

PARSHAS MISHPATIM PART II

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Mishpatim 5631 (II)

The Sfas Emes is working here with the following text (Shemos (23:20- 21): "Hi'nei ano'chi sholei'ach mal'ach le'faneh'cha lish'morcha ... hi'sha'mer mi'pahnav, al tah'mehr bo ..." (ArtScroll: "Behold! I send an angel before you to protect you ... do not rebel against him ... ")

This ma'amar is basically the Sfas Emes's analysis of that pasuk. His analysis focuses on the links and allusions that, to his fertile mind, connect two words. One word is mal'ach" (ArtScroll: "angel"; more generally, a messenger), i.e., an agent who is acting totally on behalf of the one who charges him/her with his/her task. The other word is: "mela'cha", -- mission or task. The context in which the word me'la'cha often appears is the laws of Shabbos. On Shabbos, we may not do mela'chos -- activities in which a person may engage during "yemei ha'ma'aseh" -- the weekdays.

The Sfas Emes hastens to tell us that on those days, when we are engaged in mela'chos, also contain kedusha (sanctity). The kedusha is hidden in the very activities that we do during those six days of "asiya"(activity). Thus, we should be aware that our doing melacha also enables us to be in contact with HaShem. For, just as the mala'chim are sent to this world to perform missions for HaShem, so too HaShem sent those activities to the world to enable us to fulfill His will. We know that HaShem's Presence permeates the world. The Sfas Emes explains that to match His Omnipresence, HaShem has given us mitzvos in all areas of human activity. Thus, when we are engaged in our weekday activities, we can still connect with HaShem's Presence.

Because the material components of this world are a garment in which HaShem has cloaked His will, the posuk cited above advises us to be especially careful in our weekday activities. During the week, we can relate to HaShem only via the mela'chos that we do with our asiya. By contrast, the Sfas Emes points out, on Shabbos, we can interact with HaShem directly. On Shabbos, HaShem's Presence is not cloaked with the activities of ma'aseh. Accordingly, the Torah proceeds from our interaction with the mal'ach (posuk 20, as quoted above) to our Avoda, pasuk 25: 'Ve'avadetem es HaShem' ("And you shall serve Ha Shem").

The Sfas Emes applies this framework to explain a key feature of our davening on Shabbos. During the week, a major portion of our prayer consists of petitions for Divine help. The Sfas Emes notes that our tefilos on Shabbos do not include such requests. Why so? The Sfas Emes explains that our more intimate relationship with HaShem on Shabbos obviates the need to petition Him then.

A final question. Why does our prayer on the weekdays spend so much time asking HaShem to fulfill our requests? Clearly, the reason is not to inform HaShem of our needs. He knows our needs better than we do. Rather the purpose of our petitioning HaShem is to remind ourselves of our utter dependence on Him. On Shabbos we can be mindful of our relationship with HaShem even without our petitions.

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