

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

The Master of the Universe does not say "please" often. He commands. Yet this week, in issuing one of the final charges to Moshe during the final days in Egypt he does not command Moshe to do his bidding -- He beseeches him. In Exodus 11:2 Hashem asks Moshe to, "please speak in the ears of the people (of Israel): let each man ask his fellow (Egyptian) man and each woman ask her fellow (Egyptian) woman for gold and silver utensils."

The Talmud in Tractate Brachos explains the unusual terminology -- "please." Hashem was concerned. He promised Abraham that his children would be enslaved in a foreign land and leave with great wealth. Yet so far only the first half of the promise was fulfilled. Hashem did not want the righteous one (Abraham) to say, "Enslavement you fulfilled, but you did not fulfill the promise of wealth." Therefore, though out of character, Hashem implores Moshe "please speak in the ears of the nation that they ask the Egyptians for gold and silver."

The questions are obvious. First, Hashem must keep His commitment because of His own promise, regardless of Abraham's impending complaints. Second, why must G-d enrich his people by telling them to ask the Egyptians for their due? Couldn't He have showered them with riches from the heavens as He gave them Manna?

Rav Shmuel Shtrashan of Vilna* (1819-1885) was a wealthy banker as well as a renowned Torah scholar. In addition to his commerce, he maintained a free-loan society to provide interest-free loans to the needy. One time he granted a one-year loan of 300 rubles to Reb Zalman the tailor and carefully recorded it in his ledger. One year later, to the date, with 300 rubles in an envelope, Reb Zalman knocked on the door of Rav Shmuel's study. The Rav was in the midst of deep Talmudic contemplation and hardly interrupted his studies while tucking the money away in one of the volumes he had been using.

A few weeks later, while reviewing his ledgers, Rav Shmuel noticed that Reb Zalman's loan was overdue. He summoned him to his office to inquire about the payment. Of course, Reb Zalman was astonished. He had paid the loan in full on the day it was due! The Rav could not recall payment and insisted that they go together to Beis Din (Rabbinical Court).

Word in town spread rapidly, and people began to shun Reb Zalman. His business declined, and his children and wife were affronted by their peers. The only recourse the Bais Din had was to have Reb Zalman swear that he had repaid the loan. Rav Shmuel did not want to allow a Jew to swear falsely

on his account and decided to forego the procedure by annulling the loan. This latest event brought even more scorn to the tailor, and eventually he felt forced to leave Vilna and establish himself elsewhere.

A year later, Rav Shmuel was analyzing a section of the Talmud and opened a volume he had used sometime in the past. He could not believe his eyes when he saw a thick envelope with Reb Zalman's return address, containing 300 rubles. Quickly, he ran to find the hapless tailor who had been so besmirched. After unsuccessfully searching Vilna, he found that the tailor had moved. Rabbi Shtrashan traveled to Reb Zalman to beg forgiveness. The tailor, a broken man, explained that there was no way that anyone would believe the true story. They would just say that the pious scholar had shown mercy on the unscrupulous tailor. Finally, they decided that the only way to truly atone and give back the tailor his reputation was for the scholar to take Reb Zalman's son as his son-in-law. The shocked town of Vilna rejoiced at the divine union that helped re-establish a reputation.

Hashem understood that after 210 years of hard labor there was hardly a way to give the Jews true wealth. Showering them with miraculous gifts and treasures would in no way compensate for years of degradation. Abraham would not find that reward acceptable. The only way for a slave to gain true wealth is to discard his subservient mentality, knock on his master's door, and proclaim, "I want and deserve your gold and silver!" The Egyptians complied by showering their former captives with an abundance of wealth. The Jews walked out of Egypt with more than just gold. They left with the pride and power to demand what they deserved. They received one of the most important gifts the Jews would treasure throughout their sojourn in exile -- their pride. Even Abraham was happy.

***This version of the story was adapted from "The Magid Speaks" by Rabbi Paysach Krohn c1987 Mesorah Publications**

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