

Shlach 5781

BS"D Parashat Shelach 5781

Rabbi Nachman Kahana

Living the Miracle

In the wake of the tragic episode of the Miraglim (spies), who roused the nation to mutiny against Eretz Yisrael and the leadership of Moshe and Aharon, there arose a group of people who declared their readiness to go up to the land and liberate it for the Jewish Nation.

Moshe attempted to dissuade them from this futile act since all matters dealing with Eretz Yisrael are miraculous in their nature, and what they wanted could not succeed because HaShem would not be aiding them. The group known as the 'ma'a'peelim' (those who rise up in strength) were steadfast in their intention to come up to the land, and tragically they were all killed by the Canaanites and Amalekites.

The story could have ended here on a tragic note except for the fact that there is a little-known continuation not recorded in the Chumash which permits us to close this episode with the words "and they lived happily ever after".

The Gemara in Pesachim tells us of the great Tana, Rabbi Yehuda ben Betera, who lived in the city of Netzivim near the Euphrates River. A gentile once informed him that on Pesach he had gone up to Yerushalayim dressed as a Jew and brought the korban Pesach, which the kohanim had unwittingly offered up; and the gentile added that it was his intention to do so every year.

Yehuda ben Betera, who did not partake in the mitzva of korban

Pesach, laid a trap for the perpetrator. Before the next Pesach the rabbi asked the gentile if he had received a piece of the “alya” from his korban (the fatty tail of the sheep), to which the gentile replied in the negative. R. Yehuda then said, “If you didn’t get the alya you missed the tastiest part of the Pascal lamb’.

The gentile went up to Yerushalayim with his lamb and requested the officiating kohen to give him a piece of the alya. The kohen looked incredulously at him because every school child knew that the alya was burned on the altar. The man was taken into custody and his true identity became known. The man had perpetrated a grave sin by posing as a Jew and causing a defiled animal to be burned on the altar. He was summarily killed.

The rabbis of the Sanhedrin then wrote to R. Yehuda ben Betera, “Although your place is in Netzivim in Bavel, your net is spread over all of Eretz Yisrael”. Tosafot asks why did R. Yehuda ben Betera not himself go to Yerushalayim to keep the mitzva of aliya le’regel and the korban Pesach? To which they explain that these mitzvot are meant only for people whose ancestors received a landholding in Eretz Yisrael when arriving here with Yehoshua bin Nun.

This answer of Tosafot is seemingly inappropriate because every Jew has a piece of Eretz Yisrael, which he inherited from his ancestors who entered the land with Yehoshua bin Nun. And even though he may not know where his land is, the fact is that he legally owns that land. In that case how does Tosafot say that R. Yehuda ben Betera did not have land in Eretz Yisrael?

I suggest: The Gemara in the last chapter of the tractate Sanhedrin records a discussion centering around the great miracle of the Dry Bones. The prophet Yechezkel was told by HaShem to go out to a certain valley which was filled with countless numbers of dry bones. Yechezkel did so and was then

told by HaShem to prophesy that these bones shall again live. The problem posed in the yeshiva was, did these bones which came alive as people return to their graves after the prophecy or did they continue to live?

The Gemara relates that our own R. Yehuda ben Betera stood up and displayed a pair of tefillin saying, "My grandfather was one of the living of the dry bones, and the proof of their continuing existence are my grandfather's tefillin which he wore for many years until his death."

The Gemara in Sanhedrin relates that the "dry bones" were those of the tribe of Efrayim, who were the "ma'a'peelim" we spoke about previously who were murdered while attempting to conquer the land, and since they died before entering the land with Yehoshua bin Nun they did not receive a portion of it. Hence, R. Yehuda ben Betera being a descendant of them did not receive a portion of the land and was exempt from going up to Yerushalayim for the korban Pesach.

And as said above, the story of the ma'a'peelim has a happy ending for they lived again.

The episode of the dry bones is historically true as brought down in the book of Yechezkel. But that was a long time ago – approximately 2500 years ago; however, we in our generation have also witnessed a miracle of dry bones. One who is acquainted with the history of our people after the Shoah knows that the Jewish nation could have been identified by the term "dry bones". The designation of the nation as God's Chosen People was put into question by the mass murder of one third of our people, and the life force of Torah in Eastern Europe was no longer. In its stead very dead bones spread out over the face of the globe.

And then came the prophecy as cited in Yechezkel 37:

"Thus says the Lord God unto these bones, behold I will cause breath to enter into you and you shall live. And I shall lay

sinews upon you and will put flesh upon you and cover you with skin and put breath into you... and behold a great commotion and the bones came together bone to its bone. Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds oh breath and breathe upon these slain that they may live. Then He said to me "Son of man these bones are the whole house of Israel..."

In Eretz Yisrael, the dry bones of the Jewish nation came together – bone to its bone – Jew to Jew- a Jew from Germany embracing a Jew from Yemen, a Jew from Morocco holding the hand of a Jew from Poland. And HaShem caused them to live again in Eretz Yisrael where we shall live forever as did the bones of the vision of Yechezkel.

When Rabbi Yehuda ben Betera stood up to prove that his ancestors lived, he brought out a pair of tefillin. Today, this too is the living proof of our being God's Chosen People. These dry bones came together to create here in Eretz Yisrael the greatest Torah "empire" since the early days of the Tannaim.

In the 73 years of Medinat Yisrael, the Torah world grew from a handful of people to tens of thousands whose sole occupation is the study of Torah; with hundreds of thousands of people – men and women – studying in shi'urim in the thousands of batei kneset all over the country.

We here in Eretz Yisrael think that we are witnessing a great miracle, this is not entirely accurate – we are not witnessing a miracle – we are the miracle.

Larger than Life

The epithet "larger than life" is attached to people whose influence extends farther after their demise than it did in their lifetime.

In keeping with this, there is a group of illustrious rabbis,

far more eminent in Torah scholarship and closeness to the Almighty than even the great Rabbi Akiva and the five Tannaic rabbis to whom he granted semicha: R. Meir, R. Yehuda, R. Yosi, R. Shimon and R. Elazar ben Shamo'a (Yevamot 62b).

The influence of this group grows stronger as time passes, so they certainly deserve the appellation "larger than life." But don't try to find their names in the various name books that expectant parents search through, because these names are a bit old fashioned: Shamua, Shafat, Yigal, Palti, Di'el, Gadi, Amiel, Stur, Nachbi and Ge'u'el. Sound familiar? If not, then listen closely to the Torah reading of Shlach – they are the names of the ten miraglim (scouts) sent by Moshe to report on the land. They returned with a report which appears as variations on a theme in contemporary Torah journals, magazines, speeches, etc. The message is: Do not go to Eretz Yisrael.

These ten rabbis, each one a leader of his tribe, never imagined that their teachings would be alive and well after 3300 years of Jewish history.

The miraglim loved the desert. The vegetation, the ever-shifting sand dunes in a variety of colors and formations, the free hand-outs of meat and manna, and above all they loved the status of "tribal head" afforded them by virtue of being a nomadic people.

They taught us to love the galut, and we took their teachings to heart to the extent that they became an obsession. We love the mountain flora and fauna of the Catskills, the mighty George Washington and Verrazano Bridges, the green playing field which fills one's eyes when stepping out from the underpass on the way to the box seats. On Shabbat, the Jews of Paris love to strut down the Champs Elysees as much as British Jews love to saunter along the streets of Golders Green; not to mention the Jews of Antwerp, Berlin, and Zurich.

The limited liability operation which the miraglim established in the faraway desert has grown to be a multi-national conglomerate as befits this globalization era.

But we live in an ever-changing, unpredictable world. We have a spin on the first mitzva in the Torah: "So a man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife to become as one flesh", whereby we leave 'our father' – the Torah, and 'mother' – Eretz Yisrael, and cling to our shiksa lands of the galut to become one with her.

One of the lands which we love so much is Ukraine, the land which brought us Chmielnicki in the 17th century, Babi Yar and John Demjanjuk (Ivan the Terrible, who was allowed to settle in Cleveland, OH where he became a United Auto Worker mechanic for Ford) in the 20th century, and in between, countless ferocious acts of murder and terror against our people.

As an example of what I mean by our obsessive love for the galut, take the classy, glossy magazine – impressive and quite expensive – which found its way (I don't know how) to my desk. The color pictures just scream out to be framed and hung in the living room near the ornate chandelier and Shabbat candelabra.

It opens with a scene at an airport crowded with frum Jews of all kinds. There is a picture of happily singing people in one of the many planes flying the faithful "on the wings of eagles" to the "gateway to heaven." The centerfold is an impressive, wide angle-shot of a shul with thousands of Jews deeply engrossed in the Rosh Hashana prayers, with a subscript "photographed by a gentile".

There are kitchen scenes where the preparation of the yom tov food for so many hungry mouths is in process, as well as an emotional scene of a seemingly never-ending crowd of sinners encircling a huge lake quickly being filled up with their dispatched sins in keeping with the custom of tashlich.

It was published by the World Center for Bratslav and describes the Jewish invasion of the beach heads of Ukraine on Rosh Hashana.

I have a soft spot in my heart for the Bratslaver, not only because the Rebbe's name is Nachman ben Feiga and mine is Nachman and my wife is Feiga, but because my connection with Rav Nachman of Uman began long before I met my wife. The greatness of the Rebbe comes through in his illustrious work Lekutay Maharan and as a great storyteller, which are the avenues for his profound ideas to be understood by even the uninitiated, in addition to other interesting customs.

I feel profound pity for this great man when I see what has been done in his name. The Rebbe had a great love for Eretz Yisrael. He said, "Wherever I go, I am going to Eretz Yisrael," and in his name thousands of well-meaning people from many countries travel to Ukraine rather than to Eretz Yisrael.

If I wanted to be brutally frank, I would bring up the matter of the many millions of dollars which change hands and eventually find their way into the coffers of the Ukrainian treasury and into some private pockets – but I don't want to open that eerie door.

Now it's meaningless to be critical without suggesting corrective alternatives. Therefore, I wish to make the following promise. According to the magazine, the basis for this (strange) conduct of many well-meaning people is an unrecorded promise made by Harav Nachman ben Feiga in the presence of two disciples and transmitted from person to person "to do an eternal favor for anyone visiting the gravesite in Uman and reciting the ten designated Psalms."

This Nachman, the husband of Feiga, promises that anyone coming to Yerushalayim on Rosh Hashana, or any day in the year for that matter, will receive from me (and my fellow Kohanim)

a Kohanic blessing which was promised by HaShem before millions of Jews at Mount Sinai to “do an eternal favor” for all those who receive the blessing.

The transfer of many thousands of Jews from the “happening” in Ukraine to Yerushalayim would certainly be a move towards sanity and an appropriate answer to the call of the miraglim and their contemporary dedicated disciples to love and cling to the Galut.

In the name of fairness, the Bratslaver group does not have a monopoly on manipulating simple Jewish minds to act irrationally. The teachings of the miraglim have sunk deep into Jewish consciousness among many other sects and groups who find comfort in the galut. And it is because of their aloofness and elitism which prevent their accepting responsibility beyond the four amot of their peers, that we have today in Eretz Yisrael political leaders who act like miraglim.

I am perfectly aware that what I write cannot counter the irresistible force of the ten miraglim to love the galut. However, if my words produce an even fleeting uncomfortable feeling, I will have done much.

Looking Back

This coming Sunday, the 26th of Sivan, my wife and I will celebrate 59 years since HaShem granted us the privilege to come up to the land that even Moshe Rabbeinu did not merit.

After experiencing so much in those years, I am in the process of writing an autobiography from the time we descended from the “wings of eagles” and kneeled to kiss the holy ground of Eretz Yisrael.

The “hero” of the book is not the author, which by definition is an autobiography, but rather life in Eretz Yisrael as seen

through my eyes.

The following is an excerpt which is compatible with the parasha of the miraglim.

“AND SHE (the wife of lot) LOOKED BACK AND WAS TURNED INTO A PILLAR OF SALT” (Bereishiet 19:26)

On the 26th of Sivan, in the year five thousand seven hundred and twenty two (the twenty fourth year of my life), my wife and I left two thousand years of exile to return home to Eretz Yisrael.

Feiga was already in the car, waiting with my parents.

As I descended the stairs of my parents' apartment in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, New York to begin the greatest odyssey of my life, I looked back at what had been my home for over twenty years.

The home of HaRav Yechezkel Shraga and Sara Chana Kahana was not an ordinary one. It was the home of the community Rabbi, where matters big and small were dealt with and where I was privileged to see the living Torah applied to communal and personal affairs – marriage, divorce, conversion, financial and social disputes, etc.

“How many challenges will we experience?”, I asked myself. “How many dangers and wars will we endure before I see this special home again?” I turned slowly away to enter the car.

I began driving. My jacket! I left it on the porch. Four left turns and in less than two minutes, I was again standing in front of the house.

As I ran up the stairs, I heard a voice. It was not from an external source, but from deep within me: “Nachman, if you long so much for your galut home, go back. Eretz Yisrael will get along fine without you. A Jew returning to Eretz Yisrael does so with pride and infinite gratitude to HaShem – he does

not look back".

I ran down the stairs without looking back.

To this day, we have never looked back."

JLMM Jewish Lives Matter More

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

Copyright © 5781/2021 Nachman Kahana