

PARSHAS MISHPATIM - WHEN A HIGH BECOMES A LOW

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

When A High Becomes A Low¹

To the great men of the Bnei Yisrael He did not stretch out His hand. They gazed upon G-d and they ate and drank.

"Hand" here means power or strength. The power that the pasuk speaks of is the strength to endure one of the most intense experiences known to Man.

We sometimes unconsciously make the mistake of thinking of the material world and its experiences as real, concrete and substantive. Spirituality, we think, is ethereal. We associate it with dreamy clouds. We see it as vapor-like and airy. In truth, however, an actual spiritual episode can be crushing and suffocating to a person not prepared to deal with its overwhelming power.

If a person is fortunate enough to be treated to authentic visions of Divinity, two consequences can follow along. The first is that HKBH grants him not only the experience, but a Divine influence that gives him clarity and understanding. Through it, he can decipher and process the encounter, not just experience it. He also gives the person the ability to withstand the power of that experience, which might otherwise overwhelm him. Instead, he is helped to become a vehicle for the Shechinah.

When a person endures such an episode, and gains the insight and enlightenment that flows from it, he feels incredible joy - the high of basking in the light of the King.

The "great people" of our pasuk, on the other hand, pushed beyond the limits set for them. They contemplated more than was appropriate for them, more than they were allowed to comprehend. Hashem therefore did not "stretch out His hand" to support them, or to give them the insight to comprehend what they beheld. Without that special support, they should have been grievously injured by the experience. In fact, they would have been, had it not been for the merit of that special day. They were nonetheless punished. Even though they experienced what they did, they did not emerge with great insight or enlightenment. They were not sated by the encounter, but were left with a spiritual void. There was still room within them to eat and drink, unlike others who experienced revelatory visions, whose thoughts would not and could not turn to mundane affairs like dining.

Alternatively, the effect of a strong dose of Divine presence upon an unprepared person can be devastating. It can even be fatal. In this case, HKBH did not want to spoil the joyousness of the occasion, and their punishment was suspended. The experience did leave its mark, however. It weakened and exhausted them to the point that they required food and drink to restore their equilibrium.

In any event, they had to settle for snack food, rather than the unique spiritual experience that they had tried to achieve by pushing the envelope.

Divine Anagrams²

Ascend to Me to the mountain and remain there, and I will give you the tablets of stone and the Torah and the commandment...

"Torah" here means the written text. So says the gemara[3]. The Yerushalmi[4] understands our pasuk similarly, creating an identity between the Torah text and mitzvos. (I.e. just as studying a Torah text requires a berachah before, so do mitzvos.)

The Torah referenced here cannot mean the text of the Torah as we have it today. That text was not completed until the end of the fortieth year after the Exodus. Rather, our pasuk speaks of the primordial Torah, which consisted entirely of different holy Names of HKBH[5], and with which He created the world.

A gemara in Avodah Zarah[6] describes Hashem's daily schedule, as it were. During the first three hours of the day, according to the gemara, He sits and involves Himself with Torah. The can understand this along the lines of our discussion. Each day, He creates the world anew. He does this in a similar manner to His original act of Creation. The world came into being through the use of His Names; its daily renewal involves the same use of Names, read from the Torah. This is His involvement with Torah.

The primordial Torah was in Moshe's possession from the time of Sinai. It was inscribed in its entirety on the luchos - both first and second. It would have read very differently from what we see in front of us. It took forty years for the ur-text to be expanded and recombined. This happened slowly, one parshah at a time, until the entire work was concluded with Moshe's death.

-
1. Based on the Ha'amek Davar, Shemos 24:11
 2. Based on Ha'amek Davar, Shemos 24:12
 3. Berachos 5A
 4. Berachos 6:1

5. As explained by Ramban in his introduction to Chumash

6. 3B
