

PARSHAS DEVARIM - EICHAH?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

*These are the words which Moshe spoke to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan in the desert ...
(Devarim 1:1)*

"These are the words: Because these are words of reproof and he is listing all the places where they provoked G-d to anger, he "closed" his words and only alluded to them out of respect for Israel."
(Rashi)

Thus begins the fifth and final book of the Torah, in the year 2488 (1273 BCE), and in the final year of Moshe Rabbeinu's life. And thus begins Rashi's commentary of this final book, revealing to us how that great leader, the "Faithful Shepherd" of Israel prepared his "flock" for a life in Eretz Yisroel, one that would not include him. As the Talmud says:

"Any leader that does not chastise his community is held responsible for their sins." (Shabbos 54b)

However, though there is a mitzvah in the Torah to "criticize" our fellow Jew when we see him sin (Vayikra 19:17), it has been said that there are few today who can properly perform this mitzvah. Properly criticizing a person so that they are inspired to change for the better, it seems, is a lost art.

The Talmud predicted the future of criticism, according to Rashi, based upon the following reason:

In the days preceding the arrival of Moshiach ... there won't be criticism ... (Sotah 49b)

"No one will be able to criticize another because there will be so many sinners that the one being criticized will simply answer, 'You're just like me!' " (Rashi)

In other words, it is hard to receive criticism from someone who himself is in need of criticism ("People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones," as they say). Certainly, it is very difficult to emphasize the seriousness of another's transgression when the criticizer is making the same or similar mistakes, and for this reason many simply "hold their peace" while watching others transgress.

If it is difficult to criticize adults while being inconsistent, how much more so is this the case when it comes to teaching children moral behavior. To another adult one can say, "Do as I say, not as I do,"

and maybe get away with it. However, children have difficulty separating philosophy from action, and end up imitating their parents' actions despite their parents' philosophy to the contrary. Whereas adults may reject criticism with the words, "You're just like me," children may escape criticism by saying, "I'm just like you!"

However, the truth is, there is a counter-response, and it is the basis of true criticism. It goes something like this:

"I know I am just as bad, if not worse. I'd like to change that, and I'm working on it. But should my own shortcomings interfere with my care for you? Should my weaknesses deny you the clarity that I have with respect to your life, any more than yours should deny me the clarity you have with respect to my life? You and I both know how hard it is to initiate change, and to follow through with self-growth, but the starting point is that I care about you, and the quality of your life! Maybe you will inspire me to change in the end."

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Moshe did not outwardly criticize the nation, but only alluded to what went wrong. While criticizing, a time that respect is usually a rare commodity, Moshe went out of his way to show it. He himself was criticized by G-d, and even punished, something his own death on the east side of the Jordan was testifying to.

However, what came through his words was his love of the people, a people who had been the very cause of his own downfall. Yet, he restrained himself in their honor, and any criticism that reveals love is one that inspires change for the better. As the rabbis says: Words that come from the heart enter the heart and there can be no better form of criticism than this.

That's from the side of the one giving the criticism; from the side of the one being criticized, the Talmud states:

"What is the straight way to 'break' a person (i.e., bad habits)? Love criticism, for, as long as there is criticism in the world, pleasantness comes to the world, good and blessing come to the world, and evil is removed from the world." (Tamid 28a)

Maybe the person giving the criticism isn't so full of love, and doesn't count you as one of his endeared companions. However, everything is a matter of Divine Providence, and one has to look past the mouth from which the words emanate, and hear the message on its own. If we can do this, then maybe we can fulfill another dictum:

"Criticism brings one to love." (Bereishis Rabbah 54:3)

Shabbos Day:

"How (eichah) can I alone bear your troubles, your burden, and your strife?" (Devarim 1:12)

The word "eichah" is the language of criticism ... (Eichah Rabbah 1:1)

After what was said above, this is not surprising. However, the same Midrash adds:

"Alas (eichah)! She sits in solitude ... (Eichah 1:1); Israel wasn't exiled until they denied His Oneness, Bris Milah which was given after twenty generations, the Ten Commandments, and the five books of the Torah, equal to "eichah." (Eichah Rabbah 1:1)

In other words, the gematria of the word "eichah" is thirty-six (aleph, yud, chof, heh; 1+10+20+5), and each of the letters corresponds to each of the above listed transgressions. However, at first glance, there seems to be an inherent flaw in the above Midrash: doesn't the denial of the Five Books of Moses automatically include the previous transgressions as well? Furthermore, were the sinners Moshe was referring to guilty of such severe transgressions?

The Yafeh Anaf explains:

"Denying His Oneness means denying that He is the essence of everything; Milah is the sign of the Providence of G-d; the Ten Commandments and the Five Books represent Torah from Heaven. These three form the foundation of Jewish belief, and when these are destroyed, exile comes."

The Talmud addresses the same issue, but in a different way: *"These do not have a portion in the World-to-Come: One who denies that Resurrection of the Dead is from the Torah; one who says that Torah is not from Heaven, and a heretic."* (Sanhedrin 90a)

Two of the transgressions listed in the Talmud seem identical to two listed in the Midrash. However, at first glance, Resurrection of the Dead seems to be something new, and certainly seems to bear no connection to Bris Milah. However, investigating the Bris made between G-d and Avraham reveals a very deep connection, one that helps us to understand the warning Moshe was giving in this week's parshah. *"Shmuel said, 'The merit of the Forefathers (Z'chus Avos) finished ...' Rabbeinu Tam says, 'Z'chus Avos finished, but Bris Avos did not finish, as it says, 'I will remember My covenant with Ya'akov ...' (Vayikra 26:42) even after exile ...' "* (Tosfos, Shabbos 55a)

In other words, "bris" implies something that lasts forever, it implies eternal continuity. Bris Milah is performed on the place from which generations emanate, also a symbol of continuity. As such, it represents our belief that G-d is always involved in our lives, even when His hand is hidden by nature and in history. Ultimately, Bris Milah represents G-d's promise to Avraham that his seed would live forever ... after the Resurrection of the Dead.

Obviously the less one believes in Resurrection of the Dead, the more one is going to invest time and energy in This World. The more one invests life in This World, the more that person will have to

ignore Divine Providence, which doesn't always point us in the direction we'd like to go. It's not very long before such a Jew is forced to deny the divinity of Torah, to support his godless way of life. From there, it is just a short leap of doubt to deny G-d's Oneness altogether.

Eichah. It's a progression that gets worse before it gets better, and it was Moshe's fervent desire to spare us the pain of finding out firsthand.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

"Today I will begin to put the dread of you and the fear of you upon the nations that are under the whole Heaven ..." (Devarim 2:25)

"It was taught: Just as the sun stopped for Yehoshua, so too did it stop for Moshe ... How do we know about this for Moshe? From the comparison of the words "I will begin" [in Yehoshua 3:7] and "I will begin" [in our parshah] ... " (Avodah Zara 25a)

Many people are familiar with the miracle of the sun standing still for Yehoshua in his famous battle against the kings of Canaan who had attacked Givon (Yehoshua 10:1-20). Far fewer are aware that the same miracle had happened previously for Moshe in his battle against Sichon (Bamidbar 21:21). Even the Torah didn't publicize Moshe's miracle forcing the Talmud to look for an allusion for such a spectacular event! Why?

The answer comes from understanding the nature of a plant. Just as Moshe and Yehoshua can be compared to the sun and the moon, so too can they be compared to the revealed part of a flower, and the roots that lie below the ground. Though the revealed part of the flower seems to be the essence of the plant, in truth, it is just the revealed expression of all that is rooted in the ground, hidden from the eye. However, all that grows above ground must have some root in that which grows below ground.

Moshe had been more than just a great leader; he was the "root" of all that Yisroel was and would ever be. All the greatness the Jewish people would ever flower into would be rooted in Moshe, in accomplishments he himself achieved. This is why he was asked to climb the mountain and look at Eretz Yisroel; according to the Pri Tzaddik, this was G-d's way of having Moshe spiritually imbue the land with his potential and greatness, to benefit the Jewish people long after his death.

Hence, the Talmud's question becomes: If we see that Yehoshua was able to cause the sun to remain in the sky longer than normal, where was this rooted in Moshe's lifetime? For this the Talmud reveals a "hidden" source and root, and underlying message: Though Moshe has physically left the world, his spiritual greatness continues to act as the root for all the "flowers" that have blossomed, and continue to blossom, throughout Jewish history.

Melave Malkah:

Hashem said to me, *"Don't fear because I have given him [Og] over into your hand."* (Devarim 3:2)

"With respect to Sichon, He did not need to say, 'Don't fear ...' because Moshe was only concerned that his [Og's] merit of helping Avraham should not count." (Rashi)

According to the Midrash, the messenger that informed Avraham of Lot's capture from S'dom had been Og. Therefore, when it came time to do battle against Og, long after Avraham had passed from this world to the next, Moshe worried that maybe in this merit, Og would not be easily defeated.

What makes this so remarkable is that the Midrash says that Og's intentions, as one would suspect, had been anything but altruistic. Apparently Og had wanted to marry Sarah, and short of killing Avraham to do so, he tried to engage him in a deadly war to save his nephew. His plan only half-worked: Avraham did go to war, but won a miraculous victory over the kings of Canaan.

In fact, what Og may not have known at the time, but was finding out now, was that he may have precipitated the spiritual "root" of Avraham's descendants conquering of Canaan. Ma'ase avos siman l'banim means that everything that happened to the Forefathers laid the spiritual groundwork for what would later happen for their descendants. In Og's day, Avraham overcame the kings of Canaan with the help of G-d; in Og's day, Avraham's children overcame the kings of Canaan, again, with G-d's miraculous help.

Nevertheless, it does prove just how far good goes. Though, in the end, Og's merit did not save his life, still, it did go far enough to give Moshe reason for concern. If so, then we should never take the good someone else has done for us lightly, no matter how small it may appear in our eyes-for you never know how G-d views it, and how He'll take our indifference.

After all, it is such indifference that eventually leads to insensitivity to others, and in the end, the destruction of the Temples for which we mourn during these three weeks (see Parashas Devarim, 5757, and the story of Kamtza v'Bar Kamtza). Minimizing the importance of the "smallest" good eventually leads to a lack of appreciation of even the greater good, and eventually, the Greatest Good Himself. And when that happens, we're forced to ask all over again, eichah?

Have a great Shabbos,

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