

FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

This week's Parsha begins a few weeks before the end of Moshe's life. He recounts his attempt at beseeching G-d to reconsider the decree against his entering Eretz Yisroel. Moshe's argument to G-d was, "I have just begun to see your greatness and now I am to die? Please allow me to cross over the Yarden and see Eretz Yisroel."

The seventh Ani Maamin states, "I believe with perfect faith that the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu (the Torah) is absolutely true. He was the chief of all prophets, both before and after him."

The Torah confirmed that Moshe was, "exceedingly humble, more so than anyone else alive."

As the "chief of all the prophets" Moshe's knowledge of G-d's actuality, and his understanding of G-d's judiciousness was unequaled. Therefore, what did Moshe mean when he said, "I have just begun to see Your greatness?" It could not have been an expression of Moshe's humility because humility does not involve denial of personal attainment or accomplishment. Humility involves absolute awareness and acceptance of personal greatness without feeling superior to anyone else because of it. What then did Moshe mean?

What did Moshe mean when he said, "to see your greatness?" G-d's greatness is His infinite power, justice and wisdom that are revealed through the study of Torah and the passage of time. In most instances, it is only through the retrospective mirror of history that we gain insight into G-d's infinite powers.

This retrospective perspective is not limited to historical events. It applies equally to the performance of Mitzvos and understanding our individual and collective missions. The wisdom and knowledge gained in one day of living a life of Torah and Mitzvos is the foundation for the next day's intent and performance.

We are told, "Every day, the performance of Torah and Mitzvos should be as new." "As new" means, as if we had never done that Mitzvah or studied that part of the Torah before. This sense of newness can be accomplished if we accept the infinite nature of G-d, His commandments, and His Torah. Through studying G-d's infinite Torah we continuously increase our understanding of G-d and His intention in commanding us to do Mitzvos. Therefore, the knowledge gained today through Torah study makes us realize that what we thought yesterday was the proper performance of a Mitzvah in truth was a mere glimmer of what G-d really intended our performance to be.

Imagine, we say Shema three times every day. Is it possible for each new day to be a brand "new" experience? Shema is our thrice-daily acceptance of G-d's primacy, our dependency, and our obligation to do as He commands. If every day our knowledge and understanding of G-d increases through the study of Torah and the performance of Mitzvos, we should realize that what we thought we were accepting by yesterday's Shema was less than what our newfound insight and understanding now dictates. What we thought we were accepting as G-d's primacy and intent was but a glimmer of His intent! Therefore, the next morning when we say the Shema it will be as if we are saying it for the first time. It will be "as if it was new."

On Tisha B'Av we read about the Ten Martyrs who were murdered by the Romans during the time of the destruction of the second Bais Hamikdash. Among them was Rebbi Chutzpis Hamiturgamun. The commentaries explained that he was killed one day before his 130th birthday. The author of the Kina - lamentation states that the Romans refused his final request to live till his 130th birthday and be allowed to say the Shema one more time.

The request, although touching, does not seem to be so important. He had already said the Shema for almost 130 years. What more did he hope to accomplish with saying it "one more time?" However, based upon the adage, "Every day, Torah and Mitzvos should be as new," we understand R' Chutzpis's request. He was not asking to say the Shema "one more time," he was begging to say it for the very first time!

Moshe Rabbeinu's plea was, "I have just begun to see your Your greatness and now I am to die? Please allow me to cross over the Yarden and see Eretz Yisroel. " The greatest of all prophets, the most knowledgeable of G-d's intent, knew that each day brought new revelations that altered his perception of G-d's Torah. Therefore, his greatest desire was to be able to live one more day so that he could recite the Shema for the very first time.

15TH OF AV: THE HAPPIEST DAY IN THE YEAR

The last Mishneh in Taanis states that the 15th of Av (this Shabbos) and Yom Kippur are equally joyous occasions. The forgiveness received on Yom Kippur and the annually renewed closeness with G-d are causes for great celebration.

The 15th of Av is equally a time of historic atonement, intimacy, and celebration. The Talmud explains the six events that give this day its unique character.

1. As explained in previous editions, the above 20, male, generation of the Exodus died out in the desert during the 40 years of wandering. Every Tisha B'Av, 15,000 men, (of the total 600,000) would die. On the last Tisha B'av in the year 2488, the remaining 15,000 dug their graves, but in the morning none had died! Figuring that they must have made a mistake in the calendar, they continued to dig their graves every night until the 15th, when seeing the full moon they realized that G-d had rescinded the decree for the remaining 15,000! A day of forgiveness and celebration was proclaimed. ($38 \times 15,000 = 555,000 + 14,700 + 250$ by Korach + $15,000$ Deut.1:44 = 599,950)

2 & 3. In the times of the Shoftim - Judges, under the rule of Othniel, a terrible civil war broke out between the tribe of Binyamin and the rest of the nation. (approx. 2573-1188 b.c.e.) The tribe of Binyamin was decimated and a decree was issued forbidding any further marriage with the men of Binyamin. This would have resulted in the eventual destruction of the entire tribe. Additionally, all women, from any tribe, were forbidden to marry outside of their tribes. Some time later, on the 15th of Av, both decrees were lifted, allowing for all marriages between the tribes, and guaranteeing the survival of the tribe of Binyamin. The Mishna teaches that the 15th of Av was devoted to shidduchim, marriages, and the rebuilding of relationships.

4. Following the death of King Solomon, the nation was divided. Israel, was led by the evil Yeravam ben Nevat. Three years after taking the throne, he erected two golden calves in the North and South of Israel, and prohibited his people to go and visit the Beis Hamikdash. Checkpoints and other forms of restraint were instituted to discourage going to the Temple and to encourage serving the "golden calves". On the 15th of Av, around 3187-574 b.c.e., under King Hoshea b. Elah, the decree was lifted and all of Israel was again able to go to the Beis Hamikdash.

5. "Yom Tabar Maagal" The Day of the breaking of the Axes." In the 2nd Temple, wood was scarce after the land had been unattended during the 70-year exile. Therefore, wood was very precious and expensive. To guarantee that the Mizbeach would always have sufficient wood, donations were given by the wealthiest families, exclusively for the Alter. The wood had to be completely dry to guarantee that there wouldn't be any worms. The cut off date to bring the wood into the Temple for the coming year was the 15th of Av. That was the day when the "axes could be broken" and it was a day of enormous joy and rejoicing knowing that the sacrifices could be brought for the coming year.

6. 52 years after the 2nd Temple, Bar Kochba lead an uprising against the Romans. He was so successful that some considered him to be the Mashiach.

His rebellion ended on Tisha B'Av after a 3-year siege against Betar, and he died along with 580,000 others. To disgrace and demoralize the people, the "fallen of Betar" were not permitted by the Roman authorities to be buried, and were stacked as a human fence around the vineyards of the governor, Adrianus. (approx. 12 mile perimeter) For almost 11 years, until Emperor Hadrian's death, the bodies miraculously remained intact, without decomposing.

On the 15th of Av, permission was granted to bury the martyred of Betar. This miracle was cause for celebration. In fact, the fourth blessing of the Birkas Hamazon (Grace After Meals) Hatov V'Hamaytiv - G-d Who is good and Who does good) was authored by the rabbis of that generation to commemorate this great miracle. This was ordained to remember the special love that G-d displayed in not allowing the martyrs of Betar to decompose before burial.

The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.
