

PARSHAS NASO

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Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas Naso, 5631/5634/5637

The Sfas Emes begins this ma'amar with a pasuk (and a Medrash) that come well into the parsha. The fact that the Sfas Emes skipped over other potential topics means that he saw special significance in the subject that he did select. The pasuk that the Sfas Emes saw as especially meaningful comes in Bemidbar (6:2): "ish oh isha ki yafli lindor neder nazir ... "(ArtScroll: " ... a man or a woman who shall dissociate himself by taking a Nazarite vow ... ").

The meaning of these words is not obvious, so the Sfas Emes elaborates. He explains that being a nazir means that a person separates himself from matters of olamhazeh (this world) even though in fact, he is involved in olam hazeh. That may sound like a contradiction. In fact, it is a contradiction. But the Sfas Emes does not hesitate to confront apparent cosmic inconsistencies. He explains that HaShem gives us the power to cling to the Source -- of His Presence -- which is present in all things. Thus, the Sfas Emes is telling us that this capacity to be part of -- yet separate from -olam hazeh depends on our maintaining contact with the chiyus (vibrancy, vitality) that HaShem put into all Creation. The Sfas Emes calls this phenomenon "pehleh" -- from the same root as a word in the pasuk -- "yafli".

Clearly, the Sfas Emes regards the topic of the nazir as extremely important. And equally clearly, "pehleh" is a key word for understanding what nezirus is all about. How does the Sfas Emes arrive at his reading: namely, that the word "pehleh" refers to our capacity to maintain contact with the inner vitality that HaShem has placed in all Creation? A pasuk from the haftora of Parshas Naso (Shoftim, 13:18) provides some help. That pasuk contains the word "peli" -- a word that all the commentaries render as "mechuseh" or "ne'ehlam" -- i.e., hidden. That is to say: Our capacity to connect with ruchniyus even though we are involved in olam hazeh is a phenomenon beyond our understanding. Thus, we are dealing here with a familiar situation: our limited capacity to understand how the cosmos functions.

For further clarification of the word "yafli", the Sfas Emes sends us to an unexpected source. He directs us to a remark of the Rema in Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim, Siman 6. The Rema there comments on a phrase in the berocha -- the blessing -- of asher yatzar". The Rema observes that the phrase "umafli la'asos" (HaShem, "Who does wondrous things") refers to a unique creature that HaShem has fashioned with His boundless creativity. What creature does the Rema have in mind ?

Human beings, can, in principle, combine ruchniyus (spirituality) with gashmiyus (corporeality). Thus, following the Sfas Emes's approach, we can translate the pasuk with which he began this ma'amar as: "If a person commits to doing that wondrous thing -- something whose feasibility is to us, with our limited knowledge, hidden -- that is, to take a Nazarite vow ...".

Notice what the Sfas Emes is doing here. Earlier he defined a nazir as a person who is not involved in olam hazeh even though in fact he is involved in olam hazeh. That sounds paradoxical. But by introducing us to the concept and halachos of nazir, the Torah is telling us that such a combination is indeed feasible. And the Sfas Emes brings support for this view by citing a berocha that celebrates the reality of such a combination, which HaShem has built into all humankind. The take-home lesson is clear: being bahsar vedahm (flesh and blood) need not bar us from living a life of spirituality.

The Sfas Emes moves on now to another line of thought. He quotes the Medrash Rabba on our pasuk. The Medrash, in turn, brings a pasuk from Shir Hashirim (5:15): "Shokav amudei shesh ... " ("The Torah's columns that support the world are marble ... "). The Medrash (and the Sfas Emes) read "shokav" as coming from the same root as the Hebrew word "teshuka" -- yearning. In other words, they read 'shokav' as "His yearning". Thus, the Medrash tells us that HaShem yearned to create the world. This perspective implies that the world is -- or can be -- a good thing.

The Medrash continues in the same vein, quoting a pasuk that we say in the Friday night kiddush (Bereishis, 2:1): "Va'yechu'lu ha'shamayim vеха'aretz ... " In non-pshat mode, the Medrash chooses to read the word "va'yechulu" as coming from the root of another Hebrew word which also denotes yearning or longing. Thus we find a pasuk in (Tehillim, 74:3.) which says: 'nichsefa vegam kalsa nafshi...' (That is: 'My soul yearns for ...') You see the link -- by allusion -- that connects "va'yechulu" and "kalsa".

So far, the Sfas Emes has had to add little to the discussion. The Medrash is so much in a Sfas Emes mode that he can let the Medrash say it all for him. But at this point, the Sfas Emes enters with comment on the pasuk (quoted above): "Shokav amudei sheish ... " As noted above, the pshat (simple, literal) meaning of the word "sheish" in this context is: "marble". Hence, the literal meaning: "His columns that support the world are marble. " But in non-pshat mode, the Sfas Emes reads the word "sheish" as "six." Hence, the Sfas Emes can now read the phrase as "The six support the world." Thus, the Sfas Emes is telling us that during the six yemei hama'aseh (workdays), our ma'aseh (work) can connect us with HaShem!

The picture that the Medrash (and the Sfas Emes) give us is a picture in which HaShem, as it were, yearned to create the world. Further, the way He built the world, we can reciprocate His feeling. As the pasuk in Shir Hashirim (7:11) says: "ve'ahlai teshukaso" ("And I yearn for Him"). Taking the relationship a step further, the Sfas Emes endows that pasuk with a secondary meaning, "And His yearning for me depends on my yearning for Him".

Thus, the Sfas Emes views this world in a very positive light. HaShem had a yearning to create this

world. (In fact, the Medrash uses a word much stronger than 'yearning': "ta'ava"). As you see, what we have here is a deep, heartfelt relationship between HaShem and the world that He has created -- that is, with us.

I suggest that this heartfelt relationship also brings with it a potential danger. HaShem yearns for us. But what if we do not yearn for Him? As we know, spurned love leads to frustration, and frustration leads to anger. And anger can lead to acts of anger. Sad to say, Tanach recounts many such episodes. So too does our people's history in the post-Tanach years.

In any case, the Sfas Emes reminds us that on Shabbos we can come closer to HaShem. And our coming closer gives HaShem nachas (joy). We are told in Shemos, 20:1: "va'yanach ba'yom hashevi'i." (ArtScroll: "And He rested on the seventh day."). The Sfas Emes reads this pasuk as: "And He had nachas [joy] on the seventh day". When we say this pasuk in kiddush on Shabbos morning, let us try to have in mind that on Shabbos we can give HaShem nachas.

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