

PARSHAS DEVARIM

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Note the following problem. Too often, when we encounter a mashal (metaphor, parable), or a statement that Chazal wrapped in the form of aggada, we assume that its message is only of marginal importance. For this reason, we do not make the effort to penetrate the code or the metaphor within which the message is presented.

By contrast, when the Sfas Emes works with a difficult ma'amar of Chazal, he insists that the statement must make sense. Accordingly, he takes the time and effort necessary to understand the ma'amar, and explain it to us. Here are two examples that illustrate the Sfas Emes's discipline in this respect. They also show the potential benefit that we can gain from taking Chazal's words seriously rather than taking the path of *"let's skip the Aggadata."*

For the first example, we go to , the second paragraph of the Sfas Emes's ma'amar in the year 5634. That paragraph: *"Kol Dor ..."* (That is: *"Any generation in which the Beis Hamikdash is not rebuilt is on the same low spiritual level as the generation which merited the Churban -- the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash."*)

If taken seriously and literally, this is a very powerful, if enigmatic, statement. So much so that that the Sfas Emes explicitly questioned its truth. Thus, he observed that, in fact there had been, many generations following the Churban in which exceptionally worthy and pious people (*"tzaddikei elyon"*) lived. Can we honestly say of those generations, he asks, that they literally merited the Churban of the Beis Hamikdash in their days? Likewise, do we truly expect that there will arise a generation so virtuous that it will, on its own, merit the Ge'ula (Redemption) that no earlier generation deserved?

The Sfas Emes answers that the Ge'ula will come as the result of a cumulative process, in which the spiritual achievements of each generation will be added to those of all preceding generations until finally we reach the *"target level."* Thus, every generation that adds spirituality to the world, by bringing light to where darkness had previously reigned, participates in building the Beis Hamikdash. (Note: This perspective implies a view of history as progress rather than of decline or degeneration.) It turns out, then, that the Jewish people have actually been rebuilding the Beis Hamikdash throughout the entire duration of the Golus!

Further, we can be building it right now. The Sfas Emes notes that this ongoing process is precisely referred to (twice) in our Siddur (in the daily Shemoneh Esrei and in Birkas Hamazon): namely, *"Bonei Yerushalayim"* (*"He who builds - present tense! -- Yerushalayim"*).

The Sfas Emes explains that this Chazal ("*Any generation in which the Beis Hamikdash is not rebuilt ...*") refers to a generation that does not participate at all in the cumulative process.

So far, following the text from Chazal, the Sfas Emes has been speaking in terms of "*generations*"; i.e., Klal Yisroel as a collectivity can be rebuilding the Beis Hamikdash right now. Now he adds that the same process also operates at the level of the individual ("*Vechol Ahdam Bifrat*"). Thus, he is telling us that we should be aware that each individual's actions can also help to rebuild the Beis HaMikdash right now!

The Sfas Emes concludes this paragraph (yes, all of this has been packed into a single, concise paragraph) with a quote from Chazal: "*Hakol Mesa'ayin Lebinyano Shel Melech.*" That is, each and every one of us can/may/should help in building the King's palace.

The following is another example in which, by taking a ma'amar of Chazal seriously, the Sfas Emes is led to a question which (to my very limited knowledge) had not been asked before and, in addressing that question, takes us to a totally new perspective. This example comes from the Sfas Emes of the year 5635.

As we know, Sefer Devarim begins in a surprising way, with a list of geographical sites. Why so? Rashi follows (some of) Chazal in reading the place names in Devarim 1:1 as a veiled rebuke. That is, they see Moshe as mentioning these sites to rebuke Bnei Yisroel for the Aveiros (sins) that they had committed in those places. Thus, the reference to a place named "*Di Zahav*" is in reality a rebuke to Bnei Yisroel for the sin of Eigel Hazahav, the golden calf.

To this the Sfas Emes reacts, asking: What is the point of rebuking Bnei Yisroel of this generation -- i.e., the generation that was about to enter Eretz Yisroel -- for these Aveiros? These Aveiros had been committed by the previous generation, not the people to whom Moshe was now speaking!

The Sfas Emes answers that every generation begins life with the Aveiros of the previous generation on its back, so to speak. And for this reason, every generation has the responsibility of correcting those Aveiros. Thus, just as there is Zechus Avos (people can benefit from the merit of their forefathers), so, too, there is "*Cheit Avos*" -- the Aveiros that the previous generations pass on to succeeding generations.

Note how neatly this thought of the Sfas Emes fits in with common sense. Take a moment to think about this question, you will soon reach the same conclusion. In fact, we do start life with both the assets and the liabilities of our parents -- and indeed, of the whole generation to which they belonged.

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