The Power of Return: Thoughts for Parashat Shofetim

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shofetim

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“I, even I, am He that comforts you; who are you that you should be afraid of humans who will die?...” (Isaiah 51:12)

During these seven weeks of consolation, the Haftarot offer prophecies of God’s eternal love for Israel, the return of the people of Israel to their land, and Israel’s ultimate vindication among the nations of the world. In this week’s Haftarah, we are reminded not to be afraid; we should have confidence that Almighty God will prevail over mortal human beings who wish us harm.

This message has a special poignancy for me this year. I recently was privileged to officiate at the wedding of a couple both of whom are “benei anusim.” Among their ancestors were Spanish and Portuguese Jews who were forcibly converted to Catholicism during the 15th century, a period of virulent anti-Jewish persecution in the Iberian Peninsula. In the name of the Catholic faith, many thousands of Jews were expelled, plundered, or compelled to convert. In Hebrew, the converts were called “anusim,” forced ones. Their descendants are known as “benei anusim.”

This newly married couple, like many other “benei anusim,” have reclaimed their Jewish heritage. They have chosen to live proudly and openly as religiously observant Jews. The spark of Jewishness, which had been dormant for centuries, has now emerged brightly. The souls of their Jewish ancestors must be rejoicing that their descendants have finally come home to their historic faith and identity.

Each of the “benei anusim” who returns to Judaism testifies thereby that the Jewish faith and the Jewish People are indeed indestructible. No matter how dire the situation seems, God has not forgotten us. God comforts us. God reminds us not to fear our enemies even when they seem to be prevailing over us. Each person of Jewish ancestry will one day come back home. We have a precedent in the Torah’s account of the exodus from Egypt.

The Torah states that the Israelites were expelled from Egypt (ki goreshu mimitsrayim). Apparently, not all the slaves wanted to leave…they had to be forcibly sent out. A question arises: why was it necessary for all the Israelites to leave Egypt? Why not leave the laggards behind? Rabbi Hayyim David Halevy, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, pointed out that the Torah is teaching that no

one must be left behind. Redemption requires full participation.

From the Biblical model, we can extrapolate concerning the future redemption. It, too, will necessarily be complete. All Jews will be part of the redemption. Even those who have assimilated and have lost their Jewish identity—even they will be brought back into the peoplehood of Israel. The redemption of all the people must come with the redemption of each person (Rabbi H. D Halevy, Asei Lekha Rav, vol. 4).

As those of Jewish ancestry return to their Jewish roots today, we witness rays of hope for the ultimate redemption that will bring peace and security to the Jewish People and all good people everywhere.

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