

WORDS MEANT FOR OTHER EARS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Yehudah approached him and said, "If you please, my master, may your servant speak a word in my master's ears, and let your anger not flare up at your servant. For you are like Paroh."

The last phrase - "For you are like Paroh" - has long mystified people. Some have taken it as a compliment to the stern figure who held their lives in his hand. Others saw it as an implied threat, as if to say, "Don't expect timorous behavior from us, simply because you think you wield much power. We can deal with you. We will not be cowed by your presence, just as we are not overwhelmed by the authority of Paroh."

We could suggest another approach, based on the premise that Yehudah was speaking past the person in front of him, not to him. This is not as strange as it sounds. It is well established to those who have successfully probed Torah's chochmah deeply that very great tzadikim often speak this way. Their words are heard by the people standing before them as if addressed to them; the tzadik, however, intends his words to apply only to HKBH, upon Whom he entrusts his existence and well-being. Their focus on Hashem is so complete, their dependence upon Him so total, that they can all but disregard the flesh-and-blood figure in front of them and concentrate only upon their relationship with G-d.

Dovid sends the evil Naval warm greetings, wishing him well for life, and continuing, "Peace be upon you, peace be upon your household, and peace be upon all that is yours." ² The Zohar ³ is uncomfortable with this. Is it not forbidden to initiate an exchange with an evildoer with a greeting of shalom? The Zohar relates that Dovid never had Naval in mind. His words were directed at Hashem. (His reference to "life," for instance, meant the One Who gives life to the universe.)

The same passage in the Zohar applies the same approach to the fateful meeting between Yaakov and Esav. The Torah⁴ describes Yaakov as bowing seven times, and Esav undoubtedly believed that his younger brother did so in a display of honor to him. In fact, says the Zohar, Yaakov sensed the Shechinah passing between Esav and Yaakov. Yaakov prostrated himself before the Shechinah - not before Esav.

Undoubtedly, Yehudah acted in the same manner. Standing in the royal court, about to appeal for the mercy, Yehudah would certainly direct his words to the One to Whom he always appealed for any of his needs. This was especially so in regard to the circumstances in which he found himself.

"The hearts of kings are in Hashem's hands." The powerful figure in front of the brothers had less free will than ordinary people.

The Egyptian viceroy might assume that those words were intended for his consumption, but Yehudah knew better. He remained focused on Hashem alone. (This is what Chazal mean when they say⁵ that Yehudah approached the Egyptian ruler in tefilah. We know prayer to be an avodah of the heart. In his heart, Yehudah's words were aimed only at HKBH.)

We can reconstruct what passed through Yehudah's mind as he spoke the words in our pasuk. Here is what Yehudah's words mean when we understand to Whom he was talking:

If you please, my master: I turn to You as a servant might to his master. I realize that this is somewhat inappropriate. How could I think of myself as a servant of One as exalted as You. But what can I do? You are my Master!

May your servant speak in word in my master's ears: I would like to speak in a way that none will hear but You. In other words, I will speak in prayer, and no one will know but You, who are the One who always listens to prayer.

Let your anger not flare up at your servant: Please do not be angry at my presumption for calling You my master, and regarding myself as if I could really be Your servant.

For you are like Paroh: You may find this apology of mine somewhat strange. How would I know about Your greatness that I should describe myself as so inconsequential? Did I ascend to the heavens, there to learn who You really are? Where did I learn to be careful about using language that might be belittling of Your greatness? I submit that what I am saying is similar to what Paroh did! When he appointed Yosef as ruler over all of Egypt, he said, "I am Paroh! Without you no man may lift up his hand." ⁶ In empowering Yosef, Paroh made sure to preface his words with a demand that people keep a sense of perspective. Yosef was to be promoted to a position of importance - but it should not be confused with the stature of Paroh himself. ⁷ Similarly, I, Yehudah realize that words like "master" and servant do not do justice to our relationship. I understand that human words will forever fail to convey Your greatness, and therefore can actually diminish Your honor. But I have no choice but to use the most appropriate words I can, and I do think of myself as Your servant! All the more so, when I find myself speaking in front of a mortal human being, who thinks I am referring to him, must I declare to myself and to You that I regard no one as my master but You.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Bereishis 44:18
2. Shmuel1 25:6
3. Zohar Vayishlach 171B

4. Bereishis 33:3
 5. Bereishis Rabbah 93:6
 6. Bereishis 41:44
 7. Bereishis Rabbah 90:2
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