

PURIM

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Purim, 5631

The Sfas Emes on Purim is extraordinarily rich. He has bequeathed us page after page of new, mind-stretching ideas. So be aware that what offer here is like a drop of water from the ocean or a grain of sand from the beach. The implication is: much joy awaits you if you take the plunge, buy yourself a set of the Sfas Emes, and learn some of the text yourself (or with a chavrusa) each week.

Let us work with the third paragraph of the Sfas Emes's ma'amar for Purim in his first year as Rebbe, 5631. The text there begins: "U'mitzvas mishlo'ach manos ..." ("The mitzvah of sending presents to one another ...") The Sfas Emes immediately appends his comment: "Nir'eh lavo le'ahavas Yisroel" ("Apparently, the objective of this mitzva is to get us to a state of Ahavas Yisroel" [love of our co-religionists]).

Note what the Sfas Emes has just done. His comment on mishlo'ach manos has, in effect, inverted the conventional view of how this mitzva operates. The standard approach sees mishlo'ach manos as an expression of our deeply founded, pre-existent love of our fellow Jews. By contrast, the Sfas Emes has just told us -- without making a big splash about it -- that in reality, first comes the gift giving; and only later, the love. The Sfas Emes is apparently working here with an idea similar to Sefer HaChinuch's maxim: "Ahdam nif'al lefi pe'ulosov." ("A person becomes what he does.") In the present context, this idea tells us that the purpose of mishlo'ach manos is to get us to a state in which we love our fellow Jews.

The implication is clear. The Sfas Emes takes it for granted that many of us may start from a state in which we do not love our fellow Jews. But he does not stop there. The Sfas Emes goes on to tell us that although we may begin from that state, we should not remain there. And he views mishlo'ach manos as an instrument to get us from our initial negative or indifferent state to one of true ahavas Yisroel.

The ma'amar moves on now to a new perspective on ahavas Yisroel. The Megilla's first mention of Mordechai refers to him (Esther, 2:5) as "Ish Yehudi ..." i.e., "a Jewish person." However, in non-pshat mode, Medrash Rabba reads these words as "Ish yechidi" i.e., "a single person." What does this mean? Is the Medrash telling us that Mordechai was an "isolated person"? A social misfit? Chas veshalom! Read on.

The commentaries on that Medrash explain that Mordechai was called 'yechidi' because he

proclaimed HaShem's unity (yichud). How did he do this? By refusing to bow before Haman's idol. But in what amounts to a Medrash on the Medrash, the Sfas Emes reads "Ish yechidi" very differently. The Sfas Emes reads "Ish yechidi" as telling us that Mordechai unified -- i.e. brought together -- the Jewish people.

Why was it important to bring Klal Yisroel (the Jewish people) together? Because in a state of unity, we were able to fulfill the mitzva (Vayikra, 19: 18) of "Ve'ahavta lerei'echa kamocha." (R. Aryeh Kaplan: "Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.") Chazal tell us that this mitzva is a "klal gadol baTorah" ("a major principle of Yiddishkeit") By any standard, enabling people to rise above their innate egoism is a major achievement. Hence, the question arises: How did Mordechai do it?

The Sfas Emes answers by citing what may sound like a far-fetched chassidische commentary on the posuk "Ve'ahavta lerei'acha kamocha." That commentary explains: "Rei'acha -- zeh Hakadosh Baruch Hu." That is, when the Torah tells us: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself," the Torah is really telling us: love HaShem -- who is our true rei'ah ('friend'; 'neighbor') -- as we love ourselves.

You may be wondering: who is the "far-fetched chassidische" commentator quoted above? The answer may come as a surprise: Rashi. He offers this explanation in Gemora Shabbos (31a). In support of this explanation, Rashi cites a posuk (Mishlei, 27:10) which refers to HaShem as our "rei'a". To maintain credibility, I quote the posuk: "Rei'acha verei'ah avicha ahl ta'azov". (Artscroll: "Do not forsake your friend and the friend of your father.")

The Sfas Emes proceeds to explain HOW ahavas HaShem can lead to ahavas Yisroel. If we all cling tightly to the inner core of our existence -- to HaShem -- we are all connected to each other. Then, in fact, all of Bnei Yisroel are one. And, recognizing that joint inner connection, we can treat each other -- in reality, ourselves -- with love. Thus, in principle, we can reach Ahavas Yisroel by starting with Ahavas HaShem.

Continuing in this vein, the Sfas Emes refers us to the posuk (Esther, 8:11) which says: "nikhalu ve'amod ahl nafsham". That is, Bnei Yisroel "came together and defended themselves." The Sfas Emes points out that in the Hebrew text, the word translated here as "themselves" is given in the singular. Thus, translated literally, the pasuk says: "they defended their 'nefesh'". As you see, the word 'nefesh' is in the singular. But from the context, we know that the text is speaking about a multitude. Why does the text not use the plural?

To answer, the Sfas Emes refers us to Rashi on Bereishis, 46:26. That posuk speaks of the Bnei Yisroel who went to Mitzrayim. There, too, the Torah is speaking of many people but, nevertheless, employs the singular word "nefesh." Rashi there notes the contrast with the family of Esav Harasha, of whom the Torah (Bereishis, 36, 6) speaks in the plural, "nafshos beiso." Rashi explains that Bnei Yisroel is referred to in the singular because they all served the one HaShem. Thus, in that case, too, many people holding tightly to the same HaShem became, in effect, one. Hence, the posuk can -- and does in fact -- refer to them in the singular.

Why do the Torah -- and Rashi -- have to tell us that all Bnei Yisroel served the same HaShem? Perhaps because an uninformed observer could easily misperceive the situation. That is, seeing the individual tribes - each with its own headgear and garb; with its own way of pronouncing Hebrew words; its own poskim; and its minhagim (customs) -- a person would have the impression that, in fact, they were serving different deities. For this reason, we have to be told that, notwithstanding superficial impressions, we are in fact one people.)

Finally, the Sfas Emes cites his grandfather, the Chiddushei HaRim, who noted an important fact. Our coming together -- initially for self- defense and ultimately, with mishlo'ach manos -- generated ahavas Yisroel and achdus (unity). This achdus, in turn, had a further beneficial effect. Unity enabled us to receive the Torah again, in Esther's time, as we had received it at Har Sinai -- "ke'ish echad belev echad." (As one person with one heart.) Receiving the Torah in that manner was no small thing. Awareness of that 'side effect' of Purim should increase our joy. In fact, Purim is the happiest day in the year.

This ma'amar has much to teach us: e.g., What is mish'loach manos all about? Who is the the "rei'ah" of mish'loach manos ish "le'rei'eihu"? Who is the "rei'ah" of Veahavta le'rei'acha kamocho?

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