

SPIRITUALLY-INDEPENDENT

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Moshe returned to God, and said, "This people has erred greatly, and have made a god of gold. However, please tolerate their error, and if not, remove me from Your book which You have written." (Shemos 32:31-32)

Huh? Was this a bluff? Of course not. No one bluffs God, because He read our hearts and minds better than we can. In fact, we're more likely to fool ourselves before we fool God, because as they say, "You can fool yourself some of the time, others, most of the time, but God, none of the time." Actually, that's what I say. I don't know if anyone else says it, but it is true nonetheless. And, if Moshe Rabbeinu was not bluffing, and we can certainly assume that he wasn't, then what was he thinking? He had done his best to save the Jewish people after the sin of the golden calf; if God still wanted to wipe them out and leave him alive, who was he to argue? If that was God's plan, wasn't it also the best way?

God said to Moshe, "Whoever erred against me, I will remove. Go now and lead the people to the place which I told you about." (Shemos 32:33)

God's response is equally puzzling. God could have easily told Moshe, "It is not you who dictates the terms of this arrangement. I chose you to lead the people to Eretz Yisroel whether I wipe out the nation or not. Now, get back to work."

This little dialogue is actually a lesson within a lesson. The overall story is about the sin of the golden calf, and God's response to it. However, within this account is an important lesson about free-will and what it means to be a Jewish leader, and how God deals with our decisions. Nothing pleases God more than when we take responsibility for His Creation. Obviously, we can never take ourselves so seriously as to think that we are in place of God, as many seem to do. But, on some level, we are supposed to take responsibility for as much of the world as we can, and act as if it depends upon us to survive.

In fact, if we are negligent, we're held responsible even if the crisis did not occur, if it would have occurred without Divine intervention. No damage can occur from someone if something is not meant to be damaged, and no one can stop something from being damaged if it is meant to be damaged, as Yosef reminded his brothers at the end of Parashas Vayechi. But, someone can be held responsible if it could have occurred but didn't, or be credited with saving something even if he didn't, as a long his intentions and actions were designed to accomplish one result or the other.

Thus, when Moshe Rabbeinu made his remark to God, he was showing to what extent he was prepared to take responsibility for the future of the Jewish people. This was not something that could anger God, but something to make him find favor in God's eyes. Therefore, God didn't reprimand Moshe in the end, He just told him that no matter how much he cared for the Jewish people, he could not be excluded from the Torah.

But, he was left out of one parshah: Tetzaveh. Some learn this to have been a punishment, kind of along the lines that a curse that comes out of the mouth of a talmid chacham has to have some kind of fulfillment, somewhere. Therefore, though Moshe was not excluded from the Torah completely, he was excluded from one parshah.

However, was it actually a punishment, in light of the above? If Moshe Rabbeinu did something positive, can his words be considered a curse in need of some kind of fulfillment? After all, the entire Torah is called Toras Moshe, and there are many parshios in which Moshe Rabbeinu's name is not even hinted to, at least as far as most of us see. So, the real question is, to whose detriment is the exclusion of Moshe from Parashas Tetzaveh?

It's like what happened with respect to the laws of karshus, after the war against Midian in Parashas Mattos. For sending their women in (on Bilaam's advice), in order to draw the Jewish men into sin, the Jewish people went to war against Midian on the command of God. Successful in battle, they later returned to the Jewish camp with plenty of booty — and Midianite women!

Moshe Rabbeinu couldn't believe his eyes! The very source of the sin that just caused such unmitigated destruction was being brought back as part of the spoils of war? Moshe became so angry with the Jewish people that he was denied the opportunity to teach the Jewish people the laws of kashering the utensils that they brought back from the war. Eliezer, the Kohen Gadol, taught them instead.

However, in the end, who was the real loser, Moshe Rabbeinu, or the Jewish people? The Jewish people, of course. As great as Eliezer HaKohen was, learning from him was not on the same level as learning from Moshe Rabbeinu himself, especially the laws of kashrus, since they have clues to redemption built into them. However, proving themselves unworthy, Moshe Rabbeinu was not the source of these unique laws.

As the Maharsha says, Jewish leaders are directed by Heaven based upon the merits of the people (Gittin 56b). Yes, they should tell us what we need to do, or what we shouldn't do. Yes, Heaven should direct them to direct us, but only, explains the Maharsha, if we, the people, are worthy of such Divine assistance.

So, whose loss is it that Moshe Rabbeinu is not mentioned in Parashas Tetzaveh, especially being such an important parshah (as I explained in my other parshah sheet, Deeper Perceptions), his, or ours?

In fact, Parashas Tetzaveh often comes out right in advance of Purim, making it Parashas Zachor as well, when we recall the attack of Amalek in the desert (and often the *yahrzeit* of Moshe Rabbeinu himself), right before arriving at Mt. Sinai. At first there seems to be little connection between the two parshios, other than the timing, but as I explain in *Deeper Perceptions*, that is definitely not the case.

Therefore, it is more than interesting that Moshe Rabbeinu did not go to war against Amalek, as he did against other enemies along the way. He was certainly there, but in the background, perhaps like in this week's Maftir, adding the spiritual component to a physical battle: As Yehoshua led the troops in war against Amalek, Moshe Rabbeinu kept his hands held high to keep the Jewish people focused on their Source of success.

Perhaps there is a different message in all of this than simply the fulfillment of words that Moshe Rabbeinu uttered in earnest, and for all the right reasons. How much more so since we see shortly after that God tells Moshe how much He likes him. Instead, maybe it has to do with the nature of the battle against Amalek itself, something that, perhaps, we take for granted and ought not to, a lesson, perhaps, we can learn from the Spies.

According to Rashi in Parashas Shlach, the Spies had been important men, kosher men. But then again, would Moshe have sent anything but on such an incredibly important, historical, and dangerous mission. Look how much was riding on their success, so how could anyone but people of the caliber of Yehoshua and Caleiv go to spy God's monumental gift to the Jewish people?

And yet, shortly after, Rashi mentions that, just as their return from the mission had been with bad intentions, so too had their going on the mission been with bad intentions! Does that not sound as if Rashi is contradicting himself, and in such close proximity of his original statement?

That is what it may sound like, but that is not what is happening. Rather, both statements are true, and the only things in close proximity of each other is how quickly 10 of the 12 Spies changed from being kosher to treif, pretty much immediately after getting their instructions from Moshe Rabbeinu and leaving him to carry out their mission. Indeed, not only is it true that, when that cat is away the mice will play, but when the mice leave the cat and go out on their own, they can also lose it as well.

In the case of the Spies, the problem was that they had still been dependent upon Moshe Rabbeinu for their connection to God, and to remain connected to the ultimate destiny of the Jewish people. It wasn't that, even while around Moshe, they had thoughts of rebellion and only took advantage of the opportunity of spying to make good on mutinous plans. As Rashi said, until leaving Moshe Rabbeinu, they had been *kasherim*.

However, away from Moshe Rabbeinu, doubts crept in. As they went out on their own into a foreign land ruled by 31 hostile kings with plenty of fighting experience, and they had none, they couldn't help but question the events destined to occur once they tried to take what they considered to be their land. And, the way it usually goes is that small doubts lead to bigger doubts, and bigger doubts lead to even bigger doubts, until they cross the point of no-return, causing a total

loss of perspective and capitulation to the intellectual void that is Amalek, the gematria of which is suffek — doubt.

A large part of the problem wasn't a lack of belief in God or His ability to miraculously conquer the nations of Canaan; they didn't the ability of Moshe Rabbeinu to lead them in battle and to victory. Rather, as the Leshem explains, the problem was a lack of belief in themselves, which made them feel unworthy of victory, miraculous or natural, and that made them entertain other options that previously would have been unacceptable.

With the exception of some of the leaders at the top, we are all vulnerable to the same kinds of doubts in various different situations in life. It's nice when your spiritual leader is close by, and you can call him up or run to his house to get advice and straighten out the confusion, but life is not always so convenient, as the Holocaust and even lesser crises have proven. Life can come down to life-and-death decisions, with no one to rely upon but ourselves to decide. A person has to be ready, or at least as ready as possible.

What does it mean to be ready? The first thing a person has to do is learn as much halachah as he can, and create as sophisticated a Torah data base as possible. At the same time, he has to work on himself to become as much of a God-fearer as possible, inasmuch as he has to develop self-honesty and integrity; honesty has to matter more to a person than self-interest.

We need this in order to be open to siyita d'Shemaya — Heavenly help. After all, we have limited learning time, and self-perfection is a lifelong project. Crises come at us far more often than we are usually ready for them, which is why we are often not pleased with the results. Success, physical and especially spiritual, is not a one-man job. As the Talmud writes, to succeed in life, from a Torah perspective, we need to enlist the help of Heaven:

Everyday the yetzer hara gets up to kill a person, and would succeed if Heaven did not help.
(Kiddushin 30b)

It is not about getting lucky. It is about getting Divine guidance, which can be something as basic as a hunch after we have done all we can to understand a situation, but it is still not enough. Life, and often history, does not wait for us to catch up. Like a swiftly moving river, it keeps moving downstream despite the obstacles in its path, including misinformed and misguided people and leaders.

With God, we can bridge the gap. Given over to truth and the Torah way, God has no problem lending a helping hand to help us to rise to the occasion, and accomplish greater things than our own personal assets might otherwise allow. That is what siyita d'Shemaya is all about.

In fact, explains the Arizal, one of the ways that God lends us that helping hand is something called ibur, a form of reincarnation that happens while we're actually already alive. It is not the return of our own soul in a new body, but the return of the soul of another person in our current body, to help us

out (Sha'ar HaGilgulim).

Usually, explains the Arizal, it is a soul that excelled at what we need to accomplish, but can't on our own. It's as if our soul gets a turbo-charge, greatly increasing our personal capacity, and it remains that way as long as the extra soul — or souls, since three additional souls can be added to our main soul — remains with us, which is as long as we merit it.

Don't worry: It won't make you schizo, just spiritually uplifted. In fact, prophecy worked the same way, on an even higher level. What was prophecy? It was God giving the prophet extra information, knowledge he previously had not, and probably could not, accumulate through his own efforts. It may have been reward for the prophet's pursuit of Torah and closeness to God, but it resulted in revelations beyond any data base someone could personally construct.

Even insights work the same way. How many times, after much thought and effort, do we all of sudden get a flash and find solutions to problems previously thought unsolvable, or achieve new levels of understanding that we can't explain how we reached? It's as all of a sudden if it just showed up in our brain, which it may very well have done.

Either way, it is the result of Heavenly help to go beyond our personal capacity, something we have to merit through our efforts to advance our level of Torah understanding, and our level of sincerity and integrity. It might not make us into Moshe Rabbeinu, or even put us on par with the Torah leaders of our generation. But, it can certainly help us out in a bind, and protect us from bad influences when we are away from our spiritually secure environments, something that can occur as soon as you walk out your front door.

Until Moshiach comes, Amalek will continue to be on the prowl, looking for spiritual stragglers. He will continue to hunt for people who are weak in their Torah learning and make little effort, if any, to change their situation. He will even take advantage of Jews who know much Torah, but who lack sincerity and spiritual integrity. He will create situations that take advantage of people who are overly dependents on their leaders, to cause them to stumble, and then tumble, from being Torah-true Jews, especially in such a face-paced and easily-distracting world like the one in which we find ourselves today.

In truth, all Torah flows through Moshe Rabbeinu to each and every Jew in every generation. However, to be open to it, we have to be spiritually-independent as well, so that we can maintain our Torah-integrity even in times when we are without leaders to whom to turn. Then we are invincible against Amalek and his tricks, and can even be leaders for others who are less independent in their Torah observance.

Text

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