

A PERSON THINKS... AND G-D LAUGHS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion: Tape # 22, Reading Haftorah: Scrolls vs Book. Good Shabbos!

The Rebuke Implicit in Moshe's Inability to Cross the Jordan

"And Moses went (vayeilech) and spoke all these words to all of Israel" [Devorim 31:1]. The Medrash Tanchuma says that whenever we find the word "Vaylech" it implies the giving of rebuke (tochacha/mussar). The continuation of the Parsha, however, does not seem to bear out this message of rebuke.

The Mikdash Mordechai interprets the Medrash Tanchuma:

The Yalkut says that when Moshe told the nation "I am 120 years old today, I can no longer come and go; and G-d told me you will not cross this Jordan" [31:2] the people were astonished. How is it possible that this Moshe Rabbenu who just yesterday could climb to the Heavens, today is notable to even cross this narrow river? And Moshe told them the reason was because "Hashem amar eilay..." (G-d said to me) "You will not cross this Jordan".

The Mussar that Moshe is saying is that people are not in control. People think that they call the shots. They think that they have strength and ability to do whatever they want. There is a Yiddish expression "Amensch tracht un Gut Lacht" (A person thinks... and G-d laughs). The mussar is that this same Moshe Rabbenu that yesterday was like an Angel who could do anything, today can't do anything ... because G-d overruled him.

In the Haftorah from Shabbos Shuvah it is written "Ashur lo Yoshienu" (literally Assyria will not save us). Homiletically it is expounded that the word Ashur comes from Osher, happiness. The prophet is telling us that what you think is going to make you happy is not the determining factor. The determining factor is the Ribono Shel Olam. G-d wants Moshe to fly in the sky -- he flies in the sky. G-d doesn't want him to cross the Jordan -- Moshe Rabbenu is powerless.

We as human beings, especially those of us who are young, think we are omnipotent. We can set

goals and accomplish them. It's not so simple. G-d is the One who gives us strength to do everything. If He wants it, it can happen; if He doesn't want it, it can't happen. This is the Mussar to be derived from "Vaylech Moshe..."

Despair Does Not Lead to Repentance

The parsha tells us [31:16-18] that G-d predicted to Moshe Rabbenu that after his death "This nation will arise and stray after the foreign gods of the land...and they will abandon me and nullify my covenant... and I will get angry with them...and abandon them and hide my face from them...and a multitude of terrible sufferings will befall them." Then, the prediction continues the Jewish people will say on that day "It is because G-d is not in our midst that these terrible events befell us."

The simple reading would lead one to believe, that this reaction of the Jewish people is a perfect response of Teshuva -- of regret and repentance. However the verse then proceeds to say "And I will Hide my Face on that day because of all the evil they have done, for they turned to other gods."

What is the reason for this continued Hiding of G-d's Presence. Isn't the reaction of the Jewish people a noble and appropriate response of contrition? The answer lies in a verse in Psalms, [130:4] "With You is the Power of Forgiveness in order that You should be feared."

There seems to be a logical problem with this pasuk. Logically, we would think that because G-d has the power of forgiveness, that's less of a reason for us to fear Him. It makes more sense to fear an unforgiving god than One Who Forgives.

Rav Dessler, z"tl, says when people despair they have no hope and no fear. Soldiers before battle are afraid -- they don't know what will face them on the battle field. But soldiers in the midst of battle have no fear. At that point, the situation is desperate and hopeless -- there is nothing one can do. Fear only is relevant when there is hope to escape and avoid a situation, not when a situation is inevitable.

If G-d was not a Forgiver; if there was no recourse to Teshuva, there would be nothing to be afraid of during the Ten Days of Repentance. There would simply be nothing to do! "I sinned, I will be punished. There's nothing I can do about it." But since "the Power of Forgiveness is with You..." and "if I approach you correctly I can be forgiven, that's why You should be feared."

The Sefas Emes says that this is the meaning of the verses in our Parsha. When troubles will befall you and you say "because G-d is not in our midst, these troubles befell us..." That is not Teshuva! That is Despair (Yeush). When a person says I'm rotten and worthless, that is not Repentance, it is the opposite of Teshuva -- it is Despair. The sin which triggers a further negative response from G-d is the sin of declaring oneself a worthless human being, devoid of any spirituality or religious sensitivity (G-d is not in my midst).

We find a similar idea at the beginning of Parshas Netzavim: [29:9] "You are today standing, all of you." Rashi says, the Jewish people just finished listening to 98 Curses and they "turned green," thinking, "How will we ever be able to survive?" Moshe Rabbenu tells them "Don't worry. You've made G-d angry before, He has forgiven you... Don't worry. You are standing here today..." You will not be destroyed. G-d will forgive you when you do sins in the future just like he has forgiven you for the sins you've done in the past.

Moshe doesn't appear to be a good "Maggid Mussar." After he successfully alarms them with the fearsome threat of 98 Curses, why is he now undermining the effect of the entire "mussar shmues" by telling them not to be concerned by all this?

The answer is, as mentioned before: If the point of a "mussar shmues" is to cause people to feel desperate and without hope, then one has destroyed all he has set out to accomplish. The point of Teshuva is to have fear, but to also know that there is hope. To be aware that, "Although I have done wrong in the past, my situation can be corrected." A reaction of turning green, of "there is no G-d in my midst", is a counter-productive reaction which will not lead to the desired Teshuva. There is only hope when we know "You are all standing here today before G-d" and when we know that "With you is Forgiveness; consequently you will fear."

Glossary

Mussar Shmues -- A talk by a Maggid Mussar (one who gives Mussar talks)

Mussar -- Chastisement or rebuke aimed at self-improvement

Teshuva -- Repentance

Yeush -- Despair

Personalities & Sources:

Rav Eliyahu Dessler - (1891-1954) - One of 20th centuries outstanding "mussar movement" personalities; London, Bnei Brak.

Sefas Emmes - (1847-1905) -- R. Yehudah Leib Alter; the second Gerrer Rebbe; Poland.

Mikdash Mordechai -- Rav Mordechai Ilan; 20th century Israeli Rosh HaYeshiva

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