



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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DESPITE ALL ODDS

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס זייל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

HA'AZINU

DESPITE ALL ODDS

Every time there's a major Wall Street crash, everyone is dazed. Day after day, all the experts voice their opinions in the media and prophesize gloom and doom—the end of the world is coming!

"Recession!" "Depression!" Each competes with the other trying to be the most dramatic. Is this like the 70s? Or is it like the 30s? People walk around like it's Tisha B'Av. People told me that now their kids would need to support them, and other such talk.

So let's see how a Jew is supposed to look at things like these: what is the Torah's outlook on such situations?

This week we read the Torah portion of Haazinu. At the end of the portion, the Torah tells us about the passing of Moshe Rabbeinu, our Master Moses: "And G-d spoke to Moshe in the midst of this day, saying, 'Climb Mount Avarim... and you shall die on the mountain' " (Devarim 32:48).

Along comes Rashi and stimulates our curiosity about the expression "in the midst of this day," asking why the Torah suddenly uses this expression. After all, G-d constantly spoke to Moshe! So what does "in the midst of this day" add?

Rashi points out that the expression "in the midst of this day" actually appears in the Torah several times before this Torah portion.

The first time we find it in the Torah is almost at the beginning of the Torah, in the parshah of Noach. We all know the story of the Flood, in which G-d instructed Noach to build the Ark because G-d was about to bring a flood upon the earth—but when Noach told the world what he heard, they thought he needed a psychiatrist. After all,

the world was at the peak of its strength and prosperity, and here Noach was preaching doom and gloom.

All the experts of the day said that a flood was improbable. As Rashi puts it, “Noach’s peers would say, ‘Either way, if we really feel there’s really going to be a flood, we won’t let him go into his Ark.’ ” What they were really saying was that it’s not likely to happen, that all the signs indicated that the world remained at the peak of its strength. So G-d declared, “I will usher in the Flood in the middle of the day—and anyone with the power to protest, let him come forward and protest.”

And indeed, G-d ushered in the Flood in the middle of the day—and what actually happened turned out to be the exact opposite of what everyone said would happen.

The next occurrence of the phrase “in the midst of this day” is in the story of Avraham Avinu, our Patriarch Abraham, when G-d told him to circumcise himself.

At the time, Abraham was 99 years old—an age experienced enough to start a new religion, to go around and tell people that there’s this thing called “God” that you don’t see with physical eyes and don’t hear with physical ears and cannot touch or feel.

This was against the entire world at that time—the entire world worshipped idols, which was the in thing to do. Suddenly, along comes one old man and says otherwise. Yes, he was wealthy and successful, but all in all, he was but one individual—and he tries to start a new religion, spreading faith in G-d. The entire world laughed at him—at that time, Abraham didn’t even have a son to perpetuate his idea. Nothing at all.

Even later, the Midrash tells us that the famous Biblical giant Og, who essentially was the world’s one-man superpower of the time, used to predict that Avraham will never succeed in spreading his religion – especially when he doesn’t have children to continue spreading his beliefs.

Later, Og was invited to the Bar Mitzvah of Avraham’s son Yitzchok, and even then he said, “Who’s this? He’s nothing! I can kill him with my finger!” In other words, it really looked that Avraham’s new religion of faith in G-d had no chance of success whatsoever.

In response, G-d Himself used the expression “in the midst of this day”—to say that Avraham’s idea would defy all predictions, and the entire world would eventually see who was right.

The third time the Torah uses this expression is at Yetzias Mitzrayim, the Exodus from Egypt. Let's take a look at the situation then.

At that time, the Jewish Nation had been enslaved for over 200 years under the world's leading superpower. Egypt was the country with the world's strongest economy, military and so on. So when Moshe showed up with his "dream" of setting the Jews free, all the experts laughed at him because he totally defied the conventional wisdom: What's going free? Who's going free? The Egyptians have dominated the world for hundreds of years! As Rashi himself puts it: "Not even a slave could flee Egypt, as the land was locked down"—it was a closed and locked country.

But G-d so to speak said, 'let's see who'll have the last laugh'. That's why the Torah tells us, "in the midst of this day"—that despite all the predictions of all the various experts and all the Egyptian political pundits, in the very middle of the day the unbelievable will happen: the Jewish Nation will leave Egypt.

And the same thing happens in this week's Parshah. Moshe tells his people that his days are numbered and that they should grab whatever they can from him while they can—because in just a little bit, it's all over. But what did all the "wise men" say? It's not probable that Moshe will die—a man who took us out of Egypt, split the sea for us, brought down quail from heaven, brought up a well from the earth, and gave us the Torah just can't die on us.

Moshe broke all the rules of nature. A man who could split a sea and climb a mountain three times, each time not eating for 40 days and nights, was not likely to be influenced by the laws of nature. After all, he defeated the laws nature again and again.

That's why the Torah says that Moshe passed away "in the midst of this day"—G-d showed the whole world that everything they thought amounted to nothing. Just the opposite—what actually happened turned out to be the exact opposite of what everyone thought would happen.

Now back to the stock market. When everyone panics and sells their stock, that's precisely when the big billionaires buy stock. Why? Because the best time to buy is when everyone is panicked and is selling their stock. And the same is true for the reverse: when everyone is running like mad to buy stock, the most successful investors know it's the best time to sell their stock. Why? Because what actually happens is always the opposite of the popular opinion. Why is this so? Because G-d runs the world in a way that always defies the predictions.


My dear friends: even today, everyone thinks that the economy will collapse. But a Jew must learn from the Torah that it can and will be otherwise. Even on 9/11, everyone thought that it was the end of the world and that the terrorists will destroy America—and the opposite occurred.

Thus, my friends, what they say will happen and what actually does happen are two entirely different things. With G-d's help, we each will fulfill our individual missions and everything will work out—perhaps the less we listen to the experts, the better it will be for us.

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