

DIRECT CONNECTION

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

"...This is the thing that Hashem has commanded" (30:2)

In this week's parsha, the Torah informs us that man is endowed with the ability to create new realities through his power of speech. By pronouncing a vow or an oath, new prohibitions can be established, restricting oneself or others from deriving benefit from various objects or performing certain actions. The prohibition created is so powerful that it subjects those who violate its restrictions to corporal punishment.¹

The chapter is introduced with the expression "zeh hadavar asher tziva Hashem" - "this is the thing that Hashem commanded". Rashi cites the Midrash which derives certain laws pertaining to vows and oaths from the use of this expression. Rashi adds that this expression also defines the unique quality of Moshe's prophecy known as "aspaklaria hame'ira" - "the clear lens". All other prophets begin their prophecies with the expression "ko amar Hashem" - "so says Hashem" which denotes a certain level of approximation, "aspaklaria she'eina me'ira" - "an unclear lens". However, Moshe's prophecies begin with "zeh hadavar" - "this is the thing" which denotes clarity and precision of transmission.² Why is this unique aspect of Moshe's prophecy taught through the use of the same expression that introduces the laws of vows and oaths?

The Sifri states that pronouncing a vow is akin to "utilizing the life of the King" and it is this force which effectuates a change in reality, conferring a new Halachic status upon objects and actions.³ What does "utilizing the life of the King" mean?

The Torah relates anthropomorphically that when Hashem created man He blew into his nostrils. The Zohar comments that "the One who blew, blew of Himself".⁴ This implies that man's soul was created from Hashem's own "essence". The Targum describes the breath that was blown into man's nostrils as "ruach me'alela" - "a speaking soul"; man was imbued by Hashem with the ability to speak.⁵ The Mishna teaches that Hashem created the heavens and the earth with the power of speech.⁶ When making a vow, a person utilizes the unique form of speech that emanates from his soul, thereby tapping into the creative force which was used to create all reality. Making use of this force is what the Sifri describes as "utilizing the life of the King", i.e. the Divine "essence".

The Zohar states that when Moshe spoke it was the "Shechina midaberes misoch gerono" -

"Shechina speaking from his throat".⁷ Moshe's prophecy emanated from the Divine source with which he was imbued. The strength of his connection with his Creator allowed for a clarity in transmission unparalleled by any prophet past or future. The same Divine connection that we possess, enabling us to create new realities through speech, is the vehicle through which Moshe was able to convey his prophetic message to the world.

1.Yad Hilchos Nedarim 1:5 2.30:2, See Mizrachi and Maharal 3.See Ramban 30:3 4.Bereishis 2:7, See Ramban, Sefer Hakanah 5.2:7 6.Avos 5:1, See Tehillim 33:6 7.Pinchas 23:2>

Gratitude Is Sweeter

"Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midyanites..." (31:2) Hashem instructs Moshe to avenge the harm inflicted upon Bnei Yisroel by the Midyanites whose actions caused twenty-four thousand Jews to perish in a plague.¹ Although Hashem instructs Moshe to ensure Midyan's destruction, Moshe sends Pinchas to carry out the mission.² The Midrash explains that Moshe had benefited from Midyan when fleeing Mitzrayim; Yisro opened his home and offered him a place of refuge. Therefore, Moshe reasons that it would be a lack of "hakaras hatov" - "gratitude" for him to lead the attack; "bor sheshasisa mimeno al tizrok bo even" - "into a well from which you drank, you should not cast stones".³ Therefore, he concludes that Hashem could not have meant that he should lead the charge. What is the rationale which prevents a person from taking punitive measures against an individual who has wronged him, based solely upon a previously received benefit? There is a significant difference between a response which is defined as punitive and one which is defined as vengeful. The course of action mandated depends upon the nature of the crime. Most crimes are motivated by the perpetrator's perceived benefit in committing the act. The unfortunate victim is only the vehicle for satisfying the needs of the perpetrator. In these cases punitive measures are called for. Vengeance is the appropriate response for an act which is an attack upon the victim's existence; the victim's very being is the focus of the attack. The root of the word "nekama" - "revenge" is "makom" - "place", for its purpose is to restore the violated party's place in existence. This is achieved by eradicating the perpetrator's own place in existence.

If a person has benefited from another, gratitude does not preclude his taking punitive actions against him, for he is not attacking the very essence of the individual being punished and furthermore, the punishment is ultimately therapeutic to the receiver for it corrects the negative behavior or trait. If, however, the required course of action calls for vengeance, which is an attack against the actual existence of the person, having previously received a benefit restricts an individual from taking such actions.

Moshe understands that since Hashem is instructing him "n'kom" - "to take vengeance against" Midyan, Hashem must intend for someone else to be actively involved. Hakaras hatov is the

cornerstone of our relationship with Hashem and therefore, it behooves Moshe to seek a solution which both fulfills Hashem's wishes and does not undermine a Torah-mandated sensitivity.

1.24:9 2.31:3 3.Bamidbar Rabbah 22:4
