

שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת בְּשׁוּב ה' אֶת־שִׁיבַת צִיּוֹן הָיִינוּ כְּחֹלְמִים:

“A song of ascents. When the L-rd will return the exiles of Zion, we were like dreamers.”

We are all very familiar with this verse and probably know several tunes which we sing it to. The opening verse of Tehillim 126, it has a prominent place as the opening line in Bentsching (“grace after meals”) on Shabbos and Yom Tov, and any day on which we do not say Tachanun. Probably because it is so familiar, we tend not to notice an oddity in the verse: It begins in the future tense “will return” and ends in the past tense “were like dreamers.”

The following verses are in future tense as well, אֶז יִמְלֵא שְׂחֹק פִּינוּ ... אֶז יֹאמְרוּ “Then our mouths will be filled with laughter...Then they will say...”

Why is this one phrase in past tense? The answer that many commentators offer is that the intent of the verse is to declare that when Hashem will take us out of Golus, we will look back at our experiences and say “Wow, that seems now like it was a dream!” Things will be so good then, that looking back at the hardships of Golus which we experienced throughout our history, it will be hard for us to believe that they actually occurred. It will seem unreal, so remote, that it will feel as if it all was but a dream.

The Malbim and others offer a different take on this. They suggest that we need to break up the sentences a little differently. After the opening that this is a song for when Hashem will return us from Golus back to Yerushalayim, we then declare, “We were dreaming all along that in the future our mouths will be filled with laughter and the nations will say...”

It is not that in the future we will find our current reality unbelievable and dreamlike. It is that we currently, in the present, don’t view reality as limited to the harsh circumstances which Golus entails. We are now dreaming, envisioning the future, the coming of Moshiach and live with that reality while yet in Golus.



Hmm, you say, there are medical terms for people who are not in touch with reality, and live in some alternative universe. They need therapy, perhaps medication. Sometimes they need to be kept in institutions, behind locked doors. Are we crazy? Are we supposed to be crazy?

At the Moshiach Seudah in 1962, the Rebbe said that the answer to this is found in the Haftorah of the Last Day of Pesach. As we know the Haftorah of the day is about the coming of Moshiach, describing Moshiach's pedigree ("from the stem of Yishai"), his qualities ("..spirit of wisdom and understanding, ... counsel and strength, ... knowledge and fear of the L-rd ..."), what he will do (" He will judge the poor ... strike the evil ... "), and what the world will be like ("The wolf will dwell with the lamb ...") and much more.

When we look at it a little more closely we may notice something odd. Look for yourself, on page 516 in the Sidur. The actual prophecy of Moshiach begins at the fourth verse in, with "A shoot shall come forth from the stem of Yishai ..." The first three verses are not a prophecy of the future yet to come, but are actually describing an event in the past. The "he" referred to in that first verse is Sennacherib, King of Assyria. "He exerted himself to stand at Nov while still day."

This story took place well over 2500 years ago. The day that Sennacherib and his army of 185,000 officers (presumably over millions of troops) arrived and besieged Yerushalayim was Erev Pesach. Sennecharib was in a rush to get there that day because his astrologers told him that if he entered into battle on that day he would prevail. When he arrived at Nov, a city on a hill top just to the north or northeast of the Old City of Yerushalayim, he looked down at Yerushalayim and could not believe that he had forced-marched his huge army just to conquer this small town. (One estimate that I found of the population of Yerushalayim at that time is 25,000 – a tiny fraction of the number of Assyrian soldiers.) He lifted his hand in a gesture of dismissal, and said, "We'll rest today and take care of this tomorrow."

Chizkiyah, the King of Judah, had prepared for this battle for years. Some of his defenses can be seen today in the Old City. For example there is an excavation of



part of a huge wall which was built to protect the city from the Assyrian invaders. And, a long tunnel was dug through rock to divert the waters of the Gichon spring, so that in the event of a siege there would be water within the walls. You can walk through that tunnel today, wading in the waters which continue to flow to this day. So, Chizkiyah was a practical, down to earth kind of guy.

Yet, that night, seeing the huge army arrayed against him, King Chizkiyah davened to Hashem to save them and said that he has no strength to engage in battle against such a powerful enemy. Therefore, he will go to sleep and trust in Hashem to do battle for him! And, Hashem did. That night, the first night of Pesach, an angel came and killed all of Sennacherib's troops. Sennacherib returned beaten, with a handful of men, to Nineveh, where he was later assassinated by two of his sons.

How, indeed, did the practical Chizkiyah sleep peacefully in his bed that night, knowing what was gathered just outside the walls, and what was planned for the morrow? The Gemara says that Chizkiyah had seen to it that every person in the realm, man and woman, boy and girl was knowledgeable in the laws of the Torah. That merit was what afforded them protection on that fateful night of Pesach. Chizkiyah knew that he could rely on that merit and Hashem would save him and his nation. (It probably helped that he had a prophet Yeshayahu who explicitly conveyed that assurance from Hashem that his prayers will be answered.)

This is the story referred to in the first three verses of the Haftarah. What is the connection between the story of Chizkiyah and Sennacherib and the prophecy of Moshiach?

Reading the description of the coming of Moshiach, one might wonder how this can possibly be. The world that we live in seems to be descending into chaos. All productivity is screeching to a halt; we are in situation which is clearly unsustainable for any length of time. We don't know if things are getting better or worse, or how long this is expected to drag on. How can it be that an individual, a single person, will come along, and instantly this mess will suddenly be transformed in the idyllic state described in the Haftarah? It seems like a fantasy.



And, that is the purpose of the first three verses. When things seem foreboding, remember that this is only one way of viewing reality. There is another reality as well, a reality that is as real as the first and even more so. Walls and tunnels are fine security measures in the first real world. But they can't truly stop a powerful army. The real defense in the face of destruction in this world was making sure that everyone adhered to the Will of Hashem by learning Torah and living it. And that turned out to be the reality even for Sennacherib and the Assyrians. And, if it happened in the past, it is not crazy to expect it again.

This message is especially timely for those of us about to say Yizkor. The time of saying Yizkor is a time when the Neshamos of the departed come to where their children are saying Yizkor. This is a reassurance that all year around between Yizkors, the Neshamos of one's parents are not that far away and are looking out for them. It is also a reminder that it is a two way street; the Mitzvos that the children do and the Tzedakah they give, helps the Neshamos to rise to higher levels on high. This may not be a reality that we can see with our eyes, but it is a reality that we know to be true. And we are not crazy.

We dream about things in order to process them in ways that our rational mind cannot do when we are awake. That is why we can sometimes solve problems or come to terms with them by "sleeping on them." It is not that what we process in our sleep is untrue or unreal, it is just not the truth and reality that we perceive when we are awake. Things which are truly unreal, unimaginable, we can't even see in a dream, says the Gemara. The fact that we are dreaming about Moshiach is itself a proof that it is real.

And today, on the last day of Pesach, as we read this special Haftorah, and we celebrate the end of Yom Tov with a Moshiach Seudah, we remind ourselves that our very real dream is for the reality of the coming of Moshiach NOW.

