

MATOS, 5632

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

The Parsha begins with Moshe Rabbeinu in a meeting with the leaders of the Shevatim: Moshe tells them "Zeh Hadavar Asher Tsiva HaShem." (This is -- exactly -- what HaShem has commanded.) The Sfas Emes cites Rashi, who, in turn, follows the comment of the Sifri. (The Sifri is a classical commentary--dating from Tana'itic times-- on Bemidbar and Devarim.) The Sifri tells us that whenever Moshe transmitted the words of HaShem, he sometimes introduced those words, as did other prophets in communicating their prophecies, with the sentence "Koh Ahmar HaShem." "Koh" means: "more or less like this." Hence, the introductory sentence as a whole is: "This is -- approximately -- what HaShem said..." Moshe Rabbeinu, however, operated at a level much higher than all other prophets. As a result, Moshe was often able to transmit HaShem's message with such precision that he could introduce the message with :: "Zeh Hadavar . . ." ("This is exactly what HaShem said.") The Torah signals this higher degree of clarity and precision by using the word "Zeh" rather than "Koh."

Now the Sfas Emes asks a basic question: If the greater degree of clarity that "Zeh" implies is a virtue, why were some of Moshe's Nevu'os (prophecies) preceded by "Koh?" The Sfas Emes answers: There are things in the world which cannot really be clarified, things that we cannot really grasp. We can handle these topics, only imprecisely-- with similes, allusions, parables -- that is, only approximately, only "more or less." That is, there is a whole realm of reality for which "Koh" is the best that can be applied; "Zeh" invokes a standard that is unattainable.

I have the impression that when the Sfas Emes refers to the things that we cannot really grasp, he has in mind much more than what the Navi says (Yeshayahu, 55:8): "For My thoughts are not your thoughts . . ." Much more seems to be involved than merely "thoughts." Whole configurations of reality seem to be the issue.

An example from another context may help to clarify the difference between " . . . My thoughts" and "entire configurations." The example comes from our Tefila of Shacharis on Shabbos, the Piyut that begins "Hakol Yoducho." Nusach Ashkenaz goes on to say: "Ein Ke'erkecha" - "We cannot measure Your greatness." By contrast, Nusach Sefard says "Ein Aroch Eilecha" -- We don't even have the METRIC with which we could even conceivably measure Your greatness.")

Where is this realm that we cannot really understand? The Sfas Emes tells us it is "Olam Hazei." Note the double play on words: "Olam" evokes the thought of He'eleim - "hidden." By contrast, "Hazei" implies definite clarity. You may ask: Which is it: Hidden or definite clarity? The Sfas Emes

seems to be saying: Both - that this double play on words is telling us that we live in a world of ambiguity.

You may find this confusing. And indeed that is exactly what the Sfas Emes is telling us: That the world is a very confusing place and by all indications that is exactly how HaShem wants it to be.

Moshe was on a level so high that he could pierce the Hester and perceive the world as it truly is, with the quality of "Zeh." So, too, were Bnei Yisroel at the time of Matan Torah. Unfortunately, we lost this capability when we made the golden calf. As the Torah says (Shemos, 33:6): "Vayisnatzlu Bnei Yisroel Es Edyam . . ." (ArtScroll: "And the Children of Israel were stripped of their jewelry . . ."). What "jewelry?" The crowns that we had been given when we said "Na'aseh Venishma."

The Sfas Emes makes the point all the more forceful as he reads "Edyam" not as their "jewelry" but as coming from the root "Eid" -- witness or testimony. This reading gives us the Pasuk just cited as: "Bnei Yisroel lost the clarity of perception that they had been granted at Sinai."

But all is not lost! The Sfas Emes quotes a ma'amar of Chazal, who tell us that the crowns of truthful insight are restored to Bnei Yisroel on Shabbos. The Zohar explains that, by observing Shabbos, we are testifying as witnesses ("Eidim") that HaShem created the world and gives the world its existence. Thus, by keeping the Mitzvos of Shabbos, we have greater access to HaShem and -- penetrating the shroud of Hester -- to an accurate picture of reality.

Shabbos, then, takes on the quality of "Zeh Hadavar!" This quality of enhanced perception stands in sharp contrast to the situation on Yemos Hachol (days in which the world may seem "empty" (from the root "chalol") of HaShem's presence. During the week, the most we can achieve is to see the world as if through darkly stained glasses; i.e. with the imperfect vision of "Koh."

Note how high are the Sfas Emes's standards and expectations when he tells us what we must do to reach even the inferior level of "Koh." How can a person achieve "Koh?" By doing everything that his action Leshem Shamayim (to bring honor to HaShem) and by doing so even though the truth concerning the world is hidden.

One might expect that the Sfas Emes would rank Shabbos above Yemei Hama'aseh (the days of work) in all respects and without qualification. In fact, the world is more complex. The Sfas Emes remarks that Shabbos also depends on the days of work since, to reach the level of "Zeh Hadavar" -- fully accurate metaphysical perception -- a person must start with "Koh" -- incomplete, and hence, unsatisfying perception. That's us.

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