs, this one a hundred, that one almost disappearing into the sky. And it is not Jacob, alone, the lonely refugee who sees that ladder, but Israel. Jacob sees it with the eye of the father of the house of Israel, the father of our people. And seeing that ladder, says the Midrash, Jacob becomes terrified.

Why is he terrified? Because he sees all those nations, ascending, descending, and he is afraid for himself and his descendants. Will this happen to him? Will there be tyrants ascending who will not descend?

And the message, that God promises to bring Jacob safe home, not only from Lavan's house, but from all the lands of oppression. And however high tyrants ascend they will be brought down. The cycle of national ascent, decline and fall applies to everyone else. But the Jew will live on. As Nahmanides says, *Mavticho havtacha gedola lehodia shehu lo yihiye beyad hamalachim aval yihiye helek adoshem*; "Israel will not be part of the cycle of history, in the charge of the angels of history ascending descending, disappearing, but will always be under the providence of God Himself".

Despite the tragedies, despite the sacrifices, Jacob will live: And will outlive Babylon, Media, Greece, Rome, and all the nations of history. He will outlive the enemies that surround Israel and attack her citizenry today. The Almighty is above that ladder. He will not forsake His people, nor will He break his promise that they will live!

We see this happening clearly in our time, and perhaps, because history is galloping so much faster, we see it as never before. We who have seen the defeat of the Nazi beast, and have witnessed the destruction of the great idol of our time - communism - that had appeared so impregnable, unassailable, constantly gaining in strength and influence, need have no fear of the enemies who strive against Israel today.

If we ask ourselves, why remember? Why worry after they are gone, about what kind of tyranny it was? Why remember the Nazis and the Holocaust? Why remember the heroes of the war? We answer, with the message of Zechariah, which is the message of the ladder; that tyrants ascend,

some higher, some lower. On what does it depend? How high will the tyrant ascend? That will depend on the vigor with which free and decent men oppose that tyranny fight it, and are ready to sacrifice to prevail over it.

That is why we must remember, not only the tragedies, the losses of loved ones, but also the heroes that brought the killing to an end, and enabled the remnant to survive.

God says to Jacob, Al tira avdi Yaakov; Do not be afraid, servant Jacob, Do not fear O Israel. The ladder of history has a cycle, an ascent and descent, for every people on earth, except the Jewish people. We are above history. The Lord will protect us, and one day will bring us all safe home.

But it won't happen without our own efforts. Jacob must vow, make a covenant, declare he will be faithful, serve as God wants him to, Remember the Almighty so that God will remember him, and then God will carry out his promise, and indeed bring us all safe home, across the reaches and seas of history, to the Promised Land, to the Promised goal of Messianic times, Amen.

Submitted by Nisson Shulman