

Talking About Mitzvos

*During wartime, should we be publicly criticizing our own?
This week's Haftorah has an opinion.*

The Public Comparison

Good Shabbos!

The State of Israel recently marked Yom HaShoah, International Holocaust Memorial Day.

I remember how at one such commemoration, several years ago, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Deputy Chief of Staff said that he had lately been noticing a very disturbing trend in Israeli society—budding signs of behavior that reminded him of the behavior of the Nazis in Germany over 70 years ago. He referred to the way that some Israeli soldiers treated Palestinian terrorists inappropriately and added that this behavior had to be rooted out.

The next day, the lead story across the world media's Yom Hashoah reports was the comments made by the Deputy Chief of Staff. Jew-haters in particular, who long argued that Israel was subjecting the Palestinians to Nazi tactics, thrilled over his words like long-lost treasure—look! Even Israel's Deputy Chief of Staff admits that Israel has a problem! And he found it right to talk about it publicly! The Prime Minister, Knesset members, rabbis and public figures sharply condemned his comments.

So first of all, if this high-ranking officer had studied even a bit

of history about the Nazi era, he would have never made such a deviant comparison.

But even if we grant that his words contained a kernel of truth, there's still something that you have to take into consideration before you talk about it in public. And that brings us to this week's Torah portion—or at least this week's Haftarah.

The Idol Worship in Egypt

This week's Haftarah comes to us from the Book of Yechezkel, Chap. 20. The Haftarah begins with the second verse of that chapter. But to understand the reading's context, and its connection with our Torah portion, you have to know what's written in the first verse.

The Prophet Yechezkel was the Prophet of the Diaspora. Over a decade before the Destruction of the Beis Hamikdash, he had left the Holy Land for exile in Bavel—along with an elite group of Jerusalem residents. And then, in the seventh year of his exile, he writes that as he sat on the banks of the Kvar River “on the 10th day of the 5th month” (which would have been the day after Tisha B'Av), “people from the elders of Israel came to inquire of G-d, and they sat before me.”

Who were these “elders of Israel”? In Seder Olam, we are told that they were none other than Chananya, Mishael and Azarya—the famous three Jews who were thrown into the “Fiery Furnace” because they refused to bow to an idol, and miraculously emerged alive. It was they who came to Yechezkel, asking him to pray to G-d that the First Temple not be destroyed.

So our Haftarah begins with G-d's response to the elders via the mouth of Yechezkel.

Through His Prophet Yechezkel, G-d replies that the Jewish Nation is not behaving properly— adding that it's nothing new that they are acting as such. Rather, their forefathers also acted as such.

But then the Prophet gives us news we've never before heard. The Prophet (Yechezkel 20:7-8) goes on to relate that G-d had approached the Jewish Nation while they were yet in Egypt: "And I said to them... pollute not yourselves with the idols of Egypt... But they rebelled against Me and would not consent to hearken to Me... neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt." Rashi says, "Aaron proclaimed this prophecy to them before G-d revealed Himself to Moses in the thorn bush."

Even while in Egypt, G-d commands the Jewish Nation via Aharon to stop worshipping idols—but they refused. And as a result of that, G-d wanted "to culminate My wrath upon them within the land of Egypt." And the reason G-d did not do so was that He did not want Egypt to say that He destroyed them in Egypt because He was not able to take them out of Egypt.

Now that's news! You never heard such a story told anywhere like this—that even while they were still in Egypt, Aharon is sent to the Jewish Nation to try to convince them to stop worshipping Egyptian idol worship, and the Jewish Nation doesn't listen to G-d to the extent that He wants to eradicate them; and only due to the concern that the Egyptians will interpret it as a weakness on the part of G-d, He did not actually proceed and do it. This

story is not told in the Book of Shmos, the Book of Devarim, the Book of Yehoshua or in any book of the Torah— making it “classified information.”

It was specifically the Prophet Yechezkel, who lived almost 900 years after the Exodus from Egypt, who reveals this story to us. Now why was it not known? Rashi says something very interesting: “For the nearly 900 years between the Jews in Egypt and Yechezkel, His love hovered over them—and therefore, ‘Love covers all sins’ (Mishlei 10:12).”

In other words, for about 900 years, G-d buried this story. Why? Because He loves the Jewish Nation. This teaches us that someone who loves his nation will never speak ill of them, ever—even if it’s true. And the analogy doesn’t compare whatsoever to G-d’s actual love for the Jewish Nation.

What Changed?

But this all raises a question: If G-d hid this story for close to 900 years, what suddenly happened? What changed?

There is a story in the Torah, at the end Shlach, in which we are told that when the Jewish Nation lived in the desert, “They found a man collecting wood on the Shabbos day” (Bamidbar 15:32). Even in the desert, right at the beginning of our history as the nation of Torah, there was a Jew who was already violating the Shabbos. The Torah doesn’t tell us who he was—it only says, “They found a *man*.” It’s an anonymous story.

But the Talmud (Tractate Shabbos 96b) discusses the question of who this anonymous wood gatherer was—and the famous

sage Rabbi Akiva opines, “The wood-gatherer was Tzelafchad,” and Rabbi Akiva brings proofs from the verses that it was Tzelafchad indeed.

So the Talmud tells us that Rabbi Yehudah Ben Beseira, another sage, said to him, “Akiva—the Torah concealed it, and you reveal it!” In other words, the Torah purposely did *not* tell us who the wood-gatherer was—but you come along and specifically try to discover who the man was?! And even though Rabbi Yehudah Ben Beseira’s complaint was correct, the Talmud still publicized who the wood-gatherer was. So we come back to the same question: For 1,500 years, when Jews studied this story, they didn’t know who the wood-gatherer was—and so what suddenly changed that now it’s “cleared for publication”?

A similar question was posed by the Rebbe regarding the opening of Devarim. The Book of Devarim is essentially one long speech given by Moshe Rabbeinu that he delivered five weeks before he passed away. Moshe Rabbeinu summarizes all 40 years in the desert, reviewing the Giving of the Torah, the Sin of the Golden Calf, the Sin of the Spies and so on.

But the beginning of the speech is a bit strange.

It begins with the words, “These are the Devarim (words) which Moshe spoke to all Israel on that side of the Jordan in the desert, in the plain opposite the Red Sea, between Paran and Tofel and Lavan and Hazeros and Di Zahav.” So what we have here is a record of places, without any obvious reason for their mention—what is “in the desert, “in the plain” and so on supposed to be telling us? Why are these places suddenly

mentioned?

Essentially, Moshe wanted to remind them of their sins, but he didn't want to embarrass them— so he only mentioned the names of the places... and everyone knew what he meant. It's like the parent who tells his son, "You remember what happened the last time we went to Orlando? I don't want it to happen again this time!" Both the parent and child know what is meant—no detail is needed.

But then... Rashi comes along and specifies precisely what sins were committed in each place!

So the Rebbe (Hisvaduyos 5747 Vol. 4, pg. 180) asks the same question that Rabbi Yehudah Ben Beseirah asked Rabbi Akiva: "The Torah concealed it, and you reveal it!" If the Torah intentionally did not specify what happened in those places "out of respect for Israel," as Rashi himself explains well, so then why did Rashi himself list those places? Did he not tremble for the respect of Israel?

It's All About the Timing

The Rebbe says something very interesting—that the whole thing is a matter of timing.

In Moshe Rabbeinu's day and age, for the generation about to enter the Land of Israel, it was still a fresh wound. And so, for "the respect of Israel," Moshe Rabbeinu only mentioned it by hint. But in Rashi's generation, 2,400 years later, then there is no concern that specifying the sins would embarrass somebody. On the contrary—doing so helps us understand the story.

The same is true with regard to the wood-gatherer. In his generation, it was clear that they would hide who he was—because they didn't want to shame the famous daughters of Tzelafchad "who cherished the Land." But in the time of Rabbi Akiva, 1,300 years later, no one would be going around saying that he was Tzelafchad's grandchild and that he was humiliated by the news. And so in Rabbi Akiva's time, it was okay to reveal who the man was—and not only is it allowed to be publicized, but it's necessary, too, because it's hard to connect to an anonymous story, for better or for worse.

When you hear or read that someone did something good, it doesn't have any effect on you— because you don't know who it was or what the circumstances were. But when you hear that So and-so did something good, and you know the person and he or she is your age, it has a different effect on you entirely.

Perhaps that's the same reason why G-d hid the story for 900 years of the Jews worshipping idols in Egypt. But once the Jews were exiled to Bavel, there was no reason already to hide the story—and on the contrary, such a story could motivate the Jewish Nation to teshuvah (repentance). And so it was specifically the Prophet Yechezkel who revealed this story.

And we see that it works the same way today.

Classified government information is often kept under wraps for literally 100 years, or at least a good few decades—and only then does the government allow access to the archives and the files so that the public can learn their contents. Because as long as the people involved are still alive, it is forbidden to

embarrass them. But a generation or two later, there's no longer any concern.

My friends, it is incumbent upon us to learn from this that to speak "of the shame of Israel" is prohibited, even when it is true. But what is permitted—and necessary—is to speak "of the praise of Israel."

As the Rebbe would always quote from the Sages, "It's a mitzvah to publicize those who do a mitzvah!"

May we all be inspired from this do more mitzvos, and to tell the world about it, until the day that all the world knows what a mitzvah is, with the coming of Moshiach, speedily in our days, amen!