

WHERE'S THE BEEF?

by Nechama Stampler

Where's the Beef? ¹

Moshe said, "I am in the midst of a people of six hundred thousand foot-soldiers. Yet You say I shall give them meat?...Can sheep and cattle be slaughtered for them and suffice for them?"...Hashem said to Moshe, "Is the hand of Hashem limited?"

Rashi: R. Akiva said that all should be understood according to its plain sense. "There are six hundred thousand foot-soldiers. You say that I shall give them meat? Are there sufficient sheep and cattle to satisfy them? Who will provide for them?" Questioning G-d's ability to provide was a sin on Moshe's part, but he was not punished for it, because his remark was not made in public. R. Shimon disagreed. He argued that it is unthinkable that Moshe, with all his closeness to Hashem, could have said such a thing. Rather, Moshe argued, "Shall I give them meat for a month, only so that you will kill them afterwards, so that their eating will last them an eternity? Would this bring praise to You?" Hashem responded, "If I do not give them what they ask for, they will assume that I lack the ability to do so. Would you prefer that people conclude that G-d is limited?"

Maharal: Ramban questions R. Shimon's approach. Firstly, his explication of the pesukim is forced. Additionally, he would have the Torah act in a manner very different from how it handles the sins of the great. Ordinarily, the Torah disguises them; they have to be unearthed by probing beneath the surface meaning. Here, according to R. Shimon, the plain meaning of the text casts a large shadow on the actions of the tzadik. Only by trawling for deeper meaning do we find an exculpatory explanation! This is the opposite of what we find in similar situations.

I (Maharal) do not agree. R. Shimon's comments flow easily from the pesukim. Furthermore, no explanation need show any doubt in Moshe's mind about Hashem's ability.

Here is what Moshe reasoned according to R. Shimon: Either Hashem was planning to offer the people meat through miraculous means, or through natural ones. He therefore conveyed the following to Him: "You've committed Yourself to provide meat to a huge population. Surely You could do this in an instant, miraculously. I have no doubt about that. But I certainly hope that this is not the case! The people do not deserve such a miracle. I realize that, on the other hand, every miracle performed for those who do not merit one exacts a huge price. The miracle is immediately followed by a display of Divine wrath. Were You to work a miracle for them, the consequence would be their destruction.

"Rather, You are hopefully planning to provide for them within the limitations of natural law. If so, we have a problem. There is no way to stay within a framework of Nature, and still be able to satisfy the needs of such a large number of people!"

R. Shimon sees the pesukim themselves pointing to this interpretation. Moshe speaks of the enormity of the task. Is it possible that enough animals can be "slaughtered for them?" Moshe asks. The words "for them" imply that they will be for their benefit. In other words, if they are to be granted what they ask for, there is insufficient supply in what is available without miraculous intervention. Working a miracle for them is unthinkable, because it would be followed by some show of midas hadin. As R. Shimon adds, this would make a very poor impression on any observer. It would be the equivalent of telling a donkey to eat the food in front of it, and that its head would immediately thereafter be severed.

Hashem responds that giving them food and cutting off their heads is preferable to shortening Hashem's arm. Moshe was wrong about His plan. Hashem did in fact intend to grant their request for meat through a miracle performed in Divine anger, rather than provide for them with love, but through Nature. Taking into account the harshness of Divine judgment, the upshot of the affair would still be a kiddush Hashem, not the opposite. When it comes to Man's very understanding of Who G-d is, and what He can do, there is no wiggle room allowable without harming the purpose of Man's journey on this earth. Presenting an accurate view of what Hashem is (at least the little that we are capable of understanding) ultimately has to be a kiddush Hashem.

This approach is preferable to the one offered by Ramban. Ramban sees Moshe assuming that the meat would come from a natural source, because he ruled out a miraculous one. Miracles, he assumed, only occur when Hashem wishes to shower a recipient with his chesed - or when midas hadin demands retribution against sinners. Since neither of these two seemed to apply to the Jewish people at the moment, Moshe reasoned that Hashem was planning to find a non-miraculous supply of meat. Moshe balked at this plan. How could it be that enough meat could be found? Hashem responded by reminding him that the hand of HBKH is not limited. He can do whatever He wishes.

This is not satisfying, however. What did Hashem mean by saying that His hand is not limited? If He meant that He has many options within the natural world to accomplish the unexpected, even without resorting to miraculous overturning of the laws of Nature, then we are back where we started! It is inconceivable that Moshe would not understand this on his own! If He meant that He lacks no ability to provide meat through a miracle, then why would He speak of Moshe limiting the hand of G-d? Moshe did not deny that Hashem could provide meat miraculously - he merely assumed that Hashem would not work a miracle for the Jewish people, feed them meat for a month, and then punish them with death. Miracles were supposed to be reserved for manifestations of genuine chesed!

Rather, it seems to me that Ramban's pshat is really R. Akiva's position, who reads the pesukim close

to their simple meaning. R. Akiva is not saying that Moshe doubted Hashem's ability. He is saying that Moshe could not believe that Hashem would provide meat miraculously to sinners. Miracles are justified when Klal Yisrael follows Hashem's will and dictates. When His servants are treated to supernatural protection, Hashem's heavenly court is honored and empowered, as it were, thereby. Miracles performed for a rebellious Klal Yisrael, however, bring shame and disgrace to His court.

Moshe sinned, according to R. Akiva, in failing to comprehend that Hashem would justify miraculous intervention to protect Divine honor where necessary. Even if preceded by some sin or indiscretion on the part of the Jewish people, a miraculous response by Him can be the source of a Kiddush Hashem. Observers can still note that, with all His love for us, He does not relax the high standards, the expectation He has of us to understand what is humanly possible to understand about His greatness. Moshe, who had previously never heard this position from G-d, sinned in failing to comprehend this truism about Hashem's readiness to perform miracles. It was an understandable sin, since he had never been taught otherwise by Hashem.

It is to this, seemingly innocuous point, that R. Shimon reacts. This cannot be! Moshe, describes as trustworthy throughout G-d's abode, could not fail to comprehend this on his own. R. Shimon therefore responds with his explanation of the exchange between Moshe and Hashem. As explained above, Moshe did not doubt that a miracle could be forthcoming under the circumstances - he thought that Hashem's own words indicated, however, that it would not.

The bottom line, it would seem, is for us to realize how great Hashem's ability is to provide what He wants to give us, even within the framework of the natural order of things. *1. Based on Gur Aryeh, Bamidbar 11:22*
