

WHAT THE TZADIK REVEALS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

And he said, "Blessed is Hashem, the G-d of Shem, and let Canaan be a slave to them.

Be'er Mayim Chaim: Since Noach's intention was to offer a blessing to Shem, why didn't he just do it? He could easily have said, "Blessed is Shem!" Why was his berachah addressed to the G-d of Shem instead?

We can get to an answer only by way of a digression, one in which we will consider the praises we offer to Hashem, and the statements we make about Him.

One might think that extolling G-d in every which manner is a good thing. He certainly deserves all the laudatory words we can come up with! Chazal thought differently, however. Their position is expanded upon by the Rambam in his Moreh Nevuchim. Essentially, they caution against praising Him, because anything we say about Him misses the mark.

Let's say that we wanted to praise Hashem for His great wisdom. How much of that wisdom do we see, or understand? When we use the very word "wisdom," we invoke certain ideas and experiences which place an upper, human, limit on what we say, while His wisdom really exceeds anything we can imagine.

For this reason, says the Rambam, we never really talk about what Hashem is. Anything that we say crunches Hashem's true greatness into a form that we can appreciate. Our very words limit and contain His wisdom, rather than allow full-throated appreciation. Whatever we say will not and cannot be enough. Whatever words we use will limit G-d, rather than accurately appreciate him. We therefore choose those words carefully and conservatively. Specifically, we limit ourselves to some expressions chosen by the Anshei Knesses Ha-Gedolah. Those great sages used the ruach ha-kodesh available to them to select phraseology that linked to the different sefiros, in order to draw down through them the Divine Influence that Hashem readies for us each day.

A corollary of this concern about misrepresenting the grandeur of Divinity is that we can't really get a handle on Hashem's midos through their manifestation. When we stand in awe at Hashem's chesed, a reality check reminds us that we do not understand His real chesed at all. What we perceive is a tiny fraction of what lies behind it, the fullness of which is beyond our comprehension. The real nature of the characteristics we admire is hidden from us. We only detect the most infinitesimal part of His greatness, as reflected in any midah of His at all.

And yet, that tiny fraction is hugely important to us. Through it, we understand what it is that we do not understand! By catching a small glimpse of His chesed, we at least realize that it comes from an enormous font of even greater chesed. What we see is something sourced in a much more powerful form of chesed, but is visible to us only because it has become accessible to us by being cloaked in many layers of covering.

The tzadik functions similarly. G-d sends the neshamah of the tzadik to this world to point to Hashem's greatness. People observe that the tzadik manages, on a very reduced scale, to do some of the wondrous things that Hashem Himself does. Just as Hashem brings the rains, blesses the childless with offspring, makes small amounts plentiful, so does the intervention of the tzadik accomplish the same. ² Because they realize that the tzadik's effectiveness is entirely drawn from Hashem, people learn about His power and chesed through the life of the tzadik.

The tzadik teaches about his Creator in another important way as well. Those privileged enough to study the lifestyle of the tzadik are taken in by his dedication, by his incessant service of Hashem, by the kedushah and purity of his pedestrian affairs. They see him conduct himself with wisdom, patience, and yir'as Hashem. They observe how his ahavas Hashem translates into love of people, and drawing them close to Torah. He hears how the tzadik always defends other Jews, rather than criticizes them.

The observer has little choice but to connect the accomplishment of the tzadik with HKBH. He credits not only the tzadik himself, but understands that the tzadik draws his greatness from Hashem himself. Thus, the tzadik testifies to Hashem's greatness.

Noach reacted the same way to Shem's behavior. He was not merely pleased by the exemplary behavior of his son in that difficult episode, but understood that its source was the G-d to Whom Shem was connected. Therefore, Noach blessed not Shem, but the Divine Source from which flowed Shem's laudable actions.
