

HASHEM'S WILL - PROTEST OR SUBMISSION

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, "Take revenge for the Children of Israel against the Metagnathous; afterwards you will be gathered to your nation." Moshe spoke to the people, saying, "Arm yourselves... a thousand from each tribe shall be sent to the army." From the thousands of Israel, a thousand men were delivered from each tribe - a total of 12,000 armed soldiers. (31:1-5)

Rashi derives from a Scriptural nuance that the tribe of Levi was also included among those who sent soldiers to participate in the war against Midian. If so, asks R' Yitzchak Meir of Gur (the Chiddushei Ha-Rim), how are we to understand that the total number of all armed soldiers was apparently only 12,000 - if the Tribe of Levi was included, it should have been 13,000! (see Maskil LeDavid)

Why does the Torah describe the soldiers as being "delivered" or "given over" ("va-yimasru") - were there no volunteers? From Rashi (quoting Sifrei 157) it seems there indeed weren't:

This teaches us the praiseworthiness of the shepherds (i.e. leaders) of Israel. Before they heard of Moshe's impending death, what does it say? "Another moment, and they'll stone me! (Shemos/Exodus 17:4)" Yet when they heard that Moshe's death was contingent on their taking revenge against Median, they did not want to go to war, and they had to be delivered against their will.

Rashi expresses this as "the praiseworthiness of the shepherds of Israel." But Moshe took a passive role in their refusal - wouldn't it have been more accurate to refer to the praiseworthiness of the Jews in refusing to go? Also, why does Rashi illustrate his point by dredging up a long- forgotten and unpleasant incident when there was no water to drink, and Moshe was so scared of the Jew's reaction that he feared for his life? Does this somehow enhance his, or their, praise?

How difficult it is, says the Chasam Sofer, to be a Rabbi. If a Rabbi is disliked by his congregants, he is liable to criticism; after all, don't Chazal (our Sages) teach, (Avos/Ethics of the Fathers 3:10), "If the spirit of one's fellows is pleased with him, the spirit of the Almighty is pleased with him; but if the spirit of one's fellows is not pleased with him, the spirit of the Almighty is not pleased with him either!" If, on the other hand, he is loved and revered by his congregation, they invoke a different Talmudic dictum (Kesubos 105b): "Abaye taught: A Rav who is loved by his townsmen, it is not because he is a great Rav, but rather because he withholds from rebuking them in important matters!" What's a good Rabbi to do - loved or hated he can't go right!

In the course of a Rabbi's life and career, he explains, it is natural that he will at times encounter animosity and resentment. After all, part of being a Rav is telling people things they don't want to hear. Abaye teaches us that if no one ever gets upset with him, something's wrong. Perhaps he is refraining from taking a stand - for fear of conflict and criticism - where he really should be.

When the time comes for a Rav to pass away, people start to see things differently. It's strange the effect that the realization someone might not be with us for much longer can have on our perceptions. We begin to see things in a different light. Things that irked us in the past become loveable quirks we fear we may miss more than we ever dreamed. We yearn to hear that same rebuke that so annoyed us - just one more time.

The fact that there was a time when Moshe feared for his life is to his own praise - it shows he was doing his job, and putting his flock in its place when need be, let the chips fall where they may. And when the time came for him to pass on, people started to think things over. They realized that without Moshe, they would be nowhere. He led them out of Egypt and taught them the Torah. More than once, he had defended them before Hashem, although their actions seemed indefensible. He was their faithful shepherd, and they were his flock. Both events - the threats and the unwillingness to go to war - teach us the praiseworthiness of Moshe as a leader.

Not wanting to go to war is proof of Moshe's qualities as a leader. But were B'nei Yisrael right in refusing to participate in a war that had been ordered by Hashem? Perhaps they were. "Even the wise man can only act according to what his eyes see." They felt they could not cope with the loss of Moshe, and were willing to do everything in their power to prevent it, even if it meant going up against the Almighty. Moshe himself, when told by Hashem that he would not be allowed into Eretz Yisrael, did not take it sitting down. He waged a "war of words," words of prayer and supplication, that Hashem annul His decree, and allow him into the cherished land. B'nei Yisrael can not be faulted, and likely deserve praise, for not wanting to accept the Heavenly decree.

But there is a level of insight and acceptance of G-d's will at which even this becomes impossible.

It is told that before the holy rebbe R' Elimelech of Liezensk zt"l passed away, he promised his disciples that when he was brought before the Heavenly tribunal, he would refuse to take his place in Gan Eden until they agreed to bring an end to the suffering of the Jewish Children. Days after his passing, he appeared to a disciple in a dream in the white tallis of those already in Gan Eden. "But Rebbe," he protested, "you promised you wouldn't enter Gan Eden until you brought an end to our tzuress!"

"My child," he said, "what should I do. When I was alive there was good and there was bad, and I could pray to annul an evil decree. Now that I'm here, I see that everything is Hashem's will, and everything is for our good, even when we don't understand how. It is impossible for me to pray."

Regarding the Tribe of Levi, says the Chidushei Ha-Rim, the Torah writes (Devarim/Deuteronomy 33:9), "He says of his own father and mother, 'I do not see them,' and does not recognize his brother,

nor his own child - thus they kept Your word and guarded Your covenant." Rashi explains (ibid.) that when Israel worshipped the Golden Calf, Moshe called out, "Whoever is for Hashem, come to me." All the Levites assembled. He commanded them to kill their own grandparents, maternal brothers, and grandchildren, if they had worshipped the Calf, and they did so. They didn't wage a battle with Hashem and attempt to save their flesh and blood; they submitted themselves totally to Hashem's will, unquestioningly and with complete faith and devotion.

Here too, as much as it surely pained the Tribe of Levi to hear of Moshe's demise - he was after all one of them - they had no qualms and no reservations about going to war, even with the knowledge of what lay in its aftermath. If it was Hashem's will, then there were no questions to ask and no protests to make. This was the will of the Almighty, and that was all that mattered.

So in fact there were 13,000 soldiers, but only 12,000 of them were "delivered" against their will; the other 1,000 came willingly.

At present, we don't have the benefit of prophecy, and are often left in doubt and uncertainty about what indeed is Hashem's will. We can only ask Him that He give us the knowledge to do what we can, and the wisdom to accept His will.

Have a good Shabbos.

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