

# A QUESTION OF PERSPECTIVE

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

The Rambam (Maimonides) in the beginning of the second chapter of Hilchos Yisodei Hatorah (The Laws of The Fundamental Principles of The Torah) discusses the Mitzvah of Ahavas Hashem - Loving G-d, and Yiras Hashem - Being In Awe of G-d. The Rambam considers Ahava as the prerequisite for Yirah. First we learn to love G-d and then our understanding of G-d grows beyond love and enters the realm of awe.

I would like to suggest that the parting of the Yam Suf was on the level of Ahava - love, and that Revelation was on the level of Yirah - awe. Furthermore, in the aftermath of Kriyas Yam Suf (Parting of The Sea) the Jews sang Shira (song) because they had ascended to the level of angels. In the aftermath of Mattan Torah (Revelation), the Jews remained 100% human. Angels exist in a perpetual state of Ahava (love), while humans must advance to the stage of Yirah (awe). Ahava is the stage at which we recognize the constancy of G-d's loving benevolence. Yirah is the stage at which we realize that as free willed creations we must emulate G-d and respond to G-d's love.

The free-willed human is the only creation who can actively engage in emulating G-d's Chesed (kindness) by choosing to also do Chesed. Therefore, the human is the only creation who can appreciate what it means to be a provider of Chesed. All other creations receive G-d's loving kindness as a given. For them Chesed is not earned, Chesed just is. For them the verse, "He opens His Hand and provides for all living things" is a fact of nature. Therefore, they cannot appreciate what it means to be the giver and provider. However, the human is the only creation in the universe able to understand what it takes to be a constant source of Chesed.

If we use the same logic we can conclude that we are the only creation in the universe able to deny the constancy of G-d's Chesed. All other creations exist within the framework of receiving and taking. They cannot give beyond their divinely programmed instinctual limits. They do not understand or appreciate that what they receive is a gift freely granted them by G-d's will. They take because that is what they do. When they appear to give it too is not a free willed gesture. They give in whatever manner because that is what they have been programmed to do in that instance given those specific circumstances. Their very existence testifies to the presence of a Creator who cares to maintain His world - not because they deserve to be maintained but because that is what G-d does for whatever reasons He has for doing so. As such, non-free willed creations cannot deny G-d's benevolence.

On the other hand, humans who have the choice to give or not to give can deny G-d's constancy.

They can attribute all survival to human ability and endeavor rather than attributing it to the constancy of G-d's benevolence. Because we are given free will to choose between giving and not giving we assume that our choices make all the difference between surviving and not surviving. We can think that what we have is because of our own hard work, ambition, and determination. We are able to think that, "My strength and the might of my hand are responsible for my great success." However, that is simply not true. On Rosh Hashana we state that G-d determines everything for the coming year including health and success. That means that whatever we end up with for the year was already decreed to be, regardless of our hard work, ambition, and determination. It also explains why good things sometimes happen to bad people and bad things sometimes happen to good people. If everything were determined by hard work, ambition, and determination the manner of G-d's justice would not be such a mystery. The reason why good things happen to a bad person is because he must have worked harder than the good person! The fact that the outcome seldom equals the effort proves that the system is beyond our hard work, ambition, and determination and what we have is always a product of G-d's benevolence. (And what we do not have is equally a product of G-d's benevolence, although that is much more difficult for us to understand and accept.)

Once the human realizes the extent and constancy of G-d's Chesed he is awestruck by the unlimited power of His loving care. Because the human is endowed with freewill he can decide to imitate G-d and initiate acts of Chesed. (Not so with the angels.) G-d then becomes the scale by which humans judge their own Chesed, and as such they must find themselves to be lacking. This results in the fear filled awesomeness of Yirah.

There is no doubt that the miracle of Kriyas Yam Suf was far more spectacular than the giving of the Torah. However, spectacle does not always equal greater, and spectacle does not guarantee change in commitment or behavior. On the other hand, Mattan Torah effected unequalled change and commitment in the Bnai Yisroel. I'll prove it to you.

Kriyas Yam Suf was an event that involved the forces of nature and what appeared to be a change from the usual and the probable. Nature, removed from the momentary spectacle of change, is far more spectacular than any other physical event. The orbits and movements of the cosmos and the constancy of G-d's absolute, unfailing mastery is beyond miraculous and beyond amazing. It truly defies description. Yet, we take nature for granted. Therefore, the size of the spectacle does not define the magnitude of the miracle. Experience dictates that greater constancy is trust worthier, effective, profound, and lasting.

The Parting of the Sea was a change from the norm and therefore spectacular. On the other hand, Revelation imposed G-d onto, into, and within the norms of nature and life and was therefore beyond spectacular. The Yam Suf did not result in a mandate to emulate G-d. Its result was Shira - angelic song, and only Shira. Three days after Revelation the Jews were already complaining at Marah! The reason was that no one could possibly emulate the spectacle of Divine justice and mastery over all nature that was Kriyas Yam Suf! On the other hand, Revelation resulted in a

mandate to emulate G-d through keeping His Mitzvos. If they would refuse to do so they would suffer a total loss of self and purpose within G-d's spoken intent and plan for the universe. At Revelation, nothing of the natural world was changed and nothing was altered. The world was as it always had been and always would be - with one exception - G-d had spoken! G-d had told them why He had created the universe and what His expectations were for them. G-d had publicly revealed Himself to the world as having always been there behind the veil of nature.

(It also explains why G-d revealed Himself in the desert. The desert appears to be dead, barren and empty. It is almost as if G-d did not finish the project. However, to the biologist and the observer the desert is as complex as any other ecosystem on earth. One need only look a little closer in order to reveal the thriving presence of divinely gifted life and living behind the desert facade of emptiness and death.)

After the Yam Suf the Jews were like angels. For one short period of time the actuality of G-d's manifest power forced them to realize that G-d's love was given to both those who deserve and those who do not deserve. They understood that His love and Chesed were constant and by definition their miraculous salvation from the hands of the Egyptians was undeserved. As such, they could only sing the song of angels who are always aware of G-d's constant loving benevolence of which they are the undeserving beneficiaries. (Angels have no choice but to listen to G-d and do as they are told; therefore, they do not deserve reward or punishment for what they do.) The actions of the Jews up until Kriyas Yam Suf did not warrant salvation. However, for whatever reason, G-d deemed them deserving of salvation regardless of their actions. Such seemingly undeserved salvation demanded recognition and thanksgiving. Such thanksgiving could only be expressed as Shira - song - the language of angels who exist in a perpetual state of expressed recognition for G-d's unearned benevolence.

However, the Jews could not and were not intended to sustain that momentary angelic experience. As soon as their bellies began to grumble and their throats became dry, they returned to their natural state of free willed human. They once again saw G-d in the context of providing for those who are deserving and denying those who are not deserving. They did not trust that G-d would always take care of them because they did not believe themselves to be deserving of His love. G-d's Chesed became part of the process of reward and punishment, rather than the given norm of all existence. In many ways the Jews were far more comfortable in a world of cause and effect that they could understand rather than trusting in the constancy of G-d's benevolence and wondering what G-d expected from them in return. (On a deeper level, this provided the necessary cognitive and emotional dissonance needed to prepare the Jews for Mattan Torah when G-d finally revealed to them what He wanted in return.)

On the other hand, Yisro, father-in-law of Moshe, had a much different reaction to Kriyas Yam Suf. He had already explored the philosophical and religious realms of reward and punishment cause and effect. He had found all the other philosophies crafting illogical and nonsensical causes to

rationalize personal desires and ambitions. However, when Yisro heard about Kriyas Yam Suf he realized that G-d's benevolence truly was the product of cause and effect. The Egyptians had been evil and G-d punished them. The Jews were their hapless victims and they were saved. There was a Judge and there was justice! There was a standard for good and there was a standard for bad. All he needed to know was the next step. What does this Creator, Judge, and G-d want from humanity? What are the details that define the meaning of good and the meaning of bad? How do non-angels live within the context of G-d's world?

Yisro also recognized that the miraculous manner of their salvation reflected the order of the universe rather than its lack of order. The miracles, although spectacular, were not random or excessive. They were uniquely designed to punish the crimes in the most judicious way possible while at the same time displaying G-d's awesome mastery and love.

Yisro was also not present at the actual miracle. He only heard about them. Therefore, the immediate impact of the spectacle that had left the Jews breathlessly overwhelmed by G-d's loving might was not felt by Yisro. He had the necessary distance to see the message behind the miracle. He was able to perceive the physics behind the magic. The Jews on the other hand were left with a momentary awareness of G-d's majestic awesomeness that numbed their physical and intellectual senses and defied any and all interpretation or human response. Had they not been compelled by Divine inspiration to join in song they would have been left speechless.

At the time of Mattan Torah the Jews were not re-elevated to the level of angels. They remained humans, and only humans. The Torah they were about to receive had been written exclusively for humans and not angels! As such, the Jews were left with the contrast between their extremely limited and undeserving selves and G-d's expectations. Every person was forced to evaluate himself or herself and ask, "Am I deserving of this mission? Do I want this mission? Can I do this mission?" If I accept I will deserve life, if I do not accept I might as well die here beneath the mountain. I have no other reason to exist. There is no other reason why G-d would have created me except to assume this mission."

What was the mission? The mission was to be, "A kingdom of priests and G-d's holy nation." The mission was to represent G-d in the world of nations and societies and emulate G-d by doing for them the greatest act of Chesed. Their mission was to be the source of blessing for all the families of the world. Their mission was to sanctify G-d's name by doing His commandments and teaching the rest of the world to believe in Him.

At the foot of Har Sinai the Jews confronted their most basic existence. They came face to face with their unique destiny. They each saw the Burning Bush and heard G-d call their name. Their choice was simple. "Do you want My Torah or not? If you want My Torah you have to listen to all its instructions. If you want My Torah you must be like Me and become the source of constant loving and giving. You must become My agents for all that is good and noble in a mortal existence. I will be

your example. Look to me and do as I do!"

The Jews responded, "Yes! We will do and then we will attempt to understand. However, we cannot emulate You! By comparison to you we are insignificant and irrelevant. Because we understand the act of giving it is beyond our comprehension how You give in the manner that You do. We are overwhelmed by the awesomeness of Your benevolence and constant love. We are humbled by Your unlimited compassion and ability to forgive. We do not understand your method of Justice but we trust in the essence of Your goodness.

Simply put we are in awe of You and we are determined to serve You, but please let us learn from Moshe. Let us hear Your intentions and wishes from the mouth of a human with whom we can relate. Otherwise, we fear that we will be undeserving of our designation as Your kingdom of Priests and Your holy nation. We fear that we will never be able to match Your expectations and we will surely die!"

Moshe served as the buffer. Moshe became the Ish Haelokoim - the Man of G-d - who represented G-d in all manners to the Jewish nation. It was exactly as Moshe himself had negotiated at the Burning Bush, G-d would speak to Moshe and Moshe would speak to the people.

(Note: However, it did not have to be like that. G-d was willing to speak directly to the people if only the people had been willing to listen.)

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

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