

PARSHAS KI SISA - THE LIMITS OF GRASPING G-D

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The Limits of Grasping G-d¹

He [Moshe] said, "Show me now Your kavod..." He [Hashem] said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I shall call out the Name Hashem before you. I shall show favor when I choose to show favor, and I shall show mercy when I choose to show mercy. You will not be able to see my face, for no human can see my face and live... There is a place near Me... You will see My back, but My face may not be seen."

The stakes could not be higher. Mistranslating these verses easily crosses the line into heresy. Properly grasping them means understanding what can be comprehended about G-d - and what is beyond our comprehension. It turns out that by learning about the limits of what Moshe could understand, we will sharpen our own understanding of Elokus.

Moshe never asked to "see" Hashem. He fully understood that Hashem cannot be seen like a physical object. He asked for intellectual clarity, to see in his mind's eye what he previously understood, but now wished to understand more deeply, pushing his comprehension to the limit.

Having been told that he, Moshe, would be responsible for continuing to lead the people, Moshe had successfully argued to Hashem [2] that he would need greater insight into His ways in order to perform his job effectively. Armed with answers to questions about Hashem's ways, he would be a better leader. Hashem responded that, "My Presence will go and I will provide you with what you wish [3]. In other words, you, Moshe, do not really need deeper knowledge of My nature in order to lead, because I will soon restore My Presence to the people, making it much easier for you to act as leader. Nonetheless, I will accede to your request for greater knowledge of My ways.

Emboldened by Hashem's favorable reply, Moshe decided to press the point. If You are willing to teach me about Yourself, please teach me to the very limit of human understanding. This is what Moshe meant in asking to see Hashem's kavod. (The word is the spiritual analogue to koved, which means the weight and substance of a physical object. That mass takes up room; through it, we detect its presence and size. Kavod does the same in the non-physical sphere. Applied to HKBH, it means something which points to the reality of G-d, that shouts out that He is there, and what He is about.) He wishes to grasp that kavod so clearly that it is as if he could see it.

Hashem again responds affirmatively. He first tells Moshe about what he will be able to understand,

and then draws a line beyond which Moshe will not be able to go. First He tells Moshe that he will indeed "see" things quite clearly, and in addition, He will explain to him what he is seeing. ("I shall call out the Name Hashem before you." This calling out is Hashem's commentary on what Moshe was experiencing.)

Specifically, Moshe, wished to solve the paradox of Hashem appearing to act so differently to different people and on different occasions, while His Oneness dictates a kind of uniformity in His essential Self. Moshe wished to find the uniformity that underlies the apparent diversity in the way He acts.

HKBH presented Moshe with a roadmap to discovering the resolution of the paradox. He would pinpoint for him the element of His behavior that is constant, that suffuses all His seemingly disparate and diverse reactions, and that unites them all. That element is kol tuvi, "all my goodness." Human beings have it within their ability to accept and to relate to the fact that Hashem's goodness is a constant. Even when they cannot understand how an event is good, they can realize that it must be so, because goodness is part of His essence. By concentrating on it, accompanied by the benefit of Hashem's own commentary upon it, Moshe would achieve new insight into the complexity of Hashem's different reactions. (Because Man was given the freedom of will with which to make choices, Hashem's reactions to different people have to be different, coordinating with where those choices have taken them.) Above all, Moshe would understand how Hashem's goodness weaves through all His actions, tying everything together. More than any other concept, it is the common thread running through all His actions. Only by grasping it would Moshe be able to lead a people with questions about His reactions.

This underlying goodness manifests itself through two characteristics that Moshe would be able to study and comprehend. Moshe would see how these two indeed apply to every human being at all times. He would see chaninah/ favor, as well as rachamim/ mercy. (The former refers to Hashem's endowing us with the power to be at the very beginning of our existence. The latter takes that existence and stands by it through all phases of its development, maintaining and nurturing it as if in a protective womb.)

Rather than see sameness, Moshe would understand how the application of these two characteristics produces such different phenomena in different people. The rest of us mortals are plagued with questions, such as the apparent evil befalling the righteous, and the good that is often the lot of the evil. Because we are so limited, we are hopelessly off the mark in understanding just who is good and who is evil. Moreover, we have even less understanding of what is truly good and truly evil for a given person.

Even Moshe would not understand everything. He would at least be able to detect the two characteristics at work, but still fail to grasp how the different manifestations of them are suitable for different people. Even understanding Hashem's favor and mercy, Moshe could not get the full

picture, because he could not fully plumb the true nature of other people. Thus, one opinion in Berachos 7A maintains that Moshe never solved the problem of tzadik ve-ra lo, the evil that befalls the righteous. On the level of Hashem's conduct in relation to a specific individual, even Moshe's understanding would come up short.

Moshe could not understand perfectly because he could not become G-d. Hashem would bring him to a place "near" Him. From there, Moshe would not be able to "see" G-d, but he would be able to see Hashem's interaction with human beings from a perspective much closer to that of Hashem. Nothing beyond that is within our ability to understand.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Shemos 33:12, 14, 18-21
 2. Shemos 33:13
 3. Shemos 33:14
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