

JUSTICE AND MERCY

by Rabbi Jeff Kirshblum

"And Elokim (G-d of Justice) spoke unto Moshe saying: I am YHVH (G-d of Mercy)" (6:2).

The verse seems to be contradictory. How can the G-d of Justice declare Himself to be the G-d of Mercy? Justice seems to be strict and unyielding. Mercy seems to be lenient and bending.

The ancient pagans were confronted by that very problem. How could there be Justice and Mercy co-existing in the world. They concluded that there must be more than one god: gods who constantly struggled for supremacy. The Egyptians in the time of Pharaoh envisioned the great fight between Set, the god of justice, and Horus, the god of mercy.

G-d tells Moshe that there is only one G-d. He has both attributes and each one is constantly present. It is only our lack of perception that has difficulty uniting Justice with Mercy. This concept sums up the very basic philosophy of Judaism. "Hear O Israel! YHVH (the G-d of Mercy), our Elokim (the G-d of Justice), G-d is One" (Devarim 6:4).

It would seem to us that the greatest of G-d's accomplishments was the creation of the universe, the formation of natural laws, and its population with vegetation, animal life, and rational beings. Yet, this great accomplishment takes up but a small portion of the first parshah, Bereishis. The overwhelming bulk of the Torah deals with the laws for the Jewish people, in particular, and the morals and ethics for mankind, in general.

G-d's laws are very specific and all encompassing. From the moment we wake up, and say Modeh Ani, until we fall asleep, and recite the Shema, the regulations of Torah apply. The rewards are great. The punishments are frightening. From the banishment of Adam and Chava from the Garden of Eden until the swallowing by the earth of Korach and his congregation, we see consequences of deviating from G-d's law.

At the time of the Exodus, G-d had the unenviable task of having to free a nation of slaves and form them into a disciplined free nation. G-d knew that there would be times they will falter. Mankind in general is subject to the frailties of human weakness. How much more a nation that was abused and misused for hundreds of years. G-d knew that they would have to be treated with both attributes: Justice and Mercy. They had to be treated with Justice, so that they would learn the correct behavior, and mercy because of their frailties.

At the divine revelation at Sinai, G-d proclaimed these two aspects of His nature to the Children of

Israel. "I am YHVH (G-d of Mercy), your Elokim (G-d of Justice), a jealous G-d who imposes the guilt of the parents upon the children to the third and forth generation. And (yet) I show kindness unto the thousandth generation to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (20:5-6).

Tisha B'Av is the day that G-d's anger and justice manifested itself against the Jewish people. He destroyed His Temple. The holy city of Yerushalayim was reduced to ashes. His children were exiled and sold into slavery. Yet, here we are, today, continuing to exist and thrive. Had it been a punishment solely of justice, we would not be here today. We abandoned Him. He should have abandoned us. But He did not. On Tisha B'Av, we sit on the synagogue floor and read from the words of the prophet Yirmiyahu, "For I am YHVH, doer of kindness, justice, and righteousness in the land" (Yirmiyahu 9:23).

In our own families we play a G-d-like role. We too must temper our Justice with Mercy. Justice and punishment can never be inflicted in a state of anger. Such a punishment will convey the wrong message. Justice can only be served when the punishment is carried out in a state of love.

I once saw a small child run out into the street. A car was rushing by. The driver slammed on his brakes, screeching to a halt inches in front of the child. The mother, who had seen the whole incident from the porch, came running out to her child. She picked up her precious youngster. She hugged him dearly; then she slapped his hands hard. She had tears in her eyes. She screamed at him, "Don't you ever run out in the street again." She shook him hard. "Never, ever run out in the street. I love you, poor baby."

That was Justice and Mercy.

AND THE EGYPTIANS SHALL KNOW

It is puzzling why the ten miraculous plagues were needed in order to free the Children of Israel. G-d could have caused Pharaoh to free them immediately without all these dramatic events.

Moshe and Aharon had a dual mission. Not only were they to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, they were to introduce the concept of a monotheistic G-d to the Egyptians. The Egyptians believed in a whole collection of gods, goddesses, major and minor gods, along with god consorts. The main temple of the Egyptians at the time of the Exodus was in the city of Heliopolis. There, the nine supreme gods were worshipped. In addition to the nine gods of Heliopolis, of course there was the pharaoh himself who believed that he too was a god. He was the tenth god.

When Moshe and Aharon informed Pharaoh, "So said YHVH, the G-d of the Israelites, 'Send forth My people...'" (5:1) Pharaoh responded, "Who is YHVH that I should hearken unto His voice and send forth the Israelites? I do not know of YHVH..." (5:2). Pharaoh was telling Moshe and Aharon that the G-d of the Israelites was not a member of his group of gods and therefore he is not obliged to listen to Him.

Perhaps each of the ten plagues was presented to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of each of the Egyptian ten god's. Osiris was the Egyptian god of the Nile. The Egyptians believed that Osiris gave

life and sustenance to the people because the Nile itself was the vital life-source of ancient Egypt. The first plague was Blood. The waters of the Nile turned to the symbol of death, blood. That was a sign of G-d's superiority over Osiris.

The second plague is called Frogs. The famous commentator of the Mishna, Rabbenu Ovadiah Bartenurah, tells us that the plague was not really frogs. It was Crocodiles! (Bartenurah's Memoirs of His Travels) That certainly adds a new dimension of terror to the plague. The crocodile god Sobek was the earthly representative of his mother, Nut, the goddess of virility. The Medrash (Shemos Rabah 10:3) tells us that the crocodiles bit the Egyptian males at the "normally covered parts of the body" and deprived them of their virility. This plague showed that G-d was superior to virility-goddess, Nut, and her crocodile son, Sobek.

The famous sun-god, Ra, was lord over the earth. The Egyptians thought he reigned supreme over the whole earth giving it life. Aharon hit the earth and then the dirt and dust turned into a massive swarm of lice. Ra was powerless to stop the plague.

The forth plague was an invasion of swarming creatures, scorpions and venomous snakes. (Rashi 8:17) The Egyptian god of destruction was the serpent-god Set. Yet he was helpless, unable to destroy the plague that afflicted his Egyptian people.

The fifth plague was a Pestilence that afflicted the cattle of the Egyptians. The horned-goddess, Isis, was the goddess of fertility, nurture, and protection especially over the cattle. Yet she had to stand by idly as her cattle died by the tens of thousands.

The sixth plague was Boils. The Medrash (Shemos Rabah 11:6) says that the Egyptians were afflicted with leprosy that causes the flesh to decay. This plague was to show the ineffectiveness of Nephthys, the mother-goddess of embalming, the preservation of the flesh.

The seventh plague was a destructive Hail-storm. The deity, Tefnut, was supposed to be the beneficent rain-goddess. The Egyptians prayed to her to stop the devastating hail. The Egyptians quickly learned that she had no power over the G-d of Israel.

The eighth plague was Locusts. The swarm of locust blocked out the sun and feverishly devoured the crops of Egypt. The god of vegetation, Geb, was rendered impotent.

The ninth plague was Darkness. Rashi (10:21-22) tells us that the air became thick and black. It was so thick that the Egyptians were trapped in the very position they had assumed when the plague struck. They were unable to move. This plague was to demonstrate that the Egyptian god of air, Shu, was no match for the G-d of Israel.

The tenth plague was the Death of the Firstborn. Pharaoh believed that he too was a god. Yet, he had to plead with Moshe to spare his own life. Some god!

G-d had told Moshe, "And the Egyptians shall know that I am G-d" (7:5). After the tenth plague,

Pharaoh and all of Egypt knew this to be true. The baseless faith in the Egyptian pantheon had been duly demonstrated.

It is interesting to note that according to the ancient Egyptian historian, Manetho, and the Jewish historian, Josephus Flavius, the name of the Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus was Amenophis, more commonly called Amenhotep. His son and successor, Akenaten, did away with the Egyptian collection of gods and taught a monotheistic religion throughout the land. However, he also taught that he was godlike since he was god's conduit to earth. Some habits are hard to give up.

Good Shabbos,
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