

IS SILENCE GOLDEN?

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Parshas Behaaloscha

Is Silence Golden?

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Our parashah opens with the command to Aharon to light the Menorah in the Mishkan. The third verse relates: "Aharon did so; toward the face of the Menorah he kindled its lamps, as Hashem had commanded Moshe." What is this pasuk teaching? Rashi writes: "Aharon did so - the verse speaks Aharon's praise, i.e., that he changed nothing."

How are we to understand this? asks R' Yaakov Kranz z"l (the Dubno Maggid; died 1805). Is there anyone who would deviate from what G-d had commanded him?

He explains with a parable: Three patients came to one doctor with the same serious illness, and the doctor gave each of them the same prescription. One of the patients was a simple fellow who understood nothing about his illness. He followed the doctor's instructions to the letter and was soon healed.

The second patient thought he knew something about medicine. He altered the doctor's instructions, taking only some of the medicines that had been prescribed. He did not recover from his illness.

The third patient also was knowledgeable about medicine, but he nevertheless followed the doctor's instructions. He also was healed.

The Torah is our prescription against the spiritual illness brought on by the yetzer hara, says the Dubno Maggid. And, the same three types of people can be found among Mitzvah-observing Jews. Some understand nothing and simply do the mitzvot. Others think they understand, and they pick and choose among the mitzvot. Finally, there are the scholars who do have some understanding of what lies behind the commandments, but they nevertheless do not try to "improve" on the mitzvot. This is the Torah's praise of Aharon--whether he thought he understood the commandments or not, he fulfilled them to the letter. (Quoted in Ve'karata La'Shabbat Oneg)

"Bnei Yisrael shall make the Pesach-offering in its appointed time." (9:2)

The word Pesach refers to the fact that Hashem passed-over ("pasach") the homes of Bnei Yisrael when He killed the firstborn of Egypt. After all the miracles before and during the Exodus, why does the name of the offering (and the holiday) commemorate this one detail?

R' Yitzchak Yerucham Borodiansky shlita (Yeshivat Kol Torah in Yerushalayim) explains: The fact that Hashem passed-over the homes of Bnei Yisrael is not a mere detail of the Exodus. Rather, it is a sign of the hashgachah pratit / Divine providence with which Hashem relates to the Jewish People. That hashgachah pratit is the surest sign of the uniqueness of Bnei Yisrael; therefore, it is appropriate to highlight Hashem's passing-over the homes of Bnei Yisrael. (Siach Yitzchak: Shmot p.52)

"We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt free of charge; and the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic." (11:5)

R' Yosef Giktila z"l (1248-1310; Spain; author of the influential work of kabbalah, Sha'arei Orah) writes: Although it was necessary that Bnei Yisrael be exiled and enslaved as part of their formative experience, it was an act of kindness on Hashem's part that He caused them to be enslaved in Egypt, where food was plentiful. This surely lessened the suffering compared to what it would have been in a place that lacked abundant food. Moreover, Hashem decreed that Bnei Yisrael would multiply rapidly, and Bnei Yisrael had many mouths to feed. Therefore, in His kindness, He exiled them to Egypt. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Tzofnat Paneach p.20)

"Moshe heard the people weeping in their family groups, each one at the entrance of his tent, and the wrath of Hashem flared greatly." (11:10)

R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z"l (1910-1995; rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Kol Torah in Yerushalayim and one of the leading halachic authorities of the 20th century) observed that this verse serves as a criticism of those who mourn their own relatives who were killed in the Holocaust--"weeping in their family groups"--while failing to recognize the national tragedy. It is true, he said, that no one can grasp the full magnitude of the devastation; nevertheless, if one focuses on a Torah scholar who was killed, a yeshiva that was destroyed, or a town whose Jewish population was wiped-out, one can gradually develop an appreciation of what we lost. (Quoted in Minchat Avot p.50-51)

"Yehoshua bin Nun, the servant of Moshe since his youth, spoke up and said, 'My master Moshe, incarcerate them!'" (11:28)

R' Shabtai Hakohen z"l (the "Shach"; 1622-1663; author of one of the major commentaries on the Shulchan Aruch) writes that, although one is permitted to say his Torah teacher's / rebbe's name together with a title, that is only when one is not speaking to his teacher's face. To the teacher's face, even that is prohibited. Later authorities note, however, that the Shach's rule appears to be contradicted by Yehoshua's words in our verse ("my master Moshe"), which were said to his teacher's face!

R' Eliezer Dovid Gruenwald z"l (1867-1928; rabbi of Oyber Visheve, Hungary) explains: The Gemara (Eruvin 54a) describes how Torah was taught to the Generation of the Desert: Moshe taught Aharon, then he repeated the lesson for Aharon's sons, then again for the elders, and once more for all the people. Then Moshe left, and Aharon repeated the lesson for his sons, then again for the elders, and once more for all the people. Then Aharon left, and his sons repeated the lesson, and so on, until every person had heard the lesson four times. It emerges, therefore, that Yehoshua had multiple teachers. Had he said merely, "My master, incarcerate them," no one would have known to whom he was speaking. He had to address Moshe by name! (She'eilot U'teshuvot Keren Le'Dovid siman 181)

"[Hashem] said, 'Hear now My words--If there shall be prophets among you, in a vision I, Hashem, shall make Myself known to him; in a dream shall I speak with him. Not so is My servant Moshe . . . Mouth to mouth I speak to him, in a clear vision and not in riddles . . .'" (12:6-8)

It is written in the name of R' Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov z"l (founder of the chassidic movement) (some attribute this to an unnamed disciple): The word "chalom" (literally, a dream) alludes to the word "chalim" / "strong." When a person is awake, his spiritual life-force is subdued within his material being. However, when he sleeps, his spiritual life-force leaves his body and thereby is strengthened. This enables a person to attain the level of prophecy. Moshe Rabbeinu's life-force, however, was sufficiently independent of his body [for example, he could go 40 days and nights without food or drink] that he could experience prophecy while awake.

How can a person begin to elevate his life-force above his material existence? The Ba'al Shem Tov (or the unnamed disciple) explains: Whenever one sees a beautiful person or object or tastes a delicious food, one should ask himself, "Why am I so moved by this physical beauty or this delicious taste? Where did this quality come from, if not from G-d? All beauty comes from G-d! Why then should I focus on the manifestation of G-d's creation rather than on the Creator Himself?" (Tzava'at Ha'Rivash no. 90)

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"Miriam and Aharon spoke against Moshe . . ." (12:1)

R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (Maharal of Prague; died 1609) writes: The midrash Yalkut Shimoni cites the verse (Mishlei 10:19), "In an abundance of words, silence will not be lacking," and applies it to Miriam who spoke against Moshe. Regarding the continuation of that verse, "but one who restrains his lips is wise," the midrash comments: Because he restrains his lips from speaking against others he is wise. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel said, "My entire life I grew up among wise men, and I never found anything as good for a person as silence."

The midrash relates: Two courtiers were standing before [the Roman Emperor] Hadrian. One claimed that speech is preferable to silence, while the other claimed the opposite. The one who claimed that speech was preferable presented his arguments first: "Without speech, kings could not be crowned, the dead would not be buried, brides could not be praised for their beauty, and no business would be transacted."

Next, the second courtier began to present his arguments in favor of silence. Suddenly, the one who claimed that speech was preferable slapped him across the face. "Why did you slap him?" the Emperor demanded.

"I made my arguments using speech, which I claim is preferable," he replied. "Let him make his arguments using silence, which he claims is preferable!" [Likewise, continues the midrash,] King Shlomo said, "I never said that one should muzzle his mouth, only that one should restrain his mouth from speaking against others." [Until here from the midrash]

Maharal explains: The middle section of the midrash seems to be teaching that one should not talk unless it is necessary, as in the examples the courtier gave. Without speech, one could never accomplish anything, not even to prove the merits of silence. Nevertheless, silence is preferable when there is no need to speak, lest one say things which should not be said.

On the other hand, Maharal continues, the earlier part of the midrash seems to say that all speech is permitted except hurtful speech. To sit quietly in the company of others is not fitting, Maharal writes. Even so, excessive talking is definitely prohibited, he adds.

In all, Maharal concludes, there are five types of speech: (1) Speech which is a mitzvah, such as Torah study; (2) speech which is a sin--for example, lying and lashon hara; (3) speech which is an abomination because it serves no constructive purpose, which is the category into which most of human speech falls, Maharal writes; (4) speech which is beloved, i.e., extolling the virtues of good character traits and pointing out the fallacy of bad character traits; and (5) speech which is permitted, i.e., that which is necessary for engaging in business and other worldly necessities. (Netivot Olam:

Netiv Ha'shetikah ch.1)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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