

ANSWERING THE SEA'S ANGER

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The water formed walls for them, to their right and to their left.

Meshech Chochmah: Reflecting on the ways of the Torah, we detect a distinct difference between two categories of mitzvos. We call some commandments "received" mitzvos, i.e. those that we follow simply because Hashem dictated them to us, but would not have legislated on our own. We also find other mitzvos, those that govern intuitively proper behavior and character traits. Different forms of punishment are attached to violations of the former group, such as the varieties of execution or corporal punishment/ *malkos* that are meted out for prohibitions related to *avodah zarah* and forbidden relations/ *arayos*. The latter group, however, goes unpunished by human hands – technically, because they either require monetary restitution, or because they involve no physical activity, either of which being sufficient to preclude other forms of judicial punishment. As severe as shortcomings of the latter group may be, the *beis din* does not punish the person of base character, the disputatious personality, or the chronic speaker of *lashon hora*.

This marked difference in treatment, however, only applies to individuals. The very opposite holds true for the way the *tzibur*, the community is treated. Chazal^[2] tell us that Dovid's generation was outwardly pious in their observance – but they fell in battle because of malicious informers among them. Achav's generation, on the other hand, was given to flirtations with *avodah zarah* – but prevailed on the battlefield, because they lacked those same flawed personalities! When Hashem declares^[3] that He is willing "to dwell amongst them amidst their *tumah*," He refers only to the *tumah* of breaching the "received" laws, even including idolatry. Rotten character, *lashon hora* and the like cause the *Shechinah* to flee.

The Divine reponse to the indiscretions of our people during the period of the first and second Temples illustrates the point. The community of the first *beis hamikdosh* violated all the cardinal sins: idolatry, immorality, and murder. Yet, the *Shechinah* returned to them quickly in the form of the second Temple. The community at the time of the destruction of *bayis sheni* was meticulous in its observance, but groundless enmity between people was rampant. Some two millennia later, we still await a replacement Temple! Apparently, teach Chazal^[4] the shortcomings of the second Temple were more grievous – at least when looking at the people as a community, rather than as individuals.

The gemara^[5] finds proof for the severity of monetary violence in the lead-up to the Flood. The Torah speaks of the "corruption"^[6] of the earth that led to the Deluge, which means *avodah zarah*

and *arayos*.^[7] Yet, Hashem declares^[8] that He will destroy human society because of *chamas*^[9] / theft and other monetary misappropriation by force. Which, then, was it that so aroused Divine anger? Was it the corruption of the most serious sins, or was it the theft?

The gemara says that they both contributed; the fate of the generation was "sealed" through theft. This does not necessarily mean that the contributions were additive. Our approach above provides a different way of understanding their roles. For the "corruption" vices, HKBH was willing to treat them all as a collective, and treat them compassionately despite shortcomings that would have marked them for death as individuals. What sealed their fate, however, was their penchant for *chamas*, for theft. A society of ethical depravity loses its standing with G-d. When people employed their weaponry to seize the property of others, they became two-legged beasts of prey, and lost their lease on Divine compassion.

Chazal^[10] relate that as the waters split to form the two walls of our *pasuk*, the Soton protested. "These *Bnei Yisroel* worshipped idols in Egypt. Why are You performing miracles for them?" The guardian angel of the Sea agreed, and was angered enough to wish to reverse the miracle, and drown them! (For this reason the word *chomah* / wall in our *pasuk* is spelled deficiently, without the voweled *vav*. This allows it to be read as *cheimah* / anger, alluding to the Sea's displeasure.)

While we must indeed deal in some way with Soton's point, we note that he could have argued similarly after the succession of plagues succeeded in liberating them from the Egyptians? Why did he wait till the splitting of the Sea? Our thinking above suggests an approach. While the *Bnei Yisroel* may have worshipped idols in Egypt and given up the practice of *bris milah*,^[11] they nonetheless displayed good character. They did not speak *lashon hora*. They loved each other. Seen as a community, they merited the Divine intervention on their behalf.

This changed as the shore of the Reed Sea, when their communal unity disintegrated, and they formed four different groups- each with a different strategy of dealing with the imminent threat of the approaching Egyptian armed force, including one that wished to return to Egypt! Their unity having evaporated, they had to be judged as individuals. *Soton* now had a point. As individuals, they were idolaters, and not deserving of any miracles?

While this approach is attractive, it does not explain all the anomalies in our *pasuk*. An earlier verse^[12] already introduced the image of the walls of water. There, *chomah* is spelled with a *vav*; there is no hint of the Sea's anger at any injustice. Why not?

Soton's ire was not ignited by the ten *makos*. The Bnei Yisroel had dealt adequately with their prior sins through *teshuvah*. They turned their backs on the gods of Egypt by courageously slaughtering *korban Pesach*, despite the place of the sheep among the Egyptian deities. They circumcised themselves and their children. Soton's arguments were sure to be rejected.

Reaching our *pasuk*, however, the Egyptians could also lay claim to *teshuvah*! They proclaimed, "We are forced into submission by Yisrael, because Hashem fights for them."^[13] The Egyptians now fully

accepted Hashem's existence and power. Both peoples had repented for their past, claimed Soton. Why were the formerly idolatrous Jews treated preferentially? Why was their *teshuvah* accepted, but not that of the Egyptians?

The midrash continues with Hashem's response to Soton. "Fool! The Bnei Yisroel served *avodah zarah* only because of the unsettled mindset brought on by the harsh servitude." In other words, their aveiros were committed in a state of inner confusion. They did *teshuvah*, however, after many months of respite from the rigors of servitude, which had ended. Their repentance came about through careful, deliberate reflection. The Egyptians, on the other hand, committed their sins from a position of equilibrium and plenty. Their repentance, however, was a momentary panic-stricken response to the advance of the waters that were about to crash down on their heads. Such *teshuvah* could not compete with that of the *Bnei Yisroel*.

May Hashem bring about that *Bnei Yisroel* will all return to Him from a position of calm and plenty!

[1] Based on Meshech Chochmah, Shemos 14:29

[2] Yerushalmi Peah 1:1

[3] Vayikra 16:16

[4] Yoma 9A

[5] Sanhedrin 108A

[6] Bereishis 6:11

[7] Rashi, ibid.

[8] Bereishis 6:13

[9]

[10] Yalkut Shimoni 234

[11] As indicated by the need for large-scale *bris milah* before the *korban Pesach*

[12] Shemos 14:22

[13] Shemos 14:25