

CAN YOU HEAR IT

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Some definitions:

1. Matan Torah; Revelation: When G-d gave the Ten Commandments to the Jewish People and the moment in history when they willingly committed themselves to following the 613 commandments of the Torah as well as all the Rabbinic teachings. This took place 3,318 years ago.
2. Yirah: The feeling of fear that results from being in awe of G-d's greatness and might. It is also used in relation to parents and teachers. It is not fear of punishment or consequence.
3. Ahava: The feeling of love generated by the awareness of how much we are cared for and protected by G-d at all times regardless of our limited perceptions of time and circumstance.

It was a moment of singular profundity. The Mishkan was fully assembled; Aharon and his sons were engaged in the last stages of their initiation into the service; and the Mishkan (tabernacle) was about to be consecrated with heavenly fire; however, what should have been a picture perfect day was marred by the tragic deaths of Nadav and Avihu (the two sons of Aharon). What had begun as the happiest of all days (Medresh) ended in humbled silence.

We are taught that the construction of the Mishkan and the service that it framed was a direct response for the sin of the Golden Calf. We are also told that the Jews at the time of the Exodus and Matan Torah related to G-d on the level of Yirah rather than relating to G-d on the level of Ahava.

The Rambam's (Maimonides) formulation of Ahava vs. Yirah in the beginning of the second chapter of Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah (the laws of the foundation of the Torah) presents the ideal relationship with G-d as developing through two basic stages. The first stage is Ahava. Ahava occurs when the human recognizes that he, his family, and his nation are the beneficiaries of G-d's personal and loving benevolence.

Yirah, the second stage, is an extension of Ahava. It builds upon the recognition of G-d's loving benevolence and extends that recognition to realizing that every creature, as well as the whole of creation, is equally the beneficiaries of G-d's unlimited personal attention and love. Therefore, the stage of Yirah does not contradict the starting stage of Ahava; it enhances and extends the Ahava.

The Rambam's formulation of Yirah vs. Ahava and his ordering of Ahava as a preliminary step to Yirah suggests that the Bnai Yisroel (Sons of Israel) at the time of the Exodus were on the most exalted level possible in their relationship with G-d.

The relationship that the Jews had with G-d at the time of the Exodus was at the advanced level of Yirah. They had been catapulted to this exalted level because of witnessing G-d's awesome power and majesty in ways never before experienced by humanity: the plagues in Egypt, the miracle at Kriyas Yam Suf (parting of the sea), their manner of travel and survival in the desert, and finally the indescribable experience of Matan Torah. Yet, despite the awesome display of G-d's power and the nation being truly in awe of G-d they still sinned with the Golden Calf.

At the time of Purim there was a second Matan Torah - a reacceptance of the Torah. We are told that the miracle of Purim motivated the Jews to renew their covenant with G-d - a "second acceptance of the Torah." That reconstituted relationship with G-d was different than the first Matan Torah at Mt. Sinai because it was founded upon the principles of Ahava rather than Yirah. It is important to note that it was the "new acceptance of G-d's law" that has remained and sustained us ever since. The first acceptance which was founded upon Yirah resulted in the sin of the Golden Calf while the second acceptance founded upon the principle of Ahava has survived the test of time and history.

Before I go on, allow me to explain why I am discussing the sin of the Golden Calf in contrast to Purim.

1. The Mishkan was in direct response to the sin of the Golden Calf, and the Golden Calf occurred when the Jews were on the more exalted level of Yirah.
2. Purim occurred when the Jews were on the lesser level of Ahava; yet, that relationship has remained, regardless of all our subsequent sins and their consequences.
3. The key difference between the two periods in history is Yirah vs. Ahava; Yirah did not result in a lasting relationship whereas Ahava did.
4. It makes sense to conclude that the Mishkan, which was supposed to be the Tikun (correction) for the sin of the Golden Calf, should represent Ahava (love of G-d) the missing component when contrasted with Purim. (If the relationship of Yirah did not last and the relationship of Ahava did last the Mishkan must represent Ahava rather than Yirah.)
5. This week's Parsha describes the final moments of the Mishkan's consecration. Figuratively speaking, it was the laying of the corner stone for the corrected, and hopefully ever-lasting, relationship between the Jews and G-d. Therefore, those final moments must have been the quintessential expression of G-d's Ahava for the Bnai Yisroel, and their love for Him.
6. Therefore, the deaths of Nadav and Avihu at that very moment must also represent G-d's greatest expression of love.

How can we understand that G-d's exacting and seemingly unforgiving judgment against Nadav and Avihu was the greatest expression of love, no less so than the entire creation and consecration of the Mishkan and the Mizbeach (alter)?

As we explained, the Jewish people at the time of the Exodus had jumped the stage of Ahava. Beset by 210 years of slavery and persecution, the Bnai Yisroel did not perceive their relationship with G-d as ongoing and personal. Although the recipients of His majestic might and power, they did not relate their freedom as a consequence of an ongoing relationship with G-d. In fact because the Jews did not yet understand that G-d had always "been there for them and with them" Moshe successfully argued with G-d at the Burning Bush not to reveal to the Jews that there would be future times of persecution and difficulties. It was hard enough for them to believe that G-d had suddenly decided to care enough to take them out of bondage. It would have been near impossible for them to trust G-d enough to also be with them in future exiles!

Our generation is much different than the generation of the Exodus. We have learned to live with the ups and downs of life and history and trust that G-d is always there - in good times and in bad. Coming at the tail end of history, we can look back on history and see the ebb and flow of our national successes and failures against the backdrop of trusting G-d's constant benevolence. At the same time we have translated the national historic experience into the very personal and private arena of our individual lives. We are able to believe that each of our lives is a microcosm of Jewish history and like Jewish history must be retrospectively viewed from the elevated promontory of time. Only then can the scope and sequence of events in our own lives begin to make some loving sense. However, the Bnai Yisroel at the time of the Exodus did not have the historic framework wherein which to assimilate the awesome revelation of G-d's sudden personal attention and caring. For them there was only the immediacy and confrontation with G-d's awesome power, majesty and mastery. Instead of seeing G-d's personal and loving benevolence they were catapulted to the level of Yirah. They did not have the benefits of first coming to terms with G-d's love.

Following the first Matan Torah when Moshe seemingly had not returned from his 40 day sojourn with G-d, the circumstances of their existence changed along with their trust in G-d. Whereas before Matan Torah G-d had consistently provided for their every need, food, water, shelter, and leadership, after Matan Torah, with Moshe's "absence", they were minus the important benefit of leadership. As such, there was a perceived change in their circumstances and the limited trust the Jews had developed toward G-d changed to fear, confusion, and panic. Not having had the time to first develop a Ahava relationship with G-d, the Yirah they did have could not be sustained. Without the trusting foundation of Ahava, Yirah could not be sustained. The awareness of G-d's awesome strength and power had not been softened by years of G-d's loving protection and benevolence, and every change became a challenge and every challenge became a crisis of faith. (Think about the Ahava to Yirah contrast in relation to spouse, children, and parents. Think about the concerns and fears during the first years of a marriage or child rearing in contrast to the challenges of later years when there already exists a record of familial survival in spite of successes and failures.)

Not so with Purim. Purim came after the first Bais Hamikdash (temple) had been destroyed. Purim came on the threshold of redemption at the end of the 70-prophesized years of Babylonian exile.

Purim came about after the Jews had lived enough time to realize that despite their shortcomings and sins G-d had not turned His back on them. The exile in Babylon and its final episode of the miracle of Purim proved to the Bnai Yisroel that G-d truly loved them.

The purpose of the Mishkan was to provide the Jews with proof of G-d's ever present loving benevolence. It was a building that was intended to reflect G-d's desire to "dwell within their midst." It was a building that was intended to be an ever-present testimony to G-d's Ahava. However, with humans, time and its imposed mortal limitations is always the key factor. Time is the critical ingredient in trust and it is the critical ingredient in comfort. We are time-bound in contrast to G-d's timelessness and is a component, like freewill, that must always be taken into consideration. At the time of the Exodus, after all was said and done, after all the awesome miracles and obvious displays of G-d's loving concern for His chosen people, the Bnai Yisroel still needed time. They needed to experience the ups and downs of life as dictated by its successes and the failures before they could trust the constancy of G-d's love and compassion. Imagine a parent - child situation where the child never did anything deserving of real concern. Imagine if the first time it should happen that the child does something "real bad" the parent flips out and throws the child out of his home. What will that say to the child? In spite of the years of care and love what will the child feel and think? More importantly, what will the child question? So too with G-d and the Jewish people, the Jews had to experience a goodly slice of history and time before G-d's love for them was proven and ingrained in the collective conscience of the nation.

(This may have been G-d's original intent at the Burning Bush when He told Moshe to introduce Him to them as the "One Who was with them in this exile as He would be with them in all future exiles.") The story of Purim came after sufficient time and experiences had passed to prove G-d's love. It became exceedingly clear to them after they had been exiled to Bavel and yet continued to flourish how much G-d truly loved them. Therefore, when they reaccepted the Torah in the aftermath of the miracle of Purim, their acceptance was predicated upon the certainty of G-d's Ahava - love. This week's Parsha is always read at the beginning of the Sefira count. (The Sefira count is the 49 days between Passover and Shavuot. The word Sefira is Hebrew for "count." The 49 days of the Sefira are explained by Rabbi Simon Jacobson as 49 steps to personal refinement. This is based upon the character qualities associated with the Sefira:

1. Chesed - loving kindness and benevolence.
2. Gevurah - justice, discipline, restraint, and awe.
3. Tiferet - beauty, harmony, and compassion.
4. Netzach - endurance, fortitude and ambition.
5. Hod - humility and splendor.
6. Yesod - bonding and foundation.
7. Malchut - nobility, sovereignty and leadership.

We are presently beginning the second week of the Sefira count which is devoted to developing the

qualities of Chesed and Gevurah, love and discipline. Rabbi Jacobson points out that love should not be taken for granted. We must view the ability to give and receive love as a present from G-d. Love is not natural to all creations. There are many species of animals that do not have the lasting natural instincts of parental love for a child, or a child's love for a parent. Our ability to love each other is uniquely human.

Secondly, Rabbi Jacobson points out that love without discipline is not love at all. Discipline and judiciousness, or the parental obligation to criticize and direct children, is what love is all about. Sure, there is a quality of unconditional love, however, that is for the person, not his or her behavior. We can judge a person's behavior to be terribly lacking and yet love that person more than life itself. The obligation of the parent is to always make sure that the criticism expressed and the direction offered is a product of our love for that person and not an expression of our frustration and disappointment. To criticize and even to punish must be solely motivated by the desire to see the child grow to become the very best he or she can be. Often that demands tremendous strength, courage and discipline on the part of the parent to accomplish.

The Mishkan was a physical manifestation and expression of G-d's love for His children. Despite their terrible betrayal and defection at the time of the Golden Calf, G-d did not turn His back on us. Instead, He reprimanded us, punished us, and blessed us with His ever-present love and benevolence. G-d showed the absolute in the integration of love and discipline, Chesed and Gevurah.

At the greatest moment of G-d's loving kindness, at the moment that He sent down heavenly fire to consume the first offerings on His Mizbeach (alter), at the moment that He showed the Bnai Yisroel how much He desired them as His chosen people, G-d also took the lives of Nadav and Avihu. The moment was the single greatest expression of G-d's absolute love. Love without discipline is not love. In fact, parents who love their children so much that they cannot bear to punish them consign their children and themselves to a life of pain, anger, and often death. Not so with G-d. The seemingly greatest and least among us are subject to G-d's exacting expectations. The seemingly greatest and least among us are expected to attain their highest-level of accomplishment. For G-d to want anything less from them would be a lack of His love. To punish when necessary and help us realize our greatest potential is the truest sign of G-d's pure love.

It was with that thought that Moshe comforted his brother Aharon and said, "With those who are closest to Me am I sanctified..."

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