

THE BLESSING WHICH CAN NEVER BE RETRACTED

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And G-d spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to Aharon and to his sons, saying, 'so shall you bless the children of Israel...' [6:22-23]

What is the nature of this blessing, which the Priests give the Nation? Are they simply wishing us well?

In the beginning of Parshas Mattos (Num. 30:2), the commentator Rashi quotes the Medrash (Sifri) which says "Moshe prophesied by saying 'So says HaShem, ('At about midnight...') (Ex. 11:4)', and other prophets also prophesied with 'So says HaShem,' but Moshe [alone] had the additional ability to prophecy by saying 'This is the statement...'"

The Torah V'HaMitzvah explains as follows: all prophets could "see" G-d with an "unclear," limited vision. This means that the prophet became G-d's representative (Shaliach) to deliver the Divine message, but in his own words. Moshe, as an individual, could also prophecy in this way: before Israel left Egypt, he said "so says HaShem, 'At about midnight...'", and when Israel fell from their heights during the incident of the Golden Calf, Moshe again used the language of "so says HaShem" when speaking to the tribe of Levi (Ex. 32:27).

Moshe, however, reached a unique level as the leader of the Nation of Israel at the time when G-d gave the Torah. He was able to have a "clear" vision, a more absolute contact with HaShem. In those cases, Moshe was not G-d's representative, delivering a message, but rather it was as if G-d Himself was speaking. "The Divine Presence spoke from within his throat."

We know that although G-d promised our forefather Yaakov that "I will be with you and guard you wherever you go," later Yaakov "was extremely fearful and his courage left him." This fear, according to our Sages (Brachos 4a), was Yaakov's concern that because of his sins he was no longer worthy of protection. He was afraid that as a result of his own failings, he would not deserve fulfillment of HaShem's blessing.

Maimonides, however, in his introduction to the Mishnah, Seder Z'raim, says that when HaShem blesses our future by way of a prophet, it is impossible for it not to actually happen. Were this not so, prophecy could never be substantiated. We would worry that every prophet was false. Thus the Talmud says (Brachos 7a) "every statement which came from HaShem for good, even conditionally, He will never retract." Is this not a contradiction to Yaakov's fear?

The Rambam (Maimonides) explains that a blessing from HaShem to the prophet directly can be conditional. The prophet himself (or herself) will of course not come to doubt either G-d's existence or his own prophecy as a result. But concerning a prophecy given over (by way of a prophet) to the people at large, we would be unable to rely upon or trust in prophecy if the words of even true prophets sometimes never came to pass.

Now, let us return to the Priestly Blessing, with which Moshe told the Kohanim to bless the Children of Israel. Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Hertzberg zt"l uses all we have learned above to explain the unusual language of the verses describing the blessing.

G-d tells Moshe to "Speak" to the Cohanim, the Priests, using the same root (Davar) as the word for "statement." This is the unique level of prophecy reached by Moshe: "The Divine Presence spoke from within his throat."

What, then, shall Moshe say? "So shall you bless..." using the language of "so HaShem says," the language used by the other prophets as G-d's representatives. What the Cohanim are to say is itself G-d's prophecy: that G-d will bless us and guard us, that He will show us mercy and give us peace! As a prophecy given to the people at large, it can never be retracted. "Let them place my name upon the Children of Israel, and I shall bless them" (Num. 6:27) - this blessing must certainly come to pass!