

Shvi'i Shel Pesach - The Suez Canal Deal

Category: Holidays, Pesach

What can we learn from the recent Suez crisis?

The last ten days have been very dramatic on the Suez Canal. A massive ship blocked the entire width of the canal and prevented 365 ships from passing through. Ultimately, the ship was freed from its position, but the full impact of the event has yet to be felt around the world.

The name "Suez Canal" is almost synonymous with crisis. In 1973, battles were taking place over the Suez Canal during the Yom Kippur War. At the time, the canal was the unofficial border between Egypt and Israel. But in truth, the Suez Canal has been a place of controversy since its creation.

In 1859, the governments of Egypt and France decided to dig the canal which would connect the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea. In other words, it would connect Asia and Europe. The digging was done by a French company and the project was completed ten years later, in 1869. According to various estimations, some million and a half Egyptian workers were employed in the project, and around one hundred and twenty five thousand died during the work.

Six years after digging the canal, the ruler of Egypt fell into significant debt, and he offered to sell Egypt's share of the canal to the British government in exchange for cash.

The Prime Minister of Great Britain at the time was Benjamin Disraeli. Disraeli was born a Jew; his father, Eizik Disraeli, was a Sephardic Jew who had immigrated from Italy to England. However, Eizik had gotten into a fight with the local synagogue after they didn't want to give his son an Aliya, and as an act of revenge, he had converted all of his sons to Christianity (but not himself.) Benjamin, grew up and was very successful, ultimately becoming the Prime Minister of Great Britain.

At times, he would be accused of being a Jew, but he was never ashamed of his heritage. To the contrary, he took pride in it. He was once attacked in the British

parliament for being a Jew by Daniel O’Connell, a nationalist representative. He responded, “Yes, I am a Jew, and while the ancestors of the right honorable gentleman were brutal savages in an unknown island, mine were priests in the temple of Solomon.”

On a different occasion, when his main political opponent mentioned his Jewish ancestry, he responded, “While your ancestors raised pigs, my ancestors wrote the Bible.” He was also very supportive of Jews and he fought for their rights.

Disraeli was the Prime Minister who received the offer from Egypt to purchase their share of the Suez Canal. He knew of the strategic importance of the canal, so he jumped at the opportunity. The sum Egypt requested was the equivalent of a modern-day half-a-billion dollars.

The offer came to Disraeli on a Saturday, and Egypt wanted the money immediately. The problem was that the Bank of England was closed for the weekend, and moreover, the parliament wasn’t in session to approve of the loan. Instead, Disraeli sent his deputy to Baron Rothschild to obtain the money. “Who needs the money?” Rothschild asked. “His Majesty’s government,” the deputy responded. Rothschild didn’t ask any more questions; he didn’t even request guarantors. As soon as Shabbos ended, he gave him the entire sum (which he later received back from the government).

Essentially, by Divine Providence, it was ultimately two Jews took the control of the Suez Canal from the Egyptians. Obviously, this move did not make the Egyptian people proud.

In 1956, after close to one hundred years of French and English control over the Canal, President Nasser of Egypt decided to nationalize it by taking total control. He also forbade Israeli ships from crossing through it. This brought France and England to make a secret deal with Israel to attack Egypt — each for their own interests. According to the plan, Israel would attack Egypt for blocking Israeli shipping, and when they would reach the Suez Canal, England and France would ‘intervene’ in the war, and then make peace, meanwhile taking control of their assets.

Ultimately, the plan didn’t work out. The United States intervened and forced all three countries to retreat. For many years, Israel fought for the right to pass through the Suez Canal, and they were only successful in 1979.

G-d's Form of Healing

Remarkably, the entire recent episode in the Suez took place on Passover, when we commemorate our Exodus from Egypt. Today, on the seventh day of Passover, we read about the event that took place exactly 3333 years ago — long before anyone dreamed of the Suez Canal — when the People of Israel experienced a miracle in the very same place: the splitting of the sea.

We all know the story, more or less. But I want to share something interesting with you: At the end of today's Torah reading, the Torah relates that the Jewish people wandered for three days after the splitting of the sea, and they couldn't find water. Then, they reached a place called "Marah," a body of bitter water, and they complained to Moses that they didn't have water to drink. Then, G-d commanded Moses to put a stick into the water, and the water became sweet.

Interestingly, there is an area in the middle of the Suez Canal called the Bitter Lakes, a man made body of water. This is not the original Marah, but Marah was definitely in that area, because that is where the People of Israel wandered during that period.

After the people drank from the sweet water, G-d gave them several Mitzvos as preparation for the Giving of the Torah. They received the Mitzvah of Shabbat, and honoring one's parents. They received these Mitzvos as a preparation for Mount Sinai, and then G-d gave them a wonderful promise: "If you listen to the voice of G-d...I will not give you all the illnesses I brought upon the Egyptians, because I am G-d, your Healer."

The Rebbe explained that this is not a form of healing which comes after illness. As the verse states clearly, "I will not give you" those illnesses altogether, "because I am G-d your Healer." A G-dly healing, by definition, means that you do not fall ill in the first place. (Toras Menachem 5744 vol. III pg. 1589).

In essence, G-d in this passage invented the concept preventive medicine. As Rashi explains there, "It is like a doctor who says, 'Don't eat foods which lead to sickness.'" G-d too, tells us to follow Torah and Mitzvos in order to avoid all sicknesses, physical and spiritual.

When a person learns to overpower his personal inclinations and follow the will of

G-d, it is easier for him to live a physically healthier lifestyle. When the doctor gives him a preventive medicine regiment; tells him to stop smoking, or eat healthy or exercise more often, it is easier for him to follow those instructions, and then G-d helps him remain healthy from the outset, "because I am G-d your Healer."