

Parshas Ki Tisa 5763

On ט' באב תקרנ"ב ח' Aug. 2 1492, the Jewish community of Spain, which had flourished for centuries, was expelled by order of their most catholic majesties, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella.

On the next day, Aug. 3 1492, Christopher Columbus set out with his fleet of three ships on his voyage of discovery, by order of those same monarchs.

At the time the coincidence of those two dates - although noted by Columbus himself in his diary - could have been seen as nothing other than a historical accident. Yet for us - with the benefit of historical hindsight - the connections are profound. Spain had harboured Jews for centuries, and Jews had flourished there as nowhere else in the diaspora. They had enjoyed there a Golden Age. Now the Spanish throne thought to harvest that which the Jews had sowed, and to enrich themselves at their expense. Yet that voyage of Columbus set in motion historical trends which would ultimately reduce Spain to a third-rate power. And in that land which Columbus would discover, a new haven would open up for Jews, in which they would achieve an equality and success that would far outstrip their accomplishments in Spain.

I mention this today because it brings forcibly to mind a beautiful insight of the פרשה חתם סופר on this week's פרשה.

We read today how, after achieving forgiveness for the חטא העגל, Moshe asks the וראית את אחורי לפני לא יראו. הראני נא את כבודיך: רבשיע. To which He responds:

What is it that Moshe requested, and what is the meaning of הקב"ה's response?

The חתם סופר explained that what Moshe was asking was to be shown the workings of the השגחה, to understand why things in this world happen as they do, to see the workings of the mills of G-d as they grind.

To which הקב"ה answered: פני לא יראו. It is not given to man - not even to Moshe - to understand the full meaning and import of events as they unfold. The most we can ever be given is וראית את אחורי, to catch a glimpse of הקב"ה's unfolding plan after it has passed by us, in retrospect, to look back over the events with the perspective of history and, with the benefit of hindsight, to see their significance in the Divine economy.

There is another example, of more recent vintage, which draws our attention forcibly. A little over two years ago, the presidential race was running neck and neck. We all took pride in the fact that one of the candidates for executive office was not only a Jew, but an Orthodox Jew. And then, events took a bizarre turn. A few voters in Florida suddenly held the key to the election of the leadership of the most powerful nation on earth. Events took on a surreal tone with the

introduction of hanging chads and other election arcana. And when, finally, President Bush and Vice-President Cheney took office, many of us no doubt felt cheated of the opportunity to see kiddush recited in the vice-presidential mansion.

And then, of course, came September eleventh and the realization that slowly dawned on all of us of what it would have meant had those events come on the heels of the first election of a Jew to high executive office in this country. How lucky then we counted ourselves for his defeat. וראית את אחורי, לפני לא יראו.

What is true of the broad sweep of history is also true in our personal lives. We go through life and things happen, unexpected setbacks and unlooked for surprises, and we don't presume to understand the why or the wherefore of הקב"ה's providence. But looking back over our lives, sometimes we can catch glimpses of moments when הקב"ה seems to have clearly intervened in the course of our lives and sent it in a different direction.

We are living in a time of great uncertainty, when historical forces are gathering around us, and none of us really knows what the meaning and outcome of these events will be. We should suspect anyone who purports to know what הקב"ה is up to. That is hubris. If it was not given to משה רבינו, it is certainly not given to us. The most we are given is an occasional insight into the past.

But of this much we are assured, that these events are of His making, and part of His plan. He is passing through history, and He carries us with Him. And our greatest task, at this time, is to recognize His presence, and to look forward to the time when the meaning of all this shall be made clear to us,

when בעין יראו בשוב ה' ציון, when we shall see clearly and joyously His return to Zion, and ours, בב"א.