

PARSHAS BEHAR

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Behar, 5632

The Sfas Emes starts by alluding to the first paragraph of Medrash Rabba of Parshas Behar. The Medrash, in turn, quotes a pasuk in Mishlei (18:21): "Maves vechayim beyad halashon." (ArtScroll: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue.")

Why does the Medrash discuss the power of speech here, in Parshas Behar? The formal reason is straightforward. Later in the parsha (25, 17), the Torah tells us to avoid "ona'as devarim," i.e., from giving people grief -- hurting people-- with what we say. Hence, the focus on being careful with one's speech. Still, the question persists. The Torah tells us about "ona'as devarim" well into the parsha. Why does the Medrash give this topic star billing by discussing it in its very first paragraph?

I suggest that Chazal chose to focus on the potential good or potential harm that we can do with what we say because, in fact, "maves vechaim beyad halashon. " That is, our words can do much good or much harm. A (partial) list of harmful speech includes: foul language; citing the name of gentile gods; saying things that cause pain to the listener; saying things that are not true; and, of course, old reliable--lashon hara.

By the same token, what we do say can bring much good. Here is an example of a mode of speech which, when utilized, can increase the 'chayim'--life and joy-- of which the pasuk in Mishlei speaks. Unfortunately, many people suffer from low self-esteem. In that context, it is important to let people know when they are doing a good job. Why? Because a remark of commendation from an outside observer can help replace self-doubt with self-confidence. And a deserved pat on the back can correct the distorted self-image from which a person with low self-esteem typically suffers.

To drive home the point that our speech can be either highly destructive or highly constructive, the Medrash provides some metaphors. One metaphor speaks of a burning coal. If a person uses his mouth to breathe on the ember, he can revive its fire. By contrast, if the person uses his mouth to spit on the coal, he will extinguish its fire.

Mention of the burning coal draws the Sfas Emes into the discussion. Certainly, he explains, HaShem's chiyus is present throughout Creation. For when He created the world, Hashem used the Torah, which we know is compared to fire. Hence, just as the burning coal radiates fire, so too does HaShem's Presence permeate all Creation. But HaShem created the world in such a manner that the Torah , with its light and its warmth, is hidden, as in the burning coal.

Further, the metaphor of the burning coal--whose internal fire is not apparent-- brings with it a major responsibility for us. For, continues the Sfas Emes, we are charged with the mission of searching for (and finding !) the illumination of the Torah that is present everywhere.

These are truly beautiful thoughts ; but what do they mean? What does the Sfas Emes have in mind when he says that we can --and indeed, must-- find the Torah's illumination in every thing in the world ? I emphasize that what follows here in an effort to answer this question is only le'anius da'ati - - i. e. comes only from my very limited knowledge. But the issues here are so important that it is worth trying to address the question.

We need some help. I suggest that we can get the necessary help from R. Nachman of Breslov (z'ta.). On the very first page of his sefer Likutei Maharan, R' Nachman writes:

" Ki ha'ish ha'yisra'eili tzarich tamid lehistakeil ba'seichel shel kohl davar. U'lekasheir ahtzmo el ha'chochma ve'haseichel she'yeish be'chol davar. Kedei she'yair lo ha'seichel she'yeish be'chol davar lehiskareiv laShem yisborach ahl yedei oso davar"

That is : "For a Jew must always look for the seiche (intelligence/rationality/logic) that is present in all things. And he should attach himself to the knowledge and the rationality present in every thing will provide him with light, and thus enable him to come closer to HaShem via that thing."

R. Nachman is telling us that HaShem built rationality into the world. (When I say 'rationality', I refer to such features as cause/effect.--in counter-distinction to randomness or chaos.) Hence, by observing the world around us and learning how it works, we can be aware of HaShem's Presence. And the rationality that we perceive can bring us closer to HaShem.

These ideas of R' Nachman can help clarify a key thought of the Sfas Emes that may previously have been obscure. I refer to the Sfas Emes's recurring dictum that what we do in our work during the weekdays-- our asiya ; our ma'aseh -- can be a form of avoda (serving HaShem, worship). Some possibilities for avoda (worship) in the course of avoda (weekday work) come readily to mind. An obvious example is the physicist or the biologist who marvel at the uncanny way with which HaShem put this world together. But R. Nachman's insight shows us that the potential for avoda (service of HaShem) in the course of one's weekday avoda (work) also exists in more humble occupations.

For example, consider the case of a salesperson who sells shoes. Rationality here would require that he find the shoe that truly fits a customer's feet. The salesperson searches--using trial-and-error as well as measurement-- until he finds the right shoe. By finding the accurate solution to his problem, the salesperson brings to light the presence of rationality -- and hence, HaShem -- in his world. (You may find this example farfetched. If so, it probably means that you have never encountered the irrationality of buying and wearing a pair of shoes that did not fit.)

Likewise, consider a bond trader who detects a possibility for profitable arbitrage. That opportunity

reflects irrationality -- i.e., momentary disequilibrium in the market. Hence, by executing trades that correct the disequilibrium, the bond trader is bringing about rationality, and thus revealing HaShem's presence in his weekday activity.

More generally, the same possibility for avoda is open in any context where a person solves problems. By "figuring things out," a person can find the rationality that HaShem built into the situation. But like the fire in the ember, the rationality cannot be perceived unless we make an effort. By trying to understand the logic of a phenomenon or of a situation, a person can bring himself closer to HaShem.

An Epilogue

In an earlier version of this shiur, when I mentioned the the bond trader who was taking advantage of an arbitrage opportunity, a professional bond trader raised a basic objection. This bond trader had much experience in buying and selling financial assets. He had never felt that by executing trades for profitable arbitrage, he was revealing rationality, and hence, HaShem's presence.

This bond trader's objection brought to mind a story about Shelomo Hamelech (King Solomon). One day while traveling on the road, Shelomo Hamelech encountered two men who were transporting a heavy stone. The king stopped and asked them what they were doing. The first person replied, "I am carrying a heavy stone." The second man answered, "I am building the Beis Hamikdash!" The moral of the story as it applies to our bond trader ? It helps to see oneself in accurate metaphysical context.

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