

When G-d Fights On Our Behalf

Category: Metzora, Vayikra

Throughout Jewish history, there were instances where G-d did all the fighting on our behalf. This is especially true of the Pesach season.

The Attack

Will Israel respond or not?

Since the miracles of last Saturday night, the world has been holding its breath to see whether Israel will respond to the hundreds of missiles and attack drones sent by Iran, or respect America's wish to 'de-escalate.'

This situation is reminiscent of the Gulf War in 1991 when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. America created a coalition of thirty four nations against Iraq, and the UN gave Saddam Hussein an ultimatum—if they wouldn't leave Kuwait, one million soldiers would invade. In response, Saddam Hussein warned that if he is invaded, he would attack Israel with scud missiles. He basically held Israel hostage for a war which it had nothing to do with.

Saddam Hussein had biological weapons he used in his war against Iran, and many feared he might use them against Israel. There was incredible anxiety in Israel and throughout the Jewish world, and many Jews left the country.

However, the Rebbe declared that Israel was the safest place to be. When asked if it was dangerous to travel to Israel, the Rebbe reassured people that there was nothing to worry about. He made these statements publicly, and they were widely covered by the media worldwide.

When the war broke out and Iraq launched Scud missiles at Israel, the Rebbe reiterated his message of reassurance, saying there was no need to worry and that there would be miracles—and indeed, 39 missiles hit Israel, but they only caused some property damage and no loss of life.

During the 45 days when missiles were falling, there was a heated debate in Israel about whether to respond to the attacks or refrain from doing so. The US

urged Israel to refrain from responding to avoid fracturing the coalition they had formed against Iraq, which included countries hostile to Israel.

Within the Israeli government, there was also a fierce debate on the issue. The Defense Minister believed they should respond, while others argued that they should let the Americans handle it. Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir said at the time that he was torn between his heart and mind. “The heart says they’re firing missiles at us, and we remain silent? But the mind says we should let the Americans do the job.” In reality, Israel did not intervene in the war, and no Israeli soldier was harmed (Birega Ha’emet Chapter 13).

After the war, the Rebbe spoke about the uniqueness of the event—in which the Jewish people were attacked, but instead of needing to defend themselves, the defense was carried out by others.

As it turns out, this is a recurring theme throughout Jewish history—and it always has to do with Passover.

Hezekiah’s Water Tunnel

Many of you who have visited Israel have explored Hezekiah’s Tunnel, a tunnel which diverts water from the Gihon Spring beneath the homes of Jerusalem. Today, you could walk through portions of the tunnel, deep underground in ankle or even knee-deep water. It’s definitely a memorable experience. King Hezekiah built this tunnel around 2,700 years ago during his reign over Judah. But why?

During his rule, the Assyrian Empire conquered the Kingdom of Israel, also known as the Ten Tribes’ Kingdom to the north of Judah. Then, in 701 BCE, King Sennacherib of Assyria set out on a military campaign that was ultimately intended to conquer Judah. To prepare Jerusalem for the expected siege, Hezekiah built the tunnel, so that water could be brought into the fortified city.

In the end, Sennacherib arrived with an army of 185,000 soldiers and reached Jerusalem on the eve of Passover. Sennacherib ordered his army to build a tall tower from which he could overlook Jerusalem. He was shocked to discover how small the city was. “Why did I exert all my forces for this? Tomorrow, every soldier will bring a single brick from the city wall, and we will enter and leave nothing behind.”

The commander-in-chief of Sennacherib's army was a Jewish apostate named Ravshakeh. He stood above the wall of Jerusalem and conducted psychological warfare; he spoke in Hebrew, addressing the besieged Jews, saying that they should surrender to Sennacherib, as they had no chance against the mighty Assyrian army.

Within Jerusalem, there was also a debate. Most of the Sanhedrin, led by High Priest Shevna, believed they should surrender to the enemy. However, Hezekiah received guidance from the prophet Isaiah not to surrender to the Assyrians under any circumstances. When Hezekiah asked the prophet about the majority's opinion, Isaiah replied, "Against G-d's will, there is no majority. The votes of the wicked are not counted" (Sanhedrin 26a).

Needless to say, the tension in Jerusalem reached a peak that night.

Sennacherib decided to let his army rest and postponed the attack on Jerusalem to the next day, the first day of Passover. But that night, something changed in Ravshakeh. He heard the Jews saying Hallel at their Seder, and suddenly had a bad feeling about the attack. He advised Sennacherib to leave the city, "Passover night is a night of miracles for the Jewish people," he said. But Sennacherib did not heed his advice.

Meanwhile, in Jerusalem, Hezekiah told the people of Jerusalem to go home and prepare the Seder meal according to tradition; "G-d will save us." Hezekiah himself was sick at the time; he turned to G-d and said, "Master of the universe, I have neither the strength to kill nor to chase Sennacherib and his army... I am lying in bed—You do the rest."

The result was a total miracle; that night, an angel came and killed most of Sennacherib's soldiers, and the rest fled, saving Jerusalem.

So you see, it's already happened in Jewish history during the Pesach season—that the Jewish people have been saved from a superpower's army without being involved in the war at all. (Isaiah 36-37, Otzar Aggadot Nach vol. 2 pg. 245).

The Great Shabbat

This, actually, is the very theme of this Shabbat.

This Shabbat is called “Shabbat Hagadol” (the Great Shabbat). The Rebbe once pointed out (Metzora 5736) that this designation is peculiar. Every special Shabbat on the Jewish calendar has a unique name because something specific is done or observed on that Shabbat. For example, “Shabbat Shirah” is marked by the Torah reading of the “Song of the Sea.” “Shabbat Chazon” refers to the Haftarah of “Isaiah’s Vision.” “Shabbat Shuva” is a reference to the Haftarah that begins with the words “Shuva Yisrael,” and so on. The only Shabbat with a unique name with no associated observance is “Shabbat Hagadol.”

Why is it called “Shabbat Hagadol”? The Alter Rebbe explains in Shulchan Aruch that it is because of the miracle that occurred on that Shabbat, before the Exodus from Egypt.

On the first of Nissan, G-d told Moses that on the tenth of the month, the Jews should take a lamb (which was the idol of Egypt) into their homes, and on the fourteenth, slaughter it and make the Passover offering—because on that night, G-d would pass through Egypt and kill all the firstborn.

Well, when the Jews began bringing lambs into their homes, the Egyptians took notice and asked them what it was for, and they responded that in four days, G-d would strike the firstborn of Egypt and the Jews would leave Egypt. Needless to say, the firstborns of Egypt were very worried; the nine plagues that Egypt endured made them realize that Moses was credible. If he said something, it would happen.

They raced to confront Pharaoh and demanded that he release the Jews immediately. Pharaoh was vehemently opposed, so the firstborns began to revolt. Pharaoh sent the Egyptian army to suppress the rebellion, and a fierce battle ensued between the firstborns of Egypt and the Egyptian army. Incredibly, the firstborns were fighting for the liberation of the Jews from Egypt.

All this occurred on the Shabbat before the Exodus. Because of this miracle—where Egyptians fought on behalf of the Jews—this Shabbat is called “Shabbat Hagadol.”

G-d Will Fight For You

I have one final story.

On the final day of Passover, we mark the splitting of the sea. The Torah describes how the Jewish people were standing at the foot of the water, with the Egyptians closing in on them. Some Jews came to Moses and pressured him to wage war against the Egyptians, but he replied that it was not necessary. “Stand and watch G-d’s salvation... G-d will fight for you, and you will remain silent” (Beshalach 14:14).

With G-d’s help, this Passover will likewise be one of miracles. G-d will fight for us, and we will sit back and watch.