

# NATIONAL BACKBONE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*"Moshe returned to Hashem and said, my Lord, why have you done evil to this people?...Ever since I came to Paroh...he has done evil to this people, while You have not rescued Your people." HKBH said to Moshe...Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov did not question the justice of My ways, nor did they say to me, "What is Your name?"...Right at the start, however, you said to me "What is Your name," and now you say to Me, "You have not rescued Your people. Now you will see what I shall do to Paroh." The war against Paroh you will see. You will not see the war against the thirty-one kings of Canaan.*"<sup>[2]</sup>

"Cursed is anyone who kills their neighbor secretly."<sup>[3]</sup> Most of us find open murder abhorrent and unthinkable. Killing by stealth, however, gets a pass from too many. We use speech as a lethal weapon, oblivious to the devastation it causes. We do the same with the pen, indiscriminately abusing its lethal power.

One of the reasons that people are blind to what words can do is that they are trained to consider the consequences of actions, of deeds. Speech, in their minds, simply doesn't rise to the bar of action. Therefore, they reason, it just cannot be as objectionable. We can guess that the Torah meant this to be part of the take-away from the *parshah* of *eidim zomemim*/ plotting witnesses.<sup>[4]</sup> The Torah treats extremely seriously the attempt by these witnesses to inflict harm literally without lifting a finger. Halacha deals as harshly with them as if they had done some terrible deed with their own hands. The Torah wishes us to understand that speech alone sometimes must be considered by the law as a serious crime.

After Moshe's encounter with the mean-spirited and cynical Dosson and Avirom, he exclaimed, "Now the matter is known!"<sup>[5]</sup> Chazal<sup>[6]</sup> explain that Moshe had been baffled by the long servitude of his brethren. Why were they pressed into servitude more severely than any other nation? Now, however, he understood. With crude informers among them, they deserved their fate. He had seen the darkest shades of evil speech at work.

What, though, had he not understood? Moshe knew of Avrohom's conversation with G-d, where he learned of a long, bitter servitude ahead for his people – and its reason! – after which they would ride out on a crest of miraculous intervention by Hashem. Clearly the appointed hour had not yet arrived according to Hashem's timetable. He had no cause to be puzzled!

In fact, he was not surprised at all that a Divine Hand of deliverance had not been sighted. It would

surely come; of this, he had no doubt. More surprising was that a large nation could be kept in servitude for centuries without taking action on its own behalf! Why had they not done more to hasten their own freedom?

Moshe found his answer in his unpleasant episode with Dosson and Avirom. The prosecution of a people's national interest depends on strong ties between all parts of its citizenry. People must bond and unite with their countrymen. When he discovered informers, fifth-columnists among the Bnei Yisrael, when he detected Jews prepared to compromise their own brothers and sisters, Moshe understood why they had not succeeded in protecting and advancing their cause by natural means, even without miraculous assistance. And he realized as well that sadly, even if the time were ripe for a miraculous delivery, the sins of infighting and disunity would delay such intervention.

While Moshe had found his answer to one question, he was less successful with another – the one that is the subject of the gemara cited above. Having been deputized by HKBH at the burning bush to redeem the Bnei Yisrael, Moshe assumed that behind Hashem's plan was His *midah* of *rachamim*. Moshe believed that Hashem was reaching out to an oppressed people, to break the shackles of their bondage. He also reasoned that such compassion would be inappropriate for a people that had grown content with their servitude. It would be no great favor to save a people that did not want or need to be saved. Moshe believed, however, that the human spirit would not allow the yearning for freedom to be extinguished. Despite the apparent apathy of the people, surely they deeply desired freedom!

So he had thought, until faced with evidence to the contrary. That changed when Moshe's initial pitch to Paroh ended in failure. The reaction of the people was devastating. Moshe had put his life on the line. He had been received with alacrity and joy when he first arrived. True, he had failed. But he was not prepared for the contemptuous reaction of the people. He expected more patience, more sympathy. What he experienced caused him to doubt the readiness of the people for redemption-as-*rachamim*. They no longer evidenced determination to be redeemed. They were ready, it seemed, to accept their servitude, so long as they were fed.

If so, what could have been G-d's reason for sending Moshe on his mission? It must have been for one of two reasons, reasoned Moshe.

Perhaps he had been sent in the manner of many of the prophets who followed him. Perhaps his job was to warn a sinning population. Hashem, after all, loves all who are created in His image. Maybe Moshe had been sent as a prophet urging the Egyptians to repent.

Moshe rejected this possibility. Would Hashem arrange to warn one population at the expense of the suffering of a different group of people? It could not be that he, Moshe, was sent to warn Paroh at the expense of the Bnei Yisrael. Their servitude had just become even more intolerable, as Paroh rejected the warning and retaliated by increasing their work load. "Why have You done evil to this people,"<sup>[2]</sup> Moshe asked, meaning why should exhortation to the Egyptians result in the pain of this

people, i.e. the innocent Bnei Yisroel?

Maybe it was not about warning the Egyptians. Maybe the mission to Paroh was about demonstrating Hashem's power and honor. Again, Moshe argued to himself that this could not be true, because he had utterly failed in that regard. Invoking the Name of Hashem had made things worse; the net result was a *chilul Hashem*, not a *kiddush Hashem*. "From the time I came to Paroh to speak in Your Name he did evil to this people."<sup>[8]</sup>

There was no escaping the conclusion, then, that somehow it really was all about Hashem's *rachamim*. Somehow it was appropriate to save the Bnei Yisrael.

How would this play out? Moshe reasoned that Hashem would stand by the oppressed for as long as they were oppressed – but not longer. Once freed, they would become like any other people. They would scout out their options, and find a swath of land that could sustain them, without interfering with the rights of any other people. There was plenty of unoccupied land around. On some of it, the Bnei Yisrael would make its new home.

Surely the liberation of the Jews would not be on the back of some unrelated people who would be ejected from their land for the benefit of the Bnei Yisrael. If this were all about *rachamim*, Hashem would not show a preference for one people over another!

In other words, Moshe was prepared to see the rescue of his people from the Egyptians, but he had not created the conceptual space for Hashem leading the people on a successful campaign against another people, dispossessing them from the land they occupied. In other words, he did not expect to see the wars against the "thirty-one kings of Canaan." Because he did not take into account an even grander plan of Hashem, Moshe did not merit to see those wars.

Hashem was readying Moshe for a different understanding of His purpose in standing by the Bnei Yisrael. There would be more to come.

1. Based on Hamedrash V'Ha-Maaseh, Shemos(2) by R. Yechezkel Lipshitz .
2. Sanhedrin 111A .
3. Devarim 27:24 .
4. Devarim 19:18-19 .
5. Shemos 2:14 .
6. Tanchuma, cited by Rashi loc. cit. .
7. Shemos 5:22 .
8. Shemos 5:23 .