

DON'T EVEN ASK - TAKING HASHEM'S WORD FOR IT

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Shelach begins with Hashem's instructions to Moshe to, "Send forth for yourself men, and let them spy out the Land of Canaan that I am giving to the Bnei Yisrael... (13:2)" Rashi, in a well-known comment, makes note of the unusual reflexive case of the verb shelach - send forth for yourself. He explains that the Torah is emphasizing that there was no directive from Hashem to send forth spies, but rather that permission was given to do so. Rashi goes on to explain that what in fact happened is this: People came and said to Moshe, "Let us send men ahead of us, and let them spy out the land of Israel, and bring word back to us. (Devarim/Deuteronomy 1:22)" Moshe consulted Hashem regarding the matter. Hashem replied: "I have already told them the Land is good [and that I will give it to them]... (Shemos/Exodus 3:17)" All the same, while Hashem did not order the spies sent, he did ultimately give Moshe permission to do so. Thus, "Send forth spies for yourselves..."

The difficulty is this: Immediately following, the Torah writes (verse 3), "And Moshe sent them forth from the Desert of Paran by the word of Hashem..." Rashi appears to have been disturbed by the phrase "al pi Hashem - by Hashem's word," and writes, "[this means] with His permission; He did not prevent them." Normally, though, the phraseology "al pi Hashem" is used by the Torah to describe an act performed under Hashem's directive, and not just with His permission.

In parshas Behar the Torah describes the mitzvah of Shemitah. Every seventh year Jewish farmers must allow their land to lie dormant, without plowing, planting or cultivating. What is one to eat during the seventh (and eighth) year until the new supply of produce begins to grow? Good question! In fact the Torah itself poses it! "And if you will ask: What shall we eat in the seventh year - behold we will not sow, nor gather our produce! I shall command My blessing for you in the sixth year; [the earth] will give forth [enough] produce for three years! (Vayikra/Leviticus 25:20)"

At first glance, the question-and-answer style of wording, "And if you ask... I shall command..." is something commonly found in the study of the Talmud (shakla ve-tarya - give and take), but almost never found in Scripture! If Hashem wants to give the produce of the sixth year a special blessing, let Him go ahead and do so, but why bother posing the question?

The holy Rebbe R' Elimelech of Liezensk zt"l in his sefer Noam Elimelech (parshas Behar) cites his brother, R' Zisha, who explains the semantics here with a basic yet beautiful premise: When Hashem placed man on this world, His intention was to take care of all of his basic physical/material needs

and necessities. To facilitate this, He established spiritual channels through which material blessing could flow from the upper spheres. Our task is not to create the channels - they are already there - but rather just to make sure we don't damage them and destroy the paths that have already been forged for our benefit.

There's an expression in Yiddish; "Az m'fregt iz pusel," which roughly translates into, "If you're asking the question, the answer is probably no." In our context, when we ask, thereby questioning Hashem's ability to provide for us, we damage the spiritual channels through which our sustenance and blessings should flow. As long as we rely on Hashem, without qualms or queries, things will take care of themselves in a most wondrous way. It's only when we start snooping around and stirring up the dust that our questions become a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy; because we ask, the question in fact becomes a very good question.

From where, indeed, are our blessings now going to come, seeing as how we've plugged up the channels with our doubts and misgivings? Az m'fregt - iz pusel!

The Ramban in parshas Bechukosai (Vayikra/Leviticus 26:11) writes that although the Torah gives permission for doctors to practice medicine, were we to conduct ourselves consistently according to Torah, there would be no need for them. For a Jew who places his complete trust in Hashem for all his needs, he writes, the miraculous becomes the norm. Things fall into place with very little effort, and blessings permeate and pervade his day-to-day life.

(This is not to be misunderstood as an instructive not to go to doctors and not to take care of our material needs; to endanger one's health or livelihood is strictly forbidden according to the Torah! What it means is that within our material lives, the more we question and the more we stray, the more we will be subjected to the natural order and end up having to "take care of ourselves." Conversely, to the extent we place our trust in Hashem and conduct our lives accordingly, the more we will find things taking care of themselves with little effort on our behalf. If things aren't going smoothly, it seems, it may be a sign that there has been damage to our "channels.")

Based on this, I believe, we can propose a very simple answer to the above discrepancy between the spies being optional (send forth spies for yourselves), yet obligatory (by the word of Hashem): Before they asked, there was no need to send spies - Hashem's word was more than good enough reason to believe that the Land was good, and that it would be given to them without any need for the usual tactics of espionage and military preparations. "I told them I would bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey!" Yet for whatever reason the Jews were not satisfied with Hashem's word. They wanted to check things out for themselves and draw their own conclusions. Az m'fregt iz pusel - once the question had been raised and the request made, preparation became a necessity. By doubting Hashem's promise, they damaged the channels and forfeited their capacity to receive

the Land without any effort on their part. "Now that you ask," said Hashem to Moshe, "I think it's a very good idea - indeed a necessity - that you take the necessary precautions before entering the Land!" [Based in part on Emes Le-Yaakov, R' Yaakov Kamenetsky zt"l]

Sometimes not asking is one of the hardest things to do. Humans are very used to taking care of themselves, and it's not easy to place all our trust in something we can't control. Perhaps the following mashal of the Dubner Maggid can help us to do so:

A weary Jew was once travelling along a dirt road schlepping a heavy load. A wealthy Jew in a wagon passed by, and kindly stopped to offer him a ride. He graciously accepted, and climbed aboard the wagon, where he sat down, resting his weary feet. Yet he refused to put down his heavy sack, which remained perched upon his shoulders. "Reb Yid," said the wagon owner, "why don't you put down your load?"

"I wouldn't want to be even more trouble," he said. "After all, it's kind enough of you to have taken me aboard! Why should your horses have to pull the additional weight of my sack?"

"But don't you understand - even if you carry your load on your shoulders, my horses are still schlepping you and your peklach! You're accomplishing nothing by carrying them on your shoulders - so throw them down and let my horses do the work!"

"Throw your load onto Hashem," says David HaMelech, "and He will take care of you (Tehillim/Psalms 55:23)!" He's running the show anyways, so you might as well throw your load on His shoulders! Not only will it ease your worries, it actually makes the blessings flow smoother.

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