

Remember the days of old/world history, study the generational epochs. (32:7)

A number of years back, during the recession that had a major impact on the financial markets and resulted in devastating blows on the finances of many *bnei Torah*, the question was posed to *Horav Eliyahu Svei, zl*: Why? These were *bnei Torah* who had done well financially and, being exemplary *bnei Torah*, they used the profits of their investments well. They supported *yeshivos* and promoted all forms of Torah *chinuch*. Their money was used to fund *chesed* organizations that helped individuals in need. Thus, it came as a surprise when their fortunes suffered a reversal. Why did Hashem take their bounty when it could have been used wisely to help those in need?

The *Rosh Yeshivah* applied this question to *Reb* Baruch Ber Zeldovich and his brother-in-law, *Reb* Ber Pinnes, who were two of the greatest *baalei tzedakah*, philanthropists, in Russia during the nineteenth century. They supported most of the *yeshivos* and *chesed* organizations in Russia. They never said “no” to any *tzedakah* request. Then *Reb* Baruch went bankrupt, which also took a toll on his brother-in-law, who partnered with him in most of their businesses. At this point, *Reb* Baruch went to *Horav Chaim Soloveitchik, zl*, of Brisk, and asked, “Why?” He had used his G-d-given money properly, using most of it to support and sustain Torah institutions and Torah scholars. Why was it decreed on him from Heaven that he should lose it all?

Rav Chaim replied with a parable. A father sent his son away to a school of higher learning, so that he would complete a specific course of study. After the son successfully completed the course, his father sent him to take a different course in another department. Likewise, when a person completes his mission in life successfully and does so in record time, Hashem gives him another mission to fulfill. “Until now, your mission was to serve Hashem amid wealth. You executed your mission admirably. Now Hashem wants you to serve Him amid abject poverty.”

The *Rosh Yeshivah* observes that while this explanation clarifies somewhat why the individual suffers a reversal of his fortunes, it does not explain why large segments of Jews who did well and acted appropriately should suffer the traumatic effects of a recession. He looks to *Sforno's* commentary to the above *pasuk* (*z'chor yemos olam*) as a foundation upon which we can lend some understanding concerning world events and their impact on our lives.

Sforno explains that by relating the events of the past and the future, the Torah seeks to tell us that initially Hashem intended to attain the goal and purpose of Creation via humankind. When that did not succeed, he elevated and focused only on *Klal Yisrael*. First, it was *Adam HaRishon*, who fared well until he sinned. The generation that followed did not fare much better. Thus, Hashem had to punish the generation of the Flood and deal with the generation of the Dispersal. Hashem then chose the Patriarchs and their progeny to fulfill His goals for the world. The Jewish People survived Pharaoh, were liberated and received the Torah. It appeared that Hashem's plan for a *mamleches Kohanim v'goi kadosh*, a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation, was on target to be realized when

the sin of the Golden Calf occurred. Hashem sought to achieve His goal with the next generation, who would enter *Eretz Yisrael* and glorify His Name. Sadly, Yeshurun waxed fat and rebelled. The nation lost their Temples and required exile to expiate their sins, test their mettle and hopefully then realize Hashem's goal for a *mamleches Kohanim v'goi kadosh*. So, here we are now in midst of *galus*, exile, from which we will hopefully emerge one day soon as the finished product of Hashem's Divine Plan for the world.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* asks why we have been blessed with such material bounty practically unheard of throughout our checkered history. Clearly, when we were in *Eretz Yisrael* and blessed with material excess, it did not spare us from exile. We had it, and we lost it. Why should we have another "shot" at it? He explains that following all of the troubles, travails and persecutions that we have endured, especially after the Second World War and the Holocaust, we should have learned that the bounty with which we have been blessed was for a purpose. Apparently, we did not. Thus, the test continues, and the *galus* which has been our backdrop for two thousand years continues, until that glorious day when we will finally fulfill Hashem's goal and pass the ultimate test with flying colors.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* continues along those lines and explains the benefit of *yesurim*, troubles and afflictions. By understanding how they benefit us, we are better attuned to deal with them and benefit from their expiatory process. He quotes *Horav Avraham Grodzensky, zl*, who cites the dialogue in the *Talmud Sanhedrin* 101a when Rabbi Eliezer lay bedridden. He was visited by his students, of which Rabbi Akiva was primary. Rabbi Eliezer said that Hashem was angry with him, so He had caused him to suffer. His students began to weep for him, while Rabbi Akiva smiled. They asked Rabbi Akiva why his reaction to their *Rebbe's* pain was mirthful. He countered by asking why their response was mournful. They said, "How can we not weep when the *Sefer Torah* (their revered *Rebbe*, who embodied Torah at its apex) is in such pain. Rabbi Akiva countered, "This is why I smile. When I see that *Rebbe's* wine does not sour, his flax does not become ruined, his oil does not spoil, his honey does not decompose, I have reason to fear that he has received his future reward in this world. Now, when I see him suffering, I know that he has a glorious reward waiting for him in the World-to-Come."

We see from here that when everything goes our way, when material bounty is ours and excess becomes our accepted way of life, we have to think twice: Is Hashem giving it all to me now, in this temporary world, in which nothing endures? Life should not be about struggle, but a life without struggle makes one wonder. No one is perfect. We all make mistakes. No one acts maliciously with intent to rebel. We just forget that we are here for a purpose. *Yesurim* are Hashem's manner of reminding us.

Life has its (to the mortal eye) negative moments, with some of us experiencing more than others. Why one person, one family, seems to endure a greater portion of adversity goes beyond our level of comprehension. With our limited vision and awareness, some areas of the spiritual dimension elude us. How one deals with, how one addresses the varied moments of travail and adversity to

which he is subjected, however, makes a world of difference. *Horav Shimshon Pincus, zl*, offers a powerful, inspiring analogy that should help us to deal with these circumstances, if and when they occur.

A talented young child was being instructed in art. Under his mentor's tutelage, the child had painted an impressive landscape. It had taken him some time, but the boy was a perfectionist who demanded that his painting be flawless. As he was admiring his finished work, he accidentally knocked over a bottle of paint and a large drop of paint landed squarely in the middle of his landscape. The boy was devastated. All of that work was for nothing. He could not bear to look at what had once been his masterpiece.

When his teacher saw how crushed he was, he told him to sit down, and said, "Let us look at this together and see if we cannot ameliorate the problem. We have before us a perfect portrait of a landscape, and, right in the middle, we have the intrusion of a paint spot. All you have to do is paint a head and a beak with eyes, add wings and feet, and you now have a beautiful bird admiring the magnificent landscape." A powerful analogy that teaches us an important lesson: With calm and positive thinking it is possible to transform disaster into opportunity.

I conclude with an inspiring story. In his short life, Moishele had experienced more trauma than most people experience in a lifetime. His father had been killed in an automobile accident when Moishele was just a toddler, and his mother became ill two years ago. She fought valiantly, and Moishele prayed with all his heart that she should be cured, but it was not meant to be. As he walked back from his mother's funeral, accompanied by his *rebbe*, the dam that had heretofore kept his emotions in check burst, and Moishele broke down. His *rebbe* also wept, because he understood what this young boy was now up against. He prayed that he would have the right words to say that would provide some sort of comfort to him.

"Do you see that construction site across the street? A group of contractors purchased that five-story building. They are knocking it down and are planning to build a twenty-story apartment complex in its place. If an unknowing person would walk by and see them knocking down a perfectly fine building, he would surely wonder why they were doing this. The answer is simple: They want to build a larger building. If this is the case, why not simply add fifteen stories to the original building? The answer is: The taller the building, the deeper and stronger must be its foundation.

"Likewise with you, Moishele. Hashem has put you under incredible pressure, as you have lost both your parents and theoretically are alone in the world. (He did have elderly, loving grandparents.) Hashem obviously is preparing your foundation for extraordinary greatness. He is putting you through very difficult travail in order to temper and strengthen your faith in Him."

"Why me? Why does He not choose someone else for this mission?"

“That is a good question, Moishele. A similar question can be asked concerning why the contractors must knock down this building. Why can they not simply go to the outskirts of the city and choose an empty lot and build there? The answer is simple: This is the center of town, the *mercaz*, where everything happens. People want to live here, not on the outskirts. To build here makes the most sense and will incur the greatest profit. Likewise, Hashem sees something special in you, Moishele. This is why He is preparing your spiritual foundation to achieve greatness.” Hashem has a plan. It is neither for us to understand, nor is it for us to conclude. We ask no questions, because the chances are we will probably not grasp the answers.