When a Leader Sins: The Russian Invasion of Ukraine

I want to begin today with a quick linguistic quiz, and ask -- What is the difference between a sentence that begins with the word – “if” and one that begins with the word “when” – as in - what is the difference between – “If I do something… or “When I do something….” “If”, *eem* in Hebrew, is conditional and the second assumes something will definitely occur.

I mention this today because in the listing of the circumstances proscribing the offerings and sacrifices to be made in the Temple for various wrongdoings, which is the primary consideration of this morning’s Torah portion, a number of instances say what is to be done – “*If* one sins”. The text indicates what sacrifice is to be offered to make amends **if** one commits various sins.

But there is one instance in the series which says not if, but when. It is “*asher nasee yeheteh*…when a leader sins.”

Our sages took notice and tried to understand why this was the exception, and why it didn’t follow the pattern of all the previous examples. They asked - Why didn’t it say –“If a leader sins….” but rather -- “when a leader sins…”

They concluded that the Torah’s choice of words is not coincidental and the use of a different precedent is designed to call our attention to the incongruity. Our commentators, who knew something about psychology, as well as about human nature and political realities, suggested the reason for the different language was because the Torah is telling us that it is not a question of **If** a leader will sin, but **when** the ruler will sin.

In other words, it is inevitable that a leader will sin.

Bahya ben Asher writing in the 1300’s comments: *asher*, when (is used because it) implies certainty.” He goes on to attribute the leader sinning because “he will become haughty and arrogant and this leads him to sin.”

Today we are witnessing the consequences of what the Torah and our sages warned us of -- what happens when a leader becomes haughty and arrogant and wishes to grab power and land, and to conquer another people.

Calling the Russian invasion of Ukraine the greatest threat to the free world since World War II, Natan Sharansky, who was born and raised in Ukraine and educated in Moscow, whose sense of morality, Jewish peoplehood and courage propelled him to take on the Soviet Union, and who was instrumental in leading to the demise of the Iron Curtain, was imprisoned for leading the human rights fight against the Soviet Empire and for being the leader of the Jewish resistance movement to free Soviet Jews. With his background, he has unique insight into the current power grab by Putin.

Sharansky, someone I have met numerous times and am honored to call a friend, is one of the greatest Jewish heroes of the last 50 years, and as a brilliant chess player, knows a thing or two about strategy, tactics, and the Russian leader’s mindset.

He explained in a recent interview, “I said from the very start that this is not a fight between Russia and Ukraine about a piece of land; it is not even a fight about the future of Ukraine. It is, rather, an attempt to change all the principles on which the free world stands, to dismiss all the understandings and agreements that guarantee people that they will not lose their freedom because their neighbor is stronger than they are. Putin doesn’t want to use nuclear weapons. He’s not an Iranian leader who thinks about the next world,” said Sharansky. “He wants to rule this world.

Sharansky likens Putin’s aggression to “a classical situation in the criminal world, where the ringleader is not the one who is most physically strong, but is the one that everyone understands is willing to use his fist, his body and his knife.”

Today is the Sabbath known as Shabbat Zachor, when we are commanded: Zachor et asher asah lecha Amalek, remember what Amalek did to you. Every year at this time of year, on the Shabbat before Purim, we read the story of how the Amalekites attacked the Jews by striking the weak, the elderly, the infirm, the stragglers in the back, how they did not fear God, and how we are called upon to obliterate the memory of Amalek from the earth.

There are times when the concept may seem remote, distant and from an era that has long past. Some years we may question if Amalek is real, or more of an intangible metaphor - the embodiment of cruel disregard for others, and the exploitation of the weak.

As we witness what is happening in Ukraine, we cannot help but feel that Amalek may not exist as a nation anymore, but its legacy is alive and well and that it is still a potent force in our world.

Keshet Star writing in the Times of Israel comments, “Shabbat Zachor forces us to remember that evil exists, and that battles of light against darkness are not just the stuff of fairy tales and epic fantasy novels but real life, from the earliest origins of human history until today.

Parshat Zachor teaches, most of all, that what is even more dangerous than evil is thinking it doesn’t exist. We cannot whitewash evil, oppression, exploitation and injustice. We cannot pretend they are “old” problems and not part of our modern experience. We cannot take ourselves, and our own moral responsibility out of the narrative. Do not lull yourself into complacency, the Torah warns, in a world that has always required moral courage.”

This is why it is important that we read and tell the story of Purim, of Amalek, of Haman and of Passover each and every year.

There are bad actors in the world. Sharansky suggests that Putin saw the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the way the US dealt with Syria’s civil war, and concluded that the United States was too weak to respond to an invasion in Ukraine, just as the world did not respond to the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Turning his attention to what Israel must learn from what is going on, he says that Israel’s “military power always has to be such that we could destroy all our enemies. Looking at Ukraine it is clear that [even] with the sympathy of the world, it is (being overrun). So we need more than sympathy; we need to maintain a very strong military advantage.”

He spoke last week at the *Sheva Brachot* wedding reception for a groom whose parents and brother were killed in a terrorist attack when the groom was only seven years old. This is what he said:

"When I was growing up in Ukraine, in Donetsk, there were a lot of nations and nationalities. There were people who had 'Russian', 'Ukrainian', 'Georgian', 'Kozaki' written on their ID cards. It was not so important, there was no big difference, but one thing was important - if it said 'Jew', it was as if you had an illness.

We knew nothing about Judaism, there was nothing significant in our Jewish identity other than anti-Semitism and hatred towards us.  So no one tried to replace the word 'Russian' with the word 'Ukrainian' in his ID card, for example, in order to be accepted to a university, because it did not matter. But if it said 'Jewish' and you could change it - your chances of being accepted were greater.

I was reminded of it this this week when I saw thousands of people standing at the borders, trying to escape the tragedy in Ukraine.  They stand there day and night, and there is only one word that can help them get out of there: 'Jew'.  If you are a Jew - there are Jews out there who take care of you, there is someone on the other side of the border who is looking for you, and your chances of leaving are high.

The world has turned upside down.  "When I was a child, 'Jew' was an unusual word for evil, no one envied us. But today on the Ukrainian border a Jew is an unusual word for good, it describes people who have a place to go and there is an entire nation , which is their family, waiting for them outside."

So on this Shabbat Zachor, this sabbath of Remembrance, let us remember our obligation to be that moral force in the world, to be willing to have the courage to stand up against tyranny and evil forces, which sadly still exist in our world.

March 12, 2022

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