

PART 23: CHAPTER 4, VERSES 11-21

by Rabbi Yitzchak Schwartz

Verse 11. *"The old lion perishes for lack of prey, and the lion's whelps are scattered abroad."*

Verse 12. *"Now a word came stealthily to me, and my ear took fright at it."*

Verse 13. *"In thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falls,"*

Verse 14. *"Fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake."*

Verse 15. *"Then a spirit passed before my face; it made the hair of my flesh to bristle up:"*

Verse 16. *"It stood still, but I could not discern its form: a shape was before my eyes: there was silence, and I heard a voice saying,"*

Verse 17. *"Shall mortal man be more just than G-d? Shall a man be more pure than his maker?"*

Verse 18. *"Behold, he puts no trust in his servants; and his angels he charges with folly:"*

Verse 19. *"How much more those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, who are crushed before the moth?"*

Verse 20. *"Between morning and evening they are destroyed: they perish for ever without anyone paying heed."*

Verse 21. *"Is not their excellency which was in them gone away? They die; for they are with wisdom."*

Commentary

In verse 11 *Elifaz* figuratively describes how the wicked perish. When the old lion loses its teeth it perishes quickly. So too the wicked are punished with speed and intensity. Just as 'the lion's whelps are scattered abroad' i.e. nothing remains of the lion's former might, so too the wicked are condemned to total destruction.

When this happens they are likely to lose all of their possessions; disappearing like the lost whelps

of the lion. In Psalms 92:10 King David the psalmist tells us that when G-d destroys the wicked they fall apart. For those of you with some Hebrew background the Hebrew word used to describe this process is 'yitpardu' which means to become separated, meaning that they are separated from all that they have.

The *Ramban* explains that until verse 12 *Elifaz* is giving his own response to *Iyov's* tragedy and subsequent rejection of a G-d of justice. We can summarize *Iyov's* viewpoint as follows: The righteous suffer in the same way as the wicked. There can be no justification for this. Since G-d must be a righteous judge we cannot attribute the suffering of the righteous to a Divine decree. Rather, it must be attributed to some predetermined cosmic plan. The inevitable conclusion of this approach is that man does not have free will and therefore cannot be held accountable for his deeds.

Elifaz's response is that the wicked suffer far more than the righteous. Furthermore, the nature of their suffering is altogether different from the suffering of the righteous. Whereas the wicked are destroyed in this world and eradicated from the world to-come; the pain of the righteous is only temporal in nature since they are ensured a portion in the world to-come. The fact that the righteous suffer, and the idea of a G-d of justice are not incongruous. There are no compelling observations that demonstrate that man does not have free will.

The *Ramban* continues to explain that *Elifaz* concedes to *Iyov* that human observation does not always confirm his view point. Indeed, at times the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. For this phenomenon *Elifaz* has no reasonable explanation. But at the point where reason fails prophecy is not excluded. This is alluded to in verse 12 "a word came stealthily to me". According to the *Ramban* this means that the 'word' that he received was something beyond his own abilities to ascertain. The *Malbim* also interprets this verse to mean that *Elifaz* did not receive a complete answer to this problem.

In verses 12-16 *Elifaz* describes in great detail the nature of his prophetic experience; e.g. "a word came stealthily", "from visions of the night", "I could not discern its form", "there was silence, and I heard a voice saying". Many of the commentators explain that these phenomena have a strikingly similarity to the ones that are described in the later prophets in the Bible. This seems to validate the claim of *Elifaz* that his message was an authentic prophecy.

As was already mentioned the *Malbim* agrees with this approach but points out that *Elifaz's* message was a low-level prophecy as is indicated by the fact that the message came stealthily, in the night, without clear discernment etc. This is an important insight because it means that *Elifaz* may have some inaccuracies with the interpretation of what he saw and heard.

Furthermore, the *Malbim* explains that the reason that the prophecy was given in such a nubilous fashion is because not even Moses, the greatest of all prophets, was given a full understanding of the painful paradox that the righteous sometimes suffer while the wicked prosper. *Elifaz* claims that he has only a partial understanding of this phenomenon, only a 'word' and even that only 'stealthily'.

In verses 17-21 the actual prophecy is recorded. In verse 17 the prophecy raises a crucial question; can man be more righteous than G-d? These are words of prophecy and it is unreasonable to interpret them as a facetious provocation. Is man capable of reaching a higher level of morality and justice than his creator? Intuitive reasoning dictates that no creation can be greater than the force that created it.

No computer can know more than the sum-total of information put into it by its human creators. Similarly no human can possibly know more than its Creator. Based on this we can interpret verse 17 like this: Since man cannot have greater knowledge than his Creator, how is it possible for him to be the judge of G-d?

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