

ELUSIVE ALLUSIONS

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"These are the words which Moshe spoke to the entire nation of Israel..." [1:1]

As the Sifsei Chachamim points out, this sentence uses an unusual phraseology -- the Torah would typically use an introduction such as "Moshe spoke to the entire Nation, saying..." Why, then, does the Torah use a less direct reference to "the words which Moshe spoke?" Furthermore, Moshe goes on to list various locations where the nation sinned against G-d, without an explanation of what happened in each place. Why does he not give further detail?

Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi) explains that the Torah is avoiding direct language because Moshe is delivering a rebuke. Out of concern for Israel's honor and dignity, the Torah merely hints to the various sins, rather than listing the sins themselves all at once.

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz zt"l, Dean of the Mir Yeshiva, explains in Sichos Mussar that the Torah is teaching us how important it is to honor every person, and to be careful with the dignity of others.

This is not only true concerning an entire congregation of holy people, but even with truly wicked individuals. The Medrash says that Bilaam's donkey died immediately after rebuking his master (as we read in Parshas Balak, several weeks ago). Rashi explains that had the donkey lived, people would have pointed to it and said, "there's the animal which chastised Bilaam!" G-d was concerned about Bilaam's honor, and thus killed the donkey.

Who are we discussing here? Bilaam! A man who distinguished himself as an evil-doer, who attempted to use his G-d-given spiritual talents to curse the nation which G-d had blessed. Furthermore, it would have honored HaShem's Name if the donkey were permitted to wander free, with people pointing to it and saying, "this is the animal which G-d allowed to speak!" Avoiding embarrassment to the wicked Bilaam was considered more important than giving honor to G-d.

And as Rabbi Shmuelevitz points out, this lesson regarding the honor of others is especially relevant to this time of year. In just a few days we will reach the Ninth of Av, the day on which both Temples were destroyed. And the Second Temple, our Sages tell us, was destroyed because of needless hatred.

The Talmud relates that one individual, Bar Kamtza, was publicly humiliated at a party. Seeing that no one, including the Rabbis present, arose to stop the host from shaming him, Bar Kamtza decided to strike back -- and went to inform on the Rabbis to the Romans, claiming that they were rebelling against Roman rule. The Talmud reads [Tractate Gittin 57a]: "Rabbi Elazar says, come and see the incredible power of embarrassment, for the Holy One, Blessed be He, helped Bar Kamtza, and He destroyed His House and burned His Temple."

If we must protect any individual's honor, this is obviously even more true when it comes to the honor of a Talmid Chacham, a Torah scholar. Not only does the Talmud say that "Jerusalem was not destroyed, except because Scholars were disgraced within it" [Shabbos 119b], but it also says that one who disgraces a Talmid Chacham has no share in the World to Come [Sanhedrin 99b, and see Rambam M.T. Talmud Torah 6:11].

In the Chapters of the Fathers [3:15] Rebbe Eliezer HaMoadi says, "one who publicly humiliates his fellow... even though he has in his hands both Torah and Mitzvos, he has no share in the World to Come." So if one who disgraces a Talmid Chacham has no share, and one who publicly humiliates anyone has no share -- then what is true of one who publicly humiliates a Talmid Chacham? The answer is obvious: even if he has in his hands both Torah and Mitzvos, if he prays three times a day and is meticulous to eat only the most carefully Kosher foods -- he has no share in the World to Come.

The Talmud also says regarding any generation in which the Temple was not rebuilt, that it is as if the Temple was destroyed in that generation. In our generation, we hardly need wonder why this is so -- because all the causes of its destruction are still here.

There is only one answer, and that is to abandon that sort of behavior and to return to G-d. Because as Maimonides says in the Laws of Return 3:18, whenever the Sages say that a person has no share in the World to Come, this only refers to a person who died without returning from his evil ways. For one who does, even if he did every sin in the book all of his days, and then on his last day sincerely abandoned all his evil and returned to G-d, then he has a portion in the World to Come.

Let us learn to be extremely careful with the honor of all others, to treat them with dignity and respect -- and may we merit to see the reversal of the destruction, and the rebuilding of the Temple, speedily in our days.

Good Shabbos,
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