

MOSHE'S 'BAD' CHOICE OF WORDS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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Moshe's 'Bad' Choice of Words

The parsha begins with G-d telling Moshe Rabbeinu [our teacher], "I am Hashem. I appeared to the patriarchs with the name Kel Shakai. However the name Hashem I did not make known to them" [Shemos 6:3]. The Medrash makes an interesting comment: G-d bemoaned the loss of the irreplaceable patriarchs. "Many times I revealed myself to the patriarchs with these other -- less intimate -- forms of my Name, but they never questioned Me".

"I promised Avraham the entire land of Israel, yet when he could not find a place to bury his wife Sarah until he paid a high price for a burial cave, he never complained or questioned me."

"I told Yitzchak to live in this land -- for I would give it to him and his descendants. Yitzchak could not find the basic necessity of water to drink with out hassling over wells with the shepherds of Gerar. Yet he never complained or questioned me."

"I promised Yaakov the entire land. Yaakov was unable to find a place to pitch his tent until he bought a place from Chamor ben Shechem for 100 Kiseta. Yet Yaakov never questioned me."

"But you have complaints. The situation deteriorated after I sent you to Pharaoh, and you are protesting and questioning if I know what I am doing."

We can argue, in Moshe's defense, that there is a simple difference. Moshe Rabbeinu, Heaven Forbid, was not a malcontent. He was not a complainer -- he was a leader.

The patriarchs suffered personal setbacks and disappointments. In such situations, a person is not allowed to complain. A person must accept the Judgment of G-d. Moshe, on the other hand, was not saying, "It is tough for _me_". Moshe is the leader par excellence, the faithful shepherd. Moshe's complaint and argument is on behalf of the _people_. Such a complaint is legitimate. That is Moshe's job. He is supposed to be the advocate of the Jewish People.

What, then, is the nature of G-d's objection regarding Moshe's behavior? After all, when Moshe -- following the sin of the Golden Calf -- said "erase me from your book", G-d did not object. When Moshe stood up for the nation during the entire period of the wilderness, G-d did not object. That was Moshe's job. Here however, according to the Medrash, G-d objected. Why?

The answer is that Moshe Rabbeinu used a poor choice of words here -- "Why have You done evil (haREOSA) to this people... From the time I came to Pharaoh ... he (Pharaoh) worsened the situation (heiRA) for this nation" [Shemos 5:22-23]. Saying or implying that G-d has been 'Bad' (RA) to the people is inappropriate. That was G-d's objection.

G-d is telling Moshe that whatever G-d does is for good. Whether we understand it or not, ultimately, ALL that G-d does, He does for the good that will come from it.

There are situations in life where trying to understand how they can possibly be good is extremely difficult -- if not nearly impossible. But that is a Jew's responsibility. This is what G-d is saying to Moshe. The patriarchs never uttered the word 'Bad' (RA). It may have been difficult. It may have been trying. There are many adjectives that can be used regarding situations brought about by Divine Providence, but not 'Bad'.

When the Patriarch Yaakov came to Pharaoh and Pharaoh asked Yaakov's age, Yaakov responded "The days of my life have been ... few and bad were the years of my life..." [Bereishis 47:9].

The Medrash says that at the moment Yaakov uttered those words, G-d said to him, "I saved you from Eisav and Lavan and I returned to you Dena and Yosef -- and now you are complaining that your years are few and bad? Your life will be shortened by the number of words in your statement."

But the question must be asked -- wasn't Yaakov right? True he was saved and he had children returned to him. But if not for the tzaros of Eisav there would have been any need to be saved. True, he was saved from Lavan -- but who needed twenty years of aggravation?

The answer is, again, that Yaakov's life may have been bitter -- but it was not bad. For each occurrence, there was something positive that emerged. The fight with Eisav developed the Jewish People's ability to deal with Eisav's descendants in future generations. Yosef's going down to Egypt eventually paved the way for the salvation of the nation. These were difficult, trying, and even incomprehensible events -- but they were not _Bad_. _Bad_ was an inappropriate word.

The Chofetz Chaim once gave a parable. Sometimes we take a medicine and it is terribly bitter. The medicine cures the disease. What word do we use to describe the medicine? Bitter -- yes; bad -- no! There are instances in life when our natural human reaction is to say that an event is bad, is terrible. But a Jew has the obligation to believe that everything that G-d creates is ultimately for the best. In the final analysis, it will work out for the best.

And G-d (Elokim -- the Attribute of Justice) said to Moshe: "I am Hashem" (the Attribute of Mercy) [Shemos 6:2]. Ultimately, we have to believe that any troubles which, through our limited perspective

we have no way of explaining, ultimately, somehow, do make sense.

The paradigm of this concept is the Jewish experience in Egypt. Our Rabbis tell us that Moshe Rabbeinu wrote Megillos for the Jewish People, which they used to read on the Shabbos. Pharaoh tried to stop the Jews from reading those Megillos [scrolls] on Shabbos [Shemos 5:9].

What were those Megillos? What was in them?

Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky suggests the following. The Talmud [Babba Basra 14b] says that Moshe Rabbeinu authored some of the chapters of Tehillim [Psalms]. Those were the scrolls that the Jews read in Egypt. One of the chapters was "A Psalm to the Day of Shabbos" [Tehillim Chapter 92]. However, if you examine that chapter, you will find that Shabbos is not mentioned at all. What is its connection to Shabbos? Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky suggests that the connection is that the Jewish people read that chapter on Shabbos when they were in Egypt.

Why did the Jewish people read that chapter on Shabbos? Tehillim 92 contains the words "when the wicked flourish like the grass, and all the doers of iniquity blossom forth..." Those words introduce the concept that "Bad things happen to the Tzaddik (righteous); Good things happen to the Rasha (wicked)". This issue understandably weighed heavily on the minds of the Jews in Egypt. "What is happening? We are righteous. The Egyptians are wicked. Why are we the slaves? We don't deserve this."

Moshe Rabbeinu provided this Psalm, which acknowledges the principle of the wicked flourishing. Years later, it might have been possible to begin to appreciate that the experience of Egypt molded us into a special nation. However, while in slavery, without the benefit of time and hindsight, there was no way for them to understand any rationale or redeeming feature of the slavery experience.

Such experiences often must remain simply a matter of faith. We need to maintain that faith, and remember that ultimately we will understand the good in everything.

Sources and Personalities

The Chofetz Chaim (1838-1933) Rav Yisrael Meir HaKohen of Radin. Author of basic works in Jewish Law and Jewish values (halacha, hashkafa, and mussar).

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