

MIRACLE VS MIRACLE: PART TWO

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Parshas Mishpatim presents the framework for an ethical and judicious society. The scope of its topics range far and wide. For example: How should we treat the Jewish slave and maidservant. How should we relate to the converted, the widowed and the orphaned. How do we assess payment for personal damages, and what is the punishment for sorcery and false testimony. Why did G-d record this potpourri of instructions immediately following the Aseres Hadibros?

In last week's issue, I contrasted Kriyas Yam Suf with Mattan Torah. Kriyas Yam Suf revealed G-d's Ahava - love for the Bnai Yisroel. The Jews recognized the miracle as an act of undeserved loving kindness and therefore sang Shira - the song of angels. Mattan Torah, on the other hand, was an even greater revelation of G-d's love and was received by the Bnai Yisroel on the level of Yirah - awe. However, in the aftermath of Revelation the Jews did not sing Shira. I also suggested that Angels only function on the level of Ahava, whereas humans can attain the level of Yirah. In other words, Ahava is possible for any creation that can appreciate G-d's love as a manifestation of His sustaining all living things. This applies to free-willed and non-free-willed creations alike. Yirah, on the other hand, is a function of free will and is possible only for humans.

I referenced the Rambam in the second chapter of Yisodei HaTorah who explains that Ahava must precede Yirah. A person must first recognize that he is loved by G-d before that person can be in awe of G-d.

How do we recognize G-d's love for us and attain the level of Yirah - awe? "When a person contemplates G-d's wondrous deeds and creations and perceives His infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison, he will immediately love, praise, and glorify G-d, yearning with tremendous desire to know G-d's great name. When he continues to reflect on these matters, he will recoil in awe and fear, appreciating how he is a tiny and insignificant creature standing before G-d Who is of perfect knowledge." (Rambam, Laws of Yisodei HaTorah, 2:2)

In order to understand the sequence of Kriyas Yam Suf, Mattan Torah, and the laws of this week's Parsha, we must delve even more deeply into the profundity of this Rambam.

There is a fundamental rule in our relationship with G-d that the Torah does not command emotions. The Mitzvos demand action, not feelings. G-d certainly recognized that actions often generate feelings, and that is certainly what G-d wishes and expects. However, the foundation of our relationship with G-d is doing the Mitzvos, regardless of what we feel.

It is interesting to note that included in the Ten Commandments are the two Mitzvos of honoring parents and not coveting someone else's possessions. Both appear to be emotionally based. However, a proper study of those Mitzvos will reveal that both are action oriented. Honoring parents commands us what we should do in order to honor our parents and the last commandment prohibits us from actions and attitudes that cause us to be jealous or are the result of being jealous.

To quote the Chinuch, Mitzvah #36: "You should not have thoughts of taking that which belongs to another... However, the transgression of this prohibition requires that a person act on his jealousies. For example: Using coercion to purchase an item that you desire, even though the owner does not want to sell. This presumes that you are paying the reluctant owner full market value for his property."

Back to the Rambam.

There is a Mitzvah to love G-d. There is also a Mitzvah to be in awe of G-d. These Mitzvos must mandate action, not just emotion. The Rambam explains that studying G-d's actions fulfills the Mitzvah of Ahavas Hashem - loving G-d. To the degree that we recognize G-d's wondrous benevolence will be the degree of our love for Him.

At the parting of the Yam Suf, G-d's loving kindness, His absolute benevolence, was undeniable. Not only that, but it was seemingly undeserved. As the Medresh says, "The Sea asked, The Egyptians serve idols and the Jews serve idols, why should I part for the Jews and drown the Egyptians?" The Jews themselves did not know why they were being saved; however, for whatever reason they were the undeniable beneficiaries of G-d's kindness. Therefore, they had no choice but to acknowledge G-d's mastery and majesty. The Jews sang Shira.

Shira is the song of angels. Angels are non-free-willed creations who exist solely to do G-d's will. G-d is the source of all goodness and His will must be good and kind. Therefore, to be created to serve G-d will is the greatest good possible. In fact, it is G-d's ultimate act of loving kindness - Chesed. G-d needs nothing because He is everything. G-d does not even need our service or Mitzvos. G-d created all things for their benefit, not His own.

However, the angels are limited. As non-free-willed creations, their existence is simple and clear. Their existence has nothing to do with deserving or not deserving. They always know and accept that they are the recipients of G-d's loving kindness. Therefore, angels sing Shira.

The Jews at Kriyas Yam Suf were just like the angels. They were clearly undeserving of G-d's intervention. They were equally aware that the miracle was proof positive of G-d's absolute mastery. At that moment, it was as if the gathered nation had lost their free-will. It was impossible to deny G-d! "The simplest of people (the maid-servant) recognized G-d's actuality to a greater degree than the greatest of prophets!" Therefore, like the angels, the nation sang Shira.

The experience in the desert was intended to emphasize the degree of G-d's loving kindness. The

Jews left Egypt magnificently wealthy. Yet, with all the riches of Egypt at their disposal they could not buy a glass of water or a crust of bread. Clearly, having money did not make them more or less deserving. The Jews were forced to acknowledge that neither their actions nor their money made them deserving. Therefore, whatever they had was a direct gift from G-d. Why? Because He manifests Himself through acts of loving-kindness. Neither the angels in heaven, the animals in the forest, or the humans in their palaces are any more deserving of G-d's attention. "He opens up His hand and willingly sustains all living things." The greatest proof of G-d's benevolence is the fact that He equally sustains all things, free-willed and non-free-willed alike.

Yirah, on the other hand, is different. Yirah is a product of having free will. Yirah is a product of realizing what it means to be a source of loving-kindness. "When he continues to reflect on these matters, he will recoil in awe and fear, appreciating how he is a tiny and insignificant creature standing before G-d Who is of perfect knowledge." (Ibid.) The non-free-willed creature does not understand the meaning of Chesed because they only understand what it means to receive. They cannot initiate any action that is not directly commanded by G-d. Humans, on the other hand, were gifted with the power of emulating G-d's Chesed. They too can initiate acts of loving-kindness. They too can selflessly give of themselves for the benefit of others.

According to the Rambam, the stage of Yirah requires a point of comparison. Only someone who understands what it means to give to others can begin to appreciate the magnitude of G-d's unlimited loving kindness. A child can never appreciate the degree of a parent's love. It is only when the child becomes a parent that the child begins to appreciate how much his own parent has given to him.

The aftermath of Yirah is Chesed. Once a person realizes and accepts that his own existence is all an act of divine Chesed, he begins to understand that the only significance in life is to do Chesed. "Just as He is merciful, so too must you be merciful." Considering how "tiny and insignificant" a creature we are "standing before G-d Who is of perfect knowledge" our desire to be significant propels us to connect to G-d Who is the source of all significance.

If G-d is the source of all goodness and significance and we desire to be like Him, we must know what G-d deems to be Chesed. We must be told what G-d considers significant. Mattan Torah was the moment when G-d revealed to us the meaning of Chesed, the criteria for significance.

Torah was written for free-willed humans, not angels. Torah was written for societies. Torah is an instruction manual detailing how we can emulate G-d's loving kindness. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that immediately following the giving of the Ten Commandments G-d would present the framework for an ethical and judicious society. Without an ethical and judicious society, there cannot be Chesed. Therefore, Mishpatim must follow the giving of the Torah.

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