

TESHUVA AND REBI ELAZAR BEN DORDAI

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Listen heavens, and I will speak! Hear earth, the words of my mouth! (Devarim 32:1)

In this week's parshah, as Moshe Rabbeinu readied the Jewish people for life after his death, he called Heaven and Earth to bear witness to warnings of future straying from Torah and mitzvos, especially at the end of history. As Rashi explains, Moshe Rabbeinu told the Jewish people that though he would not be around later to testify against future generations himself, Heaven and Earth will be.

That Heaven and Earth will be around until the end of history is not an issue. The question is, even though they will be around for all the future generations to which Moshe Rabbeinu is referring, how will they give testimony?

The answer to these questions might be found in another story in the Talmud.

It was said of Rebi Elazar ben Dordai that he did not leave out any harlot in the world without coming to her. Once, on hearing that there was a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who accepted a purse of denarii for her hire, he took a purse of denarii and crossed seven rivers for her sake. As he was with her, she blew forth breath and said: "As this blown breath will not return to its place, so will Elazar ben Dordai never be received in repentance." He thereupon went, sat between two hills and mountains and exclaimed: "O hills and mountains, plead for mercy for me!"

They replied: "How will we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, as it says, '*For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed*' (Yeshayahu 54:10)." So he exclaimed: "*Heaven and earth, plead for mercy for me!*" They too replied: "*How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, as it says, 'For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment.'*" (Yeshayahu 51:6)." (Avodah Zarah 17a)

The story is interesting for a number of reasons, especially how Rebi Elazar ben Dordai became inspired to do teshuvah, obviously a matter of Divine Providence. (After all, why would a harlot care if her customer would be accepted in teshuvah or not? Wasn't that bad for business?)

More interesting, though, is with whom he consulted regarding doing his teshuvah. Had he been the one to tell us the story, we might have assumed that he had lost it and was in need of some serious psychiatric treatment. Fortunately for Rebi Elazar, it is the Talmud that is recounting the tale, leaving us with little doubt about his mental state.

The only question is, though, what is the Talmud telling us? In truth, he wouldn't have been the first one in history to call out to the mountains, Heaven, and Earth in search of mercy. But, he would be probably the only one, or at least one of very few, who actually received an answer, let alone an intelligent one, to his question.

I once asked a well-known Rosh HaYeshivah about midrashim, when to believe them at face value and when it is not imperative to. He told me that, when it comes to midrashim regarding accounts in the Torah, one can assume that they occurred the way they are portrayed, even if it is hard to believe.

Regarding midrashim from the Talmud, however, the Rosh HaYeshivah said that, if the story does not need to be true to make its point, it may only be a parable. However, if the midrash must be accurate to teach its lesson, then like those from the Torah, one should believe it, even if it seems somewhat farfetched.

There is an expression, *"If walls could talk, what they might say about all that has occurred in this room ..."* or something like that. However, that is assuming first that walls have ears to hear, or eyes to see, and that their only problem is that they can't speak. If walls can't hear or see, then of what good would it be to be able to speak?

The answer is obvious: Walls can of course see and hear, and only need to learn how to speak. An even more obvious answer is that they don't have to see, hear, or even speak. It is enough that we imagine what they might say if they could, given everything, according to what we know, has occurred in the room in question.

The same thing can be said regarding the story of Rebi Elazar ben Dordai. Perhaps, as he contemplated the best way to do teshuvah, he imagined, based upon the verses quoted, what Heaven and Earth might have answered him had he invoked their assistance. The story, therefore, represents the intellectual process that led him to the eventual conclusion that teshuvah is a personal thing. No one can help us do it but we must do it ourselves.

Likewise, Heaven and Earth do not actually have to speak up at any time either for us or against us. They just have to be there in each generation so that we can be reminded, at all times, that they have been around a lot longer than we have, that they have seen a lot more history than we have. We just have to be able to see them, and that is testimony enough.

It works something like this, except in reverse:

Rebi Meir said: "What is unique about techeles from all other colors [that God chose it for the mitzvah of tzitzis]? Techeles is like the sea, and the sea is similar to the sky, and the sky to the Throne of Glory," as it says, *"They saw the God of Israel, and under His feet there was something like sapphire brick, like the essence of heaven in purity."* (Menachos 43b)

In other words, by looking at the blue thread embedded among the white ones in a pair of tzitzis, a person is reminded of the sea, which is a similar color. This, in turn, reminds the person of the sky,

which is also blue, which then reminds the person of the Throne of Glory, which was considered to be sapphire blue, as the verse says.

With respect to Moshe Rabbeinu's statement in this week's parshah, we are supposed to look at the sky, and in doing so, be reminded of our Creator, and our obligation to Him:

What is the path to loving Him and fearing Him? When a person contemplates His works and His awesome and mighty creations, and sees in them incomparable and endless wisdom, immediately he will love, praise, glorify, and greatly desire to know his Great Name, as Dovid wrote, "My soul thirsts for God, the Living Almighty" (Tehillim 42:3). (Yad, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah, 2:1)

That may work for someone who is already in the spiritual ballpark, one might argue, but what about people who are so distant from any belief in God or Torah from Sinai? What about people for whom the only testimony Heaven and Earth bear is that once-upon-a-time, there was a big bang, and that's about it?

Listen to how the story of Rebi Elazar ben Dordai ends:

He then exclaimed: *"Sun and moon, plead for mercy for me!"* But they also replied: *"How can we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, as it says, 'Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed' (Yeshayahu 24:23)."*

He exclaimed: *"Stars and constellations! Plead for mercy for me!"*

They answered: *"How can we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, as it says, 'And all the hosts of heaven shall moulder away' (Yeshayahu 34:4)."*

He said: *"The matter depends only upon me!"* Having placed his head between his knees, he wept aloud until his soul departed. Then a Heavenly Voice was heard proclaiming: *"Rebi Elazar ben Dordai is destined for the life of the World-to-Come!"* . . . Rebi [Yehudah HaNasi heard this story and he] cried and said: *"Some acquire eternal life after many years, some in a single hour!"* Rebi also said: *"Repentants are not only accepted, they are even called 'Rebi!'"* (Avodah Zarah 17a)

Talk about crossing the floor! This was a man who crossed the sea to meet with a harlot and who shortly after died doing teshuvah like most of us have never done! And, as a result, as Rebi points out, not only was he accepted in repentance, but he was even 'ordained' a rabbi on his way out!

The point? All it takes is a little self-honesty to ignite the fuse of return to God and Torah. It just takes someone to be sensitive enough to look up at Heaven and down at the earth every now and then, and to marvel at them. If we are not awed by them to the point of teshuvah, it will not be because of their lack of awesomeness. It will be because we allowed ourselves to become desensitized to the point that their awesomeness could no longer impress us.

That will not be an indictment of Heaven and Earth, but of man who walks below and above them.

Text

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