

PARSHAS MIKEITZ AND ROSH CHODESH TEIVEIS

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The Sfas Emes took on the responsibility of becoming the Gerer Rebbe in 5631 (1871). In that year, Shabbos Parshas Mikeitz coincided with Rosh Chodesh Teiveis. Accordingly, on that Shabbos, the Sfas Emes presented thoughts on both topics: Parshas Mikeitz and Rosh Chodesh.

The Sfas Emes begins with a comment on one of Par'oh's dreams, specifically on the dream in which Par'oh sees lean, mangy cows -- symbolizing the power of Evil -- devour pleasantly plump, healthy-looking cows. The Sfas Emes comments that the dream gives the impression that Evil dominates the world. The Sfas Emes insists that notwithstanding appearances, the apparent autonomy and the power of Evil derive from HaShem.

The Sfas Emes continues with the discussion of this basic fact of life -- the difficulty of perceiving HaShem's Presence in the world as we usually see it. Hester -- HaShem's "hiding" from us -- is so pervasive, the Sfas Emes tells us, that even when we are granted a glimpse of HaShem's Presence, the purpose of that glimpse is to enable us to get through the bad times that (the Sfas Emes takes for granted) will follow. Thus, the Sfas Emes is telling us that when HaShem does permit us to see through the hester, the reason for that illumination is to sustain us in the times when kedusha is hidden.

The Sfas Emes moves on now to another theme. He quotes a pasuk in Yechezkel (46: 1) This posuk was apparently very important for the Sfas Emes. So important that he quotes it often. So important that I urge you to look the posuk up, to see it in its full majesty.) The posuk describes a feature of the future Beis Hamikdash, and says: "... Sha'ar he'chatzeir ha'penimis, ha'poneh kadim yiheye sagur sheishes yemei hama'aseh; u'beyom HaShabbos yipase'ach; u'beyom HaChodesh yipasei'ach." (ArtScroll: "...The gate of the inner courtyard that faces eastward shall be closed during the six days of labor; but on the Sabbath day ... and on the day of the New Moon, it shall be opened.")

The Sfas Emes reads this posuk as telling us that on Shabbos and on Rosh Chodesh, a special channel is opened to give us easier access to the world's penimiyus. A question comes immediately to mind. How does the Sfas Emes get from this pasuk's simple pshat to this wildly distant non-pshat? After I thought about it for a long time, the answer came back: simple. The posuk's words 'ha'penimis' and ha'poneh' evoke the sound-alike of "penimiyus".

Another question. what does the Sfas Emes have in mind when he refers to 'penimiyus'? When the Sfas Emes speaks of penimiyus, he is referring to the real "real world"; i.e., to the world in which

HaShem's Presence is evident. I say the real "real world" in contradistinction to the apparent "real world," in which hester hides HaShem's Presence. The posuk is telling us that Shabbos and Rosh Chodesh can give us access to the world as it truly is; i.e., before it gets hidden by Teva (nature) and/or by Hergeil (routine; habit).

Proceeding further in his interpretation of the posuk from Yechezkel, the Sfas Emes reads the "be" in the posuk's words "ube'yom hashabbos" and "ube'yom hachodesh" not as conventionally understood -- as a time word -- that would give us: 'On Shabbos or on Rosh Chodesh...' Instead, the Sfas Emes reads the posuk's 'be' as meaning: 'by means of'. Thus, the Sfas Emes is telling us that we can use Shabbos or Rosh Chodesh as keys to open the gate that blocks our access to the penimiyus -- to HaShem's Omnipresence -- even during the week, on yemei hama'aseh.

(Note the strength of the Sfas Emes's ko'ach hachidush [innovative power]. The posuk in Yechezkel tells us unambiguously that the gate should remain closed on weekdays. The Sfas Emes just opened it.)

The Sfas Emes moves on now to include discussion of topics from Parshas Mikeitz.

The Sfas Emes spoke earlier about the possibility of a major spiritual breakthrough: to have access to the 'inner court' not only on Shabbos, but on weekdays as well. He adds that to achieve that breakthrough, we must adhere to the bris (the covenant). What is this bris to which the Sfas Emes refers? Bris milah, which many authorities view as a means of diminishing sexuality. More generally, the Sfas Emes tells us, to live our lives in a manner consistent with the covenant, we would be well advised to follow the model that Yosef exemplified -- the model for which he is often called "Yosef HaTzadik". The Sfas Emes explains that Yosef kept the bris under very difficult conditions. The Sfas Emes is referring here to Yosef's handling of sexuality, most notably with the wife of Potifar.

The Sfas Emes has just told us that bris milah is a key feature of our relationship with HaShem. Why so? Because unbridled sexuality is the most powerful competitor to our living our lives in constant awareness of HaShem's Presence. Why is it so important that we live our lives fully aware of HaShem's Presence? Because by so doing, a person can achieve "hisbatlus" -- subordinating his/her will to the will of HaShem, and his/her agenda to the agenda of HaShem. Such hisbatlus -- even in a small measure -- can enable a person to reach a state of Ahavas HaShem -- love of HaShem. For the Seforim define love as a state in which one gives priority to the will of the beloved over one's own will.

The Sfas Emes goes on to point out that Rosh Chodesh, too, can be an opportunity for access to the penimiyus. Because the new moon is a phenomenon of nature, we can use Rosh Chodesh as a trampoline to perceive HaShem behind nature. Thus, instead of seeing teva as fixed and unchanging, we can see HaShem constantly giving it existence. You may ask: what is so bad about not seeing HaShem behind teva? The answer is straightforward. A failure to be aware of HaShem behind nature may be part of a general lack of awareness about what is going on, metaphysically, in

our lives. And a life lived in unawareness -- in a rut of habit -- is the very opposite of the sense of hischadshus -- the constant freshness with which we are enjoined to live our lives.

The Sfas Emes takes us back briefly to the mangy cows of par'oh's dream. He comments that golus resembles those miserable-looking cows. All we see is a bunch of unappealing animals; but we should be aware that inside those cows there is also penimiyus.

A further point concerning control of sexuality. The Sfas Emes tells us that if we keep the bris, we can perceive HaShem even in golus. And the Sfas Emes notes that the golus began only when Bnai Yisroel stopped keeping the bris in the way Yosef had.

The Sfas Emes has focused on lost control of sexuality as a key feature of our golus in Egypt. This may be a part of the story that you were not told when you were a child. It is important to be aware that we have this feature from Chazal; the Sfas Emes did not invent it. In this context, the Sfas Emes cites a Medrash Rabba on Parshas Shemos. The posuk on which the Medrash comments is (Shemos, 1:8): 'Vayokom melech chadash' (ArtScroll: 'A new king arose in Egypt...'). Note: the Sfas Emes is working here with the allusion of chadash to chodesh.

After he refers to the text in Medrash Rabba, the Sfas Emes says: 'Ayein Shom' ('Look it up!'). Knowing the importance of heeding the words of a tzadik, we do look it up. And we find the Medrash (on the posuk: 'Vayokom melech chadash') quoting Hoshe'ah (5:7): "Be'HaShem bagadu ki banim zarim yaladu; ata yochaleim chodesh". (That is: "They have betrayed HaShem, for they have begotten alien children. Now a month will devour them.") By directing us to the Medrash in Shemos, the Sfas Emes is telling us that the golus in Egypt came in the following sequence. Bnei Yisroel gave up Bris Milah, thereby losing control of their sexuality. Thus, they failed to follow the model that Yosef Hatzadik had provided for survival in Egypt. As a result, they lost awareness of the world's constant hischadshus, and thus, of HaShem's Omnipresence. At that point, with Bnei Yisroel locked into teva and hergeil, "Vayokom melech chadash..."