

THE FATHER OF PROPHETS

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Parshas Behaaloscha

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This week's Hamaayan class is in merit of Patrick Carrera's son, Nathan Carrera for his freedom.

The concept of prophecy is mentioned several times in our parashah. Near the end, we read about the primacy of Moshe Rabbeinu's prophecy over that of all other prophets. Hashem says (12:6-8), "If there shall be prophets among you, in a vision shall I, Hashem, 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, at the image of Hashem he gazes." R' Moshe ben Maimon z"l (Rambam; 1135-1204) writes that one of the Thirteen Principles of Faith is that Moshe was the greatest of all prophets, not only greater than those who came after him, but also those who came before him.

We readily understand the need to believe that no prophet after Moshe was as great as he; otherwise, such a prophet could countermand the mitzvot of the Torah. However, why is it necessary to believe that Moshe was a greater prophet than, for example, Avraham Avinu? R' Yochanan Bechhofer shlita (Israel) explains, based on teachings of R' Yaakov Weinberg z"l (1923-1999; rosh yeshiva of Ner Israel in Baltimore): Rambam writes that the requirement to believe in prophecy, in general, and Moshe Rabbeinu's prophecy, in particular, impacts two areas: 1) our belief in a Divinely-given Torah; 2) our belief in hashgachah / G-d's involvement in the world. Why does that latter belief require believing in the primacy of Moshe's prophecy? Both Rambam and R' Yehuda Halevi z"l (11th century; author of Kuzari) explain that our acceptance of Moshe's prophecy and of the Torah comes from the fact that our ancestors all witnessed the Revelation at Har Sinai. That event also is the source of our belief that G-d is involved with our lives; thus, the two beliefs are intertwined. And, if not for Moshe's prophecy--as confirmed to us, not by signs and wonders, but by our ancestors' own observations--we would not believe in any prophets. This explains, as well, why no prophet before Moshe is recorded as publicly sharing a prophecy; prior to the revelation at Har

Sinai, mankind in general had no reason to believe that G-d spoke to man. (Even Shetiyah)

"These were the journeys of Bnei Yisrael according to their legions, and they journeyed. Moshe said to Hovav son of Re'uel, the Midianite, the father-in-law of Moshe, 'We are journeying to the place of which Hashem has said, "I shall give it to you." Go with us and we shall treat you well, for Hashem has spoken of good for Israel.'" (10:28-29)

R' Shaul Lowenstam z"l (1717-1790; rabbi of Amsterdam) asks: It seems from these verses that Moshe Rabbeinu did not speak to his father-in-law Hovav (aka Yitro) about traveling with Bnei Yisrael until after Bnei Yisrael already had broken camp and begun traveling. Why?

He explains: The Gemara (Ta'anit 21b) teaches, "It is not the place that honors a person; rather, it is the person who honors the place." The Gemara proves this from the fact that, as long as the Shechinah was at Har Sinai, people and animals had to keep their distance, whereas, once the shofar was blown to signal the Shechinah's departure, people and animals were free to ascend Har Sinai. Likewise, as long as the mishkan stood [signifying the presence of the Shechinah], individuals who were impure had to keep their distance, but, once the Shechinah departed and the mishkan was disassembled, those same people could walk over the same ground where, a short time ago, the Shechinah had been. Thus we see that the place was honored only because of its occupant.

R' Shaul continues: As long as Yitro was in Bnei Yisrael's encampment, he was honored as the ruler's (Moshe's) father-in-law. Thus, before Bnei Yisrael broke camp, Moshe had no reason to ask Yitro to travel with them; it would have been natural for Yitro to want to stay with the people who honored him so. Once camp was broken, however, Moshe said to himself: When Yitro sees that there is no holiness to the ground on which the mishkan stood, he will deduce, as the Gemara does, that it is not the place that honors a person; rather, it is the person who honors the place. In that case, Yitro might reason that he can return to Midian and receive the same honor there.

Therefore, Moshe entreated Yitro, "Go with us!" Not for honor, which you can get at home also; rather because "we shall treat you well . . ." (Binyan Ariel)

"Moshe said, 'Six hundred thousand footmen are the people in whose midst I am, yet You say I shall give them meat, and they shall eat for a month of days. Can sheep and cattle be slaughtered for them and suffice for them? If all the fish of the sea will be gathered for them, would it suffice for them?'" (11:21-22)

Commentaries wonder: How could Moshe Rabbeinu have doubted Hashem's ability to provide meat for Bnei Yisrael? R' Yeshaya Reiniger z"l (19th century; rabbi of Hranice / Reinitz, Moravia) explains:

The Gemara presents an opinion that Bnei Yisrael in the desert were not permitted to eat meat except when they brought a sacrificial offering. Although Rabbi Akiva appears to argue, Tosafot suggest a way to understand the Gemara so that there is no argument.

Accordingly, Moshe's question can be understood as follows: There are only three kohanim in the world--Aharon and his sons, Elazar and Itamar. Can enough sheep and cattle be slaughtered by just three kohanim to suffice for 600,000 people?

But, R' Reiniger adds, if that was Moshe's question, why did he mention fish? He explains: This should not be read as a question, but as an exclamation: "If all the fish of the sea will be gathered for them, then it would suffice for them!" (Chiddushei Rabbi Yeshayah)

"Aharon said to Moshe, 'I beg you, my lord, do not cast a sin upon us, for we have been foolish and we have sinned. Let her [Miriam] not be like a corpse, like one who leaves his mother's womb with half his flesh having been consumed!'

"Moshe cried out to Hashem, saying, 'Please, G-d, please heal her'." (12:11-13)

The Gemara (Berachot 12b) teaches: "If one is able to pray for mercy for another and does not do so, he is called a sinner."

R' Aharon Leib Steinman shlita (rosh yeshiva of Ponevezh L'tzeirim; at age 100, one of the senior roshei yeshiva in Eretz Yisrael) asks: Why didn't the Gemara say simply, "One who does not pray for mercy for another is a sinner"? We would understand that this was referring only to one who is able to pray, since one who is not able to pray would not be a sinner for not praying!

He answers: The Gemara is teaching us another lesson--that one should not pray for an ill person or a person in need of mercy unless "he is able," i.e., unless he will do so with true feeling. Otherwise, it is not worthwhile to pray at all. Certainly, one cannot pray for someone he dislikes or at whom he is angry. (Yemalei Pi Tehilatecha p.136)

R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z"l (Yerushalayim; 1910-1995; one of the leading halachic authorities in Israel in the second half of the 20th century) used to advise that one should not pray for someone who is ill unless the person praying has some connection to the ill person and feels his pain. Otherwise, it is merely chutzpah to ask G-d for something that one doesn't particularly care about. R' Auerbach himself was known to ask personal questions about the sick person's condition, family, job, etc. in order to be able to share in his pain.

For this reason, R' Auerbach added, if one asks a tzaddik to pray for someone who is ill, and the sick person recovers, it is important to inform the tzaddik of this fact. Since the tzaddik would not pray for the ill person unless he could feel the latter's pain, the failure to inform the tzaddik of the recovery

causes the tzaddik himself to continue to feel pain unnecessarily. (Halichot Shlomo: Tefilah ch. 8, n.60)

R' Alexander Ziskind z"l (Grodno, Belarus; died 1794) writes: In the blessing of "Refa'enu" in shemoneh esrei, one should pray for sick people, both those in his household and those in his city of whom he is aware, even if they haven't asked him to pray for them. In this way, one fulfills the mitzvah (Vayikra 19:18), "Love your fellow as yourself." When those who were sick have recovered, whether from one's own household or others, one should give praise and thanks when reciting the conclusion of this blessing and, there too, he should have in mind to perform the above-mentioned mitzvah [i.e., "Love your fellow as yourself"]. (Yesod V'shoresh Ha'avodah V ch.4)

Letters from Our Sages

In connection with the section of our parashah relating that Miriam spoke lashon hara about her brother Moshe and was punished with tzara'at, we present the following excerpt from "Iggeret Ha'Gra," a letter that R' Eliyahu z"l (1720-1797), the "Vilna Gaon," wrote to his family during his unsuccessful attempt to visit Eretz Yisrael.

A person who succeeds in muzzling his mouth merits an unimaginable abundance of the hidden light [see Rashi to Bereishit 1:4], as it is written (Tehilim 34:13-14), "Who is the man who desires life, who loves days of seeing goodness? Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit." Such a person's sin are forgiven and he is saved from gehinnom, as it is written (Mishlei 21:23), "One who guards his mouth and tongue guards his soul from troubles." It is written also (Mishlei 18:21), "Death and life are within the power of the tongue." Woe to someone who kills himself using his tongue!

What gain is there from constant speech? . . . Do not speak a person's praises excessively, for this leads to speaking about his faults, and certainly do not speak about a person's faults, for what gain is there in speaking of foreign things, about which it is written (Mishlei 22:14) "The mouth [that speaks] foreign things is a deep pit; those scorned by Hashem will fall there"? [In his commentary to Mishlei, the Vilna Gaon writes that the second half of the verse is referring to those who listen to the improper speech of the person referred to in the first half of the verse.]

The primary protection [against speaking and hearing improper speech] is solitude. Do not go out of the house except for a great need or a great mitzvah. . . Even in shul, sit alone, avoiding other people, because wherever people are gathered, it is impossible not to hear idle chatter and lashon hara. Even one who hears and remains silent is punished, as our Sages said. Especially on Shabbat and Yom Tov, when the multitudes gather in shul, it is impossible that there will not be among them those who chatter idly or speak lashon hara. Guard yourselves not to sit among them. Distance yourselves from this ugliness. Sit alone in shul, for speaking in shul is a felonious transgression and a

great sin, about which the Zohar says, "One who converses in shul has no share in the G-d of Israel." The law is the same in a bet medrash as in a shul.

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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