

CHIZUK AND IDUD

*Divrei Torah from the weekly sedra
with a focus on living in Eretz Yisrael -
Chizuk for Olim & Idud for not-yet-Olim*

Seven years after World War II, negotiations began between the Israeli and German governments. The purpose of the negotiations was to reach an agreed upon deal concerning "reparations" to the Jewish People for the Nazi atrocities. The German government took responsibility for the crimes committed by the Nazis and spoke of its special responsibilities to the Jewish State. The very term "reparations" was chosen instead of the more direct expression "compensations", since it was considered to be a more sensitive choice which would not harm the feelings of the survivors. For after all, how could it be conceivably possible to speak of any actual 'compensation' for the survivors of the unspeakable torment and torture? Could one ever compensate for the immense losses they had experienced? Even so, there were many who objected to the proposed plan, and called for a cessation of the negotiations. Some questioned whether the the Israeli government had the authority to represent world Jewry on such a contentious matter. Others, such as Menachem Begin, vigorously opposed Ben Gurion's government, speaking of the scheme in terms of the acceptance of "blood money". Menachem Begin was so adamant in his opposition, that he even raised the possibility of initiating

a civil war over the issue. Begin was quoted in the daily newspapers as having said: "When they [the Hagana] fired on us with their canons, I gave the order: No! [-referring to the 1948 incident of the Altalena and the decision not to retaliate for the fear of becoming embroiled in civil war]. Today I give the order: Yes! This will be a war of life or death..." Begin continued his remarks by comparing the severity of the situation to historical episodes from our nation's past during which there was a popular uprising against foreign powers: "When the Romans wanted to set up an idol in the Holy Temple, the Jews came from all corners of the country, surrounded the building and said, 'Over our dead bodies.' To this Knesset, I say: 'There are things in life that are worse than death...'

As always, there were surely two sides to the argument. The many backers of this plan stressed the vital necessity of receiving the funds in order to enable the fledgling state to fund its manifold activities, and specifically to underwrite the growing costs of the major Kibbutz Galuyot taking place in those years.

Without delving any further into the details of the brouhaha, I will just note that the historic agreement was eventually signed in 1952 by Israel's foreign minister, Moshe Sharett, Konrad Adenauer, the West German Chancellor, and Nachum Goldman, the representative of the Jewish Agency.

What does this slice of history have to do with this week's parsha? - The Torah describes how we left Egypt laden with precious "reparations" for our long years of slavery: "And the children of Israel did as Moshe had said and they asked the Egyptians for vessels of silver, for vessels of gold and garments: And Hashem made the nation favorable in the eyes of the Egyptians and they lent to them and they despoiled Egypt" (Sh'mot 12:35-36).

The connection between these verses and the arguments surrounding the German reparations, was made by R. Sorotzkin in his Sefer, "Oznaim La'Torah" (P.92). He writes that these events enable us to understand a verse which was unclear for many generations: Why does G-d tell Moshe to please convince the people to ask their neighbors for these gifts (See Rashi on Sh'mot 11:2)? Did the people of Israel have such an antipathy to money and towards worldly possessions, that they needed to be persuaded?! R. Sorotzkin explains that surely there were many amongst that generation who felt that they wanted to have nothing to do with the tainted Egyptian blood money...

When we study the Torah's description of Moshe's request, it is unclear from the wording of the verses to what extent trickery or deceit was involved in the "borrowing" of these vessels and garments which would, at

the end of the day, never be returned to their original owners. Some commentators, such as Saadia Gaon, point to Biblical examples where the verb Lish'ol is used in the context of a gift, not that of a loan. [Ibn Ezra brings R. Sa'adia's proof from the term "Sha'ul Lashem" (Shmuel Alef 1:28) which in its context clearly means a permanent offering raised to G-d, not a temporary loan]. Other commentators, such as Ibn Ezra himself, were of the opinion that this was a purposeful act of deception. This contact was premeditated in order to raise the ire of the Egyptians and thus guarantee that they would give chase once they realized that they had been hoodwinked.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 91a) tells of an incident which took place in the times of Alexander the Great. An Egyptian came forth suing the Jewish People, demanding back-payments for all the goods that had been borrowed from his compatriots and never returned. The Jewish counter plea was simple: Seeing as the claim was based on the description of the events as found in the Torah, we too could demand back payments for the calculated wages owed hundreds of thousands of slaves over a period of 210 years of slavery! Suffice it to say that Alexander the Great ruled in favor of the Jewish position.

Many years ago I participated in a conference of campus clergy. A Christian minister wanted to know if the Israeli Government was intending

to compensate the Arabs dispossessed of their lands in Palestine. I then interjected: "Are you also concerned about Jewish properties taken from the Jewish inhabitants in the many Arab lands"?

Over 2000 years have gone by, but this one-eyed anti-Jewish bias seems to somehow persist - sadly not much has changed!

Rabbi Yerachmiel Roness, Ramat Shiloh, Beit Shemesh