

# TAMING THE LION'S ROAR

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

The first two of the Ten Commandments were, "I am Hashem, your G-d (20:2)," and, "You shall not possess other gods before Me (verse 3)." Before giving these two mitzvot the Torah writes (verse 1), "And G-d (Elokim) spoke all these words, saying..." Why does the Torah refer to Hashem here with His name Elokim, which alludes to midas ha-din, the aspect of strict judgement, and not with the name Hashem, which alludes to kindness and compassion?

The Talmud (Kiddushin 39b) says that, whereas a person receives reward for a "good thought" (i.e. planning to do a mitzvah even though he was prevented from doing so), we are not punished for "bad thoughts" (i.e. thinking about committing a sin) unless we actually do so. This biased treatment is a result of the kindness (chesed) with which Hashem created the world ("The world was built with chesed" [Tehillim/Psalms 89:3]), in that the scales are balanced in our favour - there is more opportunity for reward than for punishment.

Now Chazal in fact say (see Rashi to Bereishis/Genesis 1:1) that, "Originally, Hashem intended to create the world with din (strict judgement)" and not with chesed. Upon realizing that we didn't stand a chance in a world constructed with strict judgement, Hashem turned things around and as a result, to our great fortune, we exist in a world based on chesed and not only on din. (It is our task to emulate Hashem and build our own lives with kindness and compassion.) In a world based on din, we would be judged for all our thoughts - the good and the bad.

Mitzvos number 1 and 2, though, are mitzvot which by definition are judged entirely by thought and not action. These mitzvot, then, are something of a "window" into the pre-chesed world, before kindness tipped the scales. Perhaps, says R' Shlomo Kluger zt"l (Imrei Shafer), this is why these two mitzvot are prefaced with the verse, "Elokim spoke all these words," because here the strict judgement of Hashem's name Elokim was preserved.

This also explains, he writes, the wording of the Talmud (Makkos 24a), "[The mitzvot of] 'I am Hashem,' and, 'You shall not possess,' were heard mi-pi ha-Gevura/from the mouth of the Mighty One [himself]." Why do Chazal accentuate that they were received, "From the Mighty One," as opposed to, "From Hashem?" It is because these two mitzvot contain the element of strict judgement, which is Elokim and Gevura.

The Midrash (Shemos Rabbah 29:9) in its discussion of the above verse, "I am Hashem your G-d," references the verse (Amos 3:8), "When the lion roars, who doesn't fear!?" What does "I am Hashem

your G-d" have to do with the roar of a lion?

Imagine a great and mighty king has assembled his subjects in order to address them. Everyone stands before the king and awaits his word in trepidation. Suddenly and unexpectedly, in a loud and powerful voice, the king calls out someone's name (lets call him Reuven) and instructs him to step forward. Trembling, Reuven approaches the great throne. He feels as if his very being is pierced by the unwavering gazes of all the assembled. "Reuven, this is what you must do for me..." the king's mighty voice rings in his ears, yet despite himself, Reuven has no idea what the king is telling him. He has to struggle with all his might to keep from fainting. Later, he reckons, some kind soul will tell me what the king wants. In the meantime, he obediently nods his head, as the king's inaudible instructions wash over him.

What if, after being singled out by the king, Reuven hears the following: "Reuven, this is what I need Shimon to do for me..." Realizing that it is not he that is being instructed, Reuven relaxes. Shimon too, even though he now realizes that it is him for whom the king's words are intended, is still able to retain his composure. Although he is humbled by the king requesting his services, he is glad that he can hear his instructions in third-person, without having to stand before the king and bear his piercing glare.

In English there is no difference between "your" in the singular or in the plural. In Hebrew, there is. "I am Hashem your G-d," is worded in the singular, as if it's Moshe alone who's being addressed. The Jews "listen in" to the instructions intended for them, but are able to do so without having to stand in the face of the "lion's roar" - the awesome voice of the Almighty.

This is why, in its discussion of the above verse, the Midrash cites the verse, "When the lion roars, who doesn't fear?" The Midrash is helping us understand why the verse, "I am Hashem your G-d," was taught in the singular, and not in the plural as we might have expected. Hashem addressed Moshe so that we could listen-in in the third person, and not be overwhelmed by fear of the lion's roar. (Imrei Shafer)

We spoke above about conducting our own lives in a way that emulates (to whatever extent possible) the ways of Hashem. What an awesome lesson Hashem taught us here. How often do we "put someone on the spot" by confronting them, sometimes publicly, and chastising them or demanding an explanation for something they've done? Have you ever been put on the spot like this? Beside it being humiliating, the words of the rebuker will more often than not miss their mark, falling on deaf ears, not because the intended recipient doesn't want to listen but because they can't. In the face of the roaring lion, all they can think about is their own fear and (emotional) safety - there is nothing left to listen to or ponder what's actually being said.

In such situations, the teacher/parent/boss etc. will often walk away from the interaction highly satisfied with their performance. The rebuke, they figure (often rightfully so) was deserved, and the anxious look on the face of the recipient convinces them that their words were received seriously. In

truth, it is more likely that their speech will be quickly forgotten, if it was ever absorbed to begin with. All the recipient will retain in the long-term are feelings of fear and resentment from being subjected to the dreadful roar of someone with the power and authority to do so.

If it's true character-refinement the rebuker is after, he will hopefully realize that the most meaningful guidance is that which is given in the "third-person" - privately and with sensitivity to the rebukee's feelings. Not being put on the spot will allow the recipient to absorb the rebuke in a relaxed manner, and its effect will likely be enduring.

A wonderful teacher I know always asks an unruly student to "step outside of the classroom for a moment," before reproaching them for something they've done. He then says what he has to say in a calm and collected way, without either student or teacher having to deal with such an interaction in the public forum where things can easily escalate into a confrontation. Hashem, in issuing the two most important mitzvos of the Torah, taught us that a quiet and sensitive voice is often heard more clearly than the lion's roar.

*Have a good Shabbos.*

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