

YOU WILL BE THE SEAL

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

I will make you a great nation. I will bless you, and I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.

Be'er Mayim Chaim: Rashi, citing the gemara,² sees this pasuk describing the first berachah in Shemonah Esrei. The first three phrases refer to the Avos, beginning with Avraham. They are invoked, serially, at the beginning of that berachah. The final words brings us back to Avraham alone. To him goes the distinction of sole billing in the conclusion of the berachah.

How are we to understand that a pasuk in the Torah refers to the content of a berachah in Shemonah Esrei, which is a rabbinic creation?

If we consider the common denominator in the respective missions of the three Avos, we will resolve our problem.

Our pasuk turns on the word "great." Ultimately, greatness is about the chesed that Hashem works. There is no more effective way of winning the praise of all Creation than showcasing Hashem's chesed. Through it, His Name becomes great.

Avrohom's life's work was teaching everyone with whom he interacted that all the good they observed flowed directly from G-d. All the blessings that people hope for are willed and directed by Hashem.

A huge obstacle stood in the way of people's acceptance of Hashem as the source of all good. They saw too much pain and suffering around them. It was difficult to square this perception with the notion of G-d's goodness.

The true believer understands that there are no exceptions to Hashem's goodness. They all reflect His chesed. Even events that we run from rather than embrace are reflections of His chesed, although the graciousness of those events remains obscure to us. What we regard as tragic is sourced in His chesed. Chazal in various places provide us with a glimmer of the sense we can make in watching Hashem's Providence, and seeing it all as chesed. We are taught that sometimes Hashem multiplies the reward of the righteous by subjecting them to tragedy that is not punishment for their sins. Or that sometimes the righteous are made to suffer in order to actualize their potential for love of Hashem. By accepting their suffering as the Will of a G-d of good and love, they translate their ahavas Hashem into concrete reality. In yet other cases, even the tzadik occasionally sins. Even

though the vast majority of his actions are meritorious, a minority element must still be addressed for Divine justice to work. The tzadik considers it a chesed to him to deal with his shortcomings in this world, rather than the next. Finally, for the genuine evildoer, meeting up with Divinely orchestrated pain and tragedy represents a last opportunity to be jarred into teshuvah.

The common thread uniting all these approaches is that even phenomena that we do not like are outgrowths of Hashem's chesed, even if we cannot always detect why. Through these approaches, however, we come to understand that all pain and suffering serve a positive purpose. Moreover, when a person accepts his pain as beneficial to him, and embraces it with happiness as he would a more obvious favor, he succeeds in changing the attribute of din to that of rachamim. By recognizing what is patently true - that all din is sourced in chesed - he "sweetens" din, by modifying it at the source. By doing this, in turn, he draws down vast quantities of berachah from the Divine attribute of chesed.

Correctly assigning din to the penumbra of chesed (rather than seeing it as a midah standing opposite to chesed, as many erroneously think) was the avodah of Yitzchok. His task was to assert and to teach that some of the outgrowths of din, like awe, reverence, self-judgment and limitation, all belong at their true root to chesed. Thus, "He sowed in that land, and in that year found one hundred measures, and Hashem blessed him."³ As the midrash teaches,⁴ it was hard land in a difficult year of famine. Nonetheless, by accepting the difficulties with joy as certainly designed for Man's benefit, Yitzchok turned the din of the famine into the bounty of chesed. In fact, by uniting din and chesed, he established harmony among all ten sefiros - each of which contains aspects of all ten sefiros within it. Hence, Yitzchok's take-home was the product of ten and ten, or the hundred measures that he reaped in a year of famine.

Thus, Avrohom and Yitzchok, coming as it were from opposite directions, both drew attention to the greatness of Hashem's chesed - and therefore to His essential greatness. We can discern a third way to showcase Hashem's grandeur - when His power is evident as working through some exemplary human being. When a tzadik is treated by people who recognize his piety with boundless respect, they recognize as well that what makes him special is his connection to HKBH. The favor shown him by people is really a reflection of the favor he has achieved in the eyes of Hashem. His stature and position thus reflect on Hashem who stands behind him.

This describes the work of Yaakov. Yaakov had difficult confrontations with Eliphaz, with Esav, with Lavan. In all cases, the other party was moved to release him unharmed. In the clutch, Yaakov lived a charmed existence, one that testified to his closeness with Hashem.

When we mention the Avos in the first berachah of Shemonah Esrei, we really mean these three methods of demonstrating and proving Hashem's greatness. They are, however, all interconnected. They should be seen as branches leading out from a trunk through which they develop.

That trunk is Avrohom. The other methods come forth from him, because his method really

contained them all. In fact, he demonstrated all three in his own life. Besides his commitment to chesed, he had to deal with the suffering of a famine when he arrived in the Land, and accepted it with joy, and without complaint. He rose in prominence and stature in the eyes of all he met, so that people could point to him as one blessed by Hashem working through him.

Still, Avrohom specialized in the avodah of chesed. The other two methods lived within him mostly as potential. He actualized only one of them. We recall this in our Shemonah Esrei when we first mention the avodah of each of the Avos, separately. By the end of the berachah, however, we come back to Avrohom. His chesed contains the other two.

Avrohom remains the seal.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Bereishis 12:2
 2. Pesachim 117B
 3. Bereishis 26:12
 4. Bereishis Rabbah 64:6
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