

Rabbi's Column

Over the years, I have learned about many waves of emigration from various portions of what was at one time the USSR. I had somewhat direct knowledge of two of those waves.

The first time that some of the refuseniks were finally able to leave, I was not in a position to help out directly, although I had several friends who knew more Russian than I did and were able to do the "meet and chat" task that was even then part of the planned acculturation process. The second time, approximately a decade later, I was much more involved. Going to the airport to greet people as they landed. Helping some of them learn both English and Hebrew, while they taught me a small bit of Russian. Working with their youth. Helping to load up their apartments with all sorts of things that people might need.

I suppose I had that experience at the back of my mind when I was thinking of the latest wave of refugee needs.

These experiences, however, came after decades of effort by many other people, during which very few people were allowed to leave at all, and only some were allowed to come to the USA. That effort appears to be where we are currently stuck in most of the USA.

It is not really where I would have liked this country to be. Yet, just as I have managed to continue waiting for World Peace, I can survive waiting for a change in the local status.

Changing gears a bit, I'd like to go back to chatting about the Torah Reading. This week's portion is Beshalach - when he sent out - meaning when Pharaoh sent out the Israelites from Egypt. Courtesy of Rabbi Sacks, I'd like to bring up an interesting set of differences between the experience of warfare before crossing the Sea of Reeds and afterwards.

When the Egyptians were hot on our trail (and on our tail), and the Israelites only saw water ahead of them, Moses let them know that God was going to do their fighting for them, as a final way of hammering in that God is indeed powerful everywhere. When the people defended themselves against Amalek, God took no active role. Moses visually reminded the people to keep God in mind as they fought back, which is different than God providing a forcefield for them.

When God takes an active role against a nation (and there are no promises or contracts currently existing between God and that nation), then they pretty much wind up as the Egyptians did. Out of the count for quite some time. On the other hand, once God steps back, then there are very few complete knockouts, as it were. Which is why God indicated a fairly long (if not eternal) battle against Amalek. The most many generations will be able to accomplish is a bit of warning off by actively defending themselves. Less fortunate generations become the example which motivates the next few generations towards defense, when that is practical.

Our difficulty is to know when we are similar to the Israelites between the Egyptians and the sea, and when we are similar to the Israelites with Amalek, and act accordingly. May our judgments prove to be accurate.