

BEWARE TO COMPARE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Toward the end of Parshas Shemos, Moshe's mission to rescue the Jews from the hands of their Egyptian oppressors seems to take a decided turn for the worse when Pharaoh, instead of acceding to Moshe and Aaron's request for freedom, reacts by heaping additional labor upon the Jews' weary shoulders. In frustration, Moshe complains bitterly to Hashem. Parshas Va'eira begins with Hashem reassuring Moshe that everything is going ahead as planned (indeed, Moshe had been forewarned about Pharaoh's stubborn refusal to heed Hashem's word). Hashem instructs Moshe to once again appear before Pharaoh, and demand the release of the Jews. Moshe expresses his concern (6:12):

"Behold! Even the Jews are not listening to me, so how do You expect Pharaoh to listen to me; and I have sealed (lit: uncircumcised) lips."

Rashi points out that this is one of the few places that the Torah itself makes use of a kal ve-chomer (a fortiori) argument, normally something used by the Sages to interpret the Torah.

Mefarshim (commentaries), however, point out that there seems to be a difficulty with this kal ve-chomer. The Torah itself explains that the reason the Jews refused to listen to Moshe's promises was, "due to the shortness of their breath, and the difficulty of their work. (6:9)" This does not necessarily prove, however, that Pharaoh, who (obviously) was not a slave, would not heed Hashem's word. (Of course, there were many other reasons to believe that Pharaoh would not listen to Moshe, not the least of which is that Hashem Himself has already promised He would "harden Pharaoh's heart." At any rate, though, the kal ve-chomer seems questionable.)

Because of this difficulty, the first Bobover Rebbe zt"l, Rabbi Shlomo Halberstam (cited in Ateres Shlomo), approaches this pasuk from a completely different angle.

The Haftorah of parshas Toldos begins with the opening words of the book of Malachi (1:1-3):

"Massah d'var Hashem/The prophetic burden of the word of Hashem, through Malachi. 'I loved you,' said Hashem. And you said, 'Why do You love us.' 'Was not Eisav a brother to Yaakov? Yet I loved Yaakov, and I hated Eisav...'"

Why do Malachi's words begin with the introduction "Massah d'var Hashem/The prophetic burden of the word of Hashem?" Chazal, our Sages, teach (Yalkut Shimoni, Lech, 76) that of all of the Ten Expressions of Prophecy, the most foreboding is "Massah," foretelling a burdensome and difficult prophecy. Yet if we examine the Navi's words, they seem to be an expression of Hashem's undying

love for Israel.

Every parent/teacher has invariably experienced the following scenario, or something close to it: Two children come home late. One comes home half-an-hour late, the other, an hour. Both are punished. The one who was "only" a half-hour late is indignant! After all, in comparison to child #2, he was all but on time! Do they expect, perhaps, an award of honour?

There are two ways, says Rabbi Shimon Oddeberger zt"l, in which the beauty of our nation can manifest itself. When Jews conduct themselves according to the ethical and moral code of the Torah, their beauty is intrinsic and essential. When, however, our conduct is less than stellar, our beauty and worth are diminished. In such times, Hashem, so to speak, finds favour in us by comparing us to the nations of the world. Needless to say, when viewed in this light, our countenance takes on a considerably more favourable appearance. Ultimately, though, if the only way we look good is by standing us next to our even-uglier cousins, then we're no more beautiful than the ugly kallah (bride) who, with enough makeup and mascara, can be made to seem beautiful for a night!

This, he says, is why Malachi's seemingly encouraging prophecy is in fact a burden. While it begins with Hashem expressing His love for us, it soon becomes apparent that this love for us is not an essential love, but rather a bitter expression of the fact that we are, at least, better than the rest: "And you said, 'Why do You love us?' 'Was not Eisav a brother to Yaakov? Yet I loved Yaakov, and I hated Eisav...'"

Let us now return to our parsha. Moshe is concerned that Israel's refusal to heed Hashem's word would cause them to lose favour in Hashem's eyes. After all, it's not every day G-d comes to take them out of slavery, yet they have spurned His word. On the other hand, their apparent lack of interest in Moshe's flowery descriptions of freedom is not surprising. Trying to win over the heart of a nation collapsing beneath the burden of oppressive slavery by selling them pie-in-the-sky promises of emancipation, while failing to produce even the smallest measure of success (au contraire - things had only gotten worse since Moshe arrived!), was fighting an uphill battle. It was not out of lack of faith and arrogance that they were balking at Moshe's promises, it was out of fear and intimidation.

Pharaoh, on the other hand, brazenly scorns Hashem's word: "Who is Hashem, that I should heed His call. I know not Hashem, and I will not release the Jews! (5:2)" Compared to Pharaoh's chutzpah, the Jews' rejection seems meek and insignificant! And, says the Bobover Rebbe, it was precisely this point that Moshe was stressing to Hashem: True, the Jewish nation heeds not my word - yet, as attested to by the Torah itself, they do so not out of disrespect, but "because of their shortness of breath, and the difficulty of their work." Yet how will Pharaoh (not!) listen to me - let us contrast their non-acceptance with Pharaoh's: Their refusal stems from a broken heart and spirit, while Pharaoh's comes from a heart full of arrogance and brazenness!

Alas, Moshe concludes, I am of sealed lips - with regard to this comparison, for if the only good I can find to express about the Jews is that "they're still better than Pharaoh," then things don't look too good.

A sage once remarked: When I recite each morning the blessing, "Blessed are you, Hashem that You did not make me a gentile," I don't think only about the alcoholics and the drug-addicts. I think about the most respected, famous, and influential gentile I can: Being a "light unto the nations" should mean glowing with the light of a torch among candles, not turning on a pen-light in a pitch-black room. While at times we succumb to the easy pat-on-the-back we can give ourselves for being "better than them," his words remind us that there's more to being a Jew than not being a gentile.

Have a good Shabbos.

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