

THE POWER OF PRAYER

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

"And Moshe sent emissaries from Kadesh to the king of Edom..."(20:14)

Moshe sends a delegation to the king of Edom requesting permission to pass through his country. He instructs his emissaries to relate the Jews' experience in Egypt to the king. The Torah records that one of the statements which was made to the king was "vanitz'ak el Hashem vayishma koleinu" -

"and we cried out to Hashem and He heard our voice".¹ From the fact that the verse states that Hashem heard our voice, rather than our cries, Rashi interprets that Moshe is sending a warning to Edom that we have the legacy of our Patriarchal blessing received from Yitzchak, "hakol kol Yaakov", the power of the voice of Torah; Bnei Yisroel are infused with the blessing that when we pray, we are answered.²

The king of Edom responds by saying that he will come out with sword in hand if Bnei Yisroel attempt to traverse his land. Rashi again comments that through his words the king of Edom is invoking the Patriarchal legacy which was conferred upon Eisav, the father of Edom, "by the sword you shall live".³

Moshe must have been aware that just as Bnei Yisroel have the power of prayer to facilitate their success, the Edomites have the power of war. Why does Moshe assume that Bnei Yisroel's Patriarchal legacy is superior?

The key to solving this dilemma lies in Rashi's comment on the preceding verse. The emissaries relate "and with us the Egyptians dealt evilly and with our fathers."⁴ The construct of the verse appears convoluted. Why does the verse not simply state that "the Egyptians dealt evilly with us and our fathers"? Rashi explains that the verse is stressing the notion that the affliction suffered by our fathers is a byproduct of our affliction. The "fathers" referred to in the verse are not our biological fathers who endured the servitude in Egypt with us, rather our Patriarchal Fathers who, although they were not present with us in Egypt, suffered our pain.⁵

Why is it necessary for Moshe to allude to this concept in his message to the king of Edom? The power of prayer which Bnei Yisroel have rests not only in our capacity to extricate ourselves from our own predicament, but also in our ability to relieve our Patriarchs of the distress caused to them by our situation. It is this ability which motivates Hashem to answer our prayers, not only in our merit, but in the merit of our Forefathers as well. The ability with which Edom is imbued benefits only them,

and not their forefathers. Their forefathers do not feel the distress of the later generations, for they do not enjoy a closeness to them as do the Forefathers of Bnei Yisroel to the Jewish nation.

1.20:16 2.Rashi *ibid.* 3.*Ibid.* 4.20:15 5.*Ibid.*

Community Minded

"And Moshe raised his arm and struck the rock..." (20:11)

The Talmud relates that after Miriam died, the well, which was a water source for Bnei Yisroel in the desert, disappeared.¹ Hashem commanded Moshe to bring forth water from a rock. The Torah records that Moshe and Aharon sinned.² However, the exact nature of the sin is not specified in the verses. Rashi understands that Moshe's sin was a result of striking the rock to bring forth water rather than communicating with it.³ The Ramban questions Rashi's approach, for Hashem instructed Moshe to take the staff from the Holy of Holies and bring it with him. If Hashem had not intended for Moshe to strike the rock, why had He commanded Moshe to bring the staff along with him?⁴

The Maharsha points out an apparent contradiction between two Talmudic statements: The Talmud in Tractate Ta'anis relates that the well, the source of water for the entire Bnei Yisroel, was in the merit of the prophetess Miriam.⁵ However, the Talmud in Tractate Bava Metzia relates that since Avraham Avinu supplied the angels with water, his descendants had water in the desert. Was the well in the merit of Avraham or Miriam?⁶

The Talmud states that the merits of an individual help for the needs of that individual. However, an environmental change that will benefit the needs of many can only be achieved through the merits of the entire community.⁷ An individual is generally concerned with his own short-term needs and of those close to him, while the responsibility and concern for long-term needs is borne by the community. A community, by nature, is an ongoing perpetual entity and therefore, it has the responsibility to ensure that not only its short-term needs are met, but, to whatever extent possible, that all of its future members' needs will be met as well. Consequently, all matters that might have long-term societal implications such as ecological and environmental issues must be addressed on a communal level, and then filtered down to the individuals. For a miracle to occur which would create a long-term environmental change, Bnei Yisroel had to ask as a community.

Once the well of Miriam was no longer available in the desert, the individual was concerned with his immediate need for water. Hashem instructed Moshe to give over the message to Bnei Yisroel that they should not request water to satiate only their individual needs, rather that their concern should be on a communal level, for this would ensure the availability of a long-term reservoir that would serve as a perpetual source of water. The staff symbolizes leadership, as we find in the blessing to

Yehuda "the staff will not depart from Yehuda".⁸ Moshe was not instructed to bring along the staff in order to strike the rock, rather as a representation of his leadership, for as leader he would herald the energies of the entire community, bringing them together to request a perpetual water source.

In Avraham's merit the needs of the individual were met. What Miriam's merit accomplished was that Bnei Yisroel would have a perpetual source of water for the ongoing community. The Talmud refers to this quality of Miriam as "parnes", a person who ensures that all of the needs of the entire community are met.⁹

1. Ta'anis ga 2.20:12 3.20:11 4.20:1 5.ga 6.86b, See Maharsha 7. Ta'anis ga. 8. Ibid., See Rashi 9. Ta'anis ibid
