

PARSHAS SHLACH

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas Shelach, 5631

The Sfas Emes begins by echoing words of the parsha's first Medrash Rabba: "Nothing in this world is as beloved (chaviv) to HaShem as sheluchei mitzva -- people who are sent on a mission to do a mitzva -- who give their all in order to accomplish their mission."

Continuing in this vein, the Sfas Emes quotes a thought of his Grandfather. The Chiddushei HaRim would often say that, in fact, each one of us can fill this beloved role of being a shli'ach mitzva. All (!) we have to do is to view ourselves as having been sent to this world with the express purpose of carrying out the will of HaShem -- and to conduct ourselves accordingly. Being a shl'iach mitzva means viewing oneself -- and living one's life -- as an agent of HaShem's will.

Note: The Chiddushei HaRim understood the Mishna in Avos (1:14): "Im ein ani li, mi li? (ArtScroll: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?") in a similar perspective. In his ma'amar on parshas Bechukosai, 5632, the Sfas Emes returns to this idea. He quotes his Grandfather as saying: "Every person is created to do a tikun (a task that improves the world) for which he is uniquely qualified, and which only he can do." Thus, in effect, every one of us is a potential "shliach mitzva". Further, the implication is clear: if a person leaves this world without having achieved his mission, his life has been a failure. (The postscript to this email discusses what such a tikun might be in present-day, real-world terms.)

The Sfas Emes proceeds to explain the concept of sheluchei mitzva (agents of HaShem's will) in the context of parshas Shelach. The parsha begins with HaShem's command to send meraglim (spies) to reconnoiter Eretz Yisroel. One might suppose that the spies who were sent had the status of beloved sheluchei mitzva. In fact, that is not how events unfolded. We know from other sources that the idea of sending spies to Eretz Yisroel came from Bnei Yisroel, not from HaShem. Unfortunately, the people's motive for sending spies was a lack of bitachon (trust) in HaShem. Hence, from the viewpoint of hashkofo (intellectual perspective), the project was ill conceived. Further, the spies did not conduct themselves as agents of HaShem's will. On the contrary, the report that they gave when they returned from their mission was a disaster. Hence, the Sfas Emes tells us, the Medrash is addressing an implicit question. If sending the spies was wrong, how is the conceptual framework of "sheluchei mitzva" relevant in this case ?

The Sfas Emes explains that, indeed, the project started as a bad idea. But once HaShem went along

with it, and issued a command to send the spies, the situation was transformed. Bnei Yisroel could have saved the day (and themselves!) if they had changed their mind-set, rejecting their own initial (ill-conceived) motives for sending the spies, and adopting instead the motive of desiring to carry out HaShem's command. That is, the same spies could have been sent, with the very same instructions. But by conceptualizing differently what they were doing -- i.e., viewing their mission as fulfilling HaShem's wish -- the whole episode could have been transformed.

You see how critical it is that a person perceive correctly the metaphysical context within which he is acting. In the shiur on parshas Behar, we saw other examples of the importance of conceptualizing one's life accurately. As you may recall, one such case involved Shlomo HaMelech, who encountered two men carrying a heavy stone. Shlomo asked: "What are you doing?" To which one man replied: "I am carrying a heavy stone". By contrast, the second man replied: "I am building the Beis Hamikdash".

Now the Sfas Emes takes this discussion a big step further. He tells us that if a person includes any other motivation -- that is, other than the desire to do HaShem's will -- in doing mitzvos, he loses the beloved status of being a sheliach mitzva. The Sfas Emes proceeds to twist the knife in our ego ever deeper. He explicitly includes in the category of extraneous motivations even the desire to "steig", that is, to reach a higher level in our avodas HaShem! For if the person has such a motive of his own, he is no longer acting as a shaliach, as an agent who is carrying out HaShem's agenda.

Continuing, the Sfas Emes refers to another passage in the same Medrash Rabba. This part focuses on the two meraglim (spies) that Yehoshua sent to Yericho (Yehoshua, 2:1; this text is also read as the Haftarah of this Shabbos). The Medrash tells us that these were exemplary shelichei mitzvo, who were moseir nefesh (totally dedicated) to accomplish their mission and hence, were beloved to HaShem.

The pasuk in Yehoshua says that he sent the spies "cheresh" -- secretly. However, the Medrash chooses to read this word not as ending with the Hebrew letter 'shin' -- which would, indeed, make the word mean "secretly" -- but rather as ending with the letter "sin". That spelling has the word read as "cheres" -- i.e., earthenware vessels. The Medrash views this construction as alluding to the subterfuge of the meraglim: to avoid being detected as spies, they disguised themselves as potters.

The Sfas Emes adds his own comment on reading the word as "cheres" -- an earthenware vessel. He points out that for Chazal, an earthenware vessel is typically a very inexpensive vessel. For this reason, it has little value of its own ; its importance derives totally from its contents. The Sfas Emes says: so, too, should we view ourselves. HaShem gives us free will. The Sfas Emes urges us to exercise our free will in a manner that casts us totally as instruments to do HaShem's will. Returning to a metaphor that we have seen in earlier ma'amarim, the Sfas Emes advises us to take the role of the "garzen beyad hachotzev" -- the hatchet in the hand of the wood-chopper.

The idea of seeing ourselves solely as instruments of HaShem may sound "extreme". But this

perspective cannot be rejected as a "deviant" strand of Yiddishkeit. The metaphor of the hatchet in the hand of the woodsman has an impeccable origin (in Yeshayahu, 10:15). And that notion is kept as contemporary as next year's Yom Kippur; for the metaphor recurs in one of the piyutim that we say on the night of Kol Nidre.

So far, the Sfas Emes has been presenting essentially one idea: namely, that we can view ourselves as shelichei mitzva. But you should be aware that there is much more to this week's Sfas Emes. (I have presented only half (!) of his initial paragraph.) The "much more" includes:

The idea that one of the assignments of the spies ("meRaGLim") was to infuse the excitement of Torah into the "heRGeiL" (unthinking routine, habit), with which we too often live our lives. Bearing this reading in mind, we can see new meaning in our daily tefila (prayer) of "vesaRGiLeinu beSoRAecha." What we are asking is: "Let your Torah permeate our hergeil (unthinking routine)".

HaShem's command to send the spies (Bamidbar 13:2) stated: "veyasuru es Eretz Kena'an." (ArtScroll: "... and let them spy out the Land of Canaan ...") The Sfas Emes reads the word "veyaSuRu" as alluding to the word "Torah." Thus, he reads HaShem's command to the spies as telling them to "Torah-ize" Eretz Kena'an; that is, to infuse Eretz Kena'an (with all the evil that the name "Kena'an" evokes) with Torah!

A postscript: As noted, the Chidushei Harim understood the Mishna's statement "Im ein ani li, mi li" as saying that every one of us has been given an assignment to do in improving the world; i.e., to make a "tikun". Further, this is a mission for which he/she is uniquely qualified, and for which his/her failure to fulfill the assignment means that it will not be done at all. This perspective on life may sound too mystical for some people. Indeed, the idea may sound so mysterious that a person may be tempted to consider the whole subject irrelevant to oneself. To avoid falling into that trap so artfully placed by the yetzer hara, it may help to mention some real-world cases.

I know a man who has taken on himself the job of publicizing everyday acts of chessed. That is, he posts to a list of hundreds of people a daily email recounting anonymous actions of chessed. This project raises consciousness concerning the need for and the possibility of helping people with acts of kindness. Now that the project has been launched, it may seem like something that anyone could -- and should -- have done. But in fact, it was not done -- until this man did it. Only he had the unique blend of compassion, persistence, and intelligence to do this tikun.

Other examples of assignments come to mind that are crucial and often very close at hand. Thus, a parent may be uniquely qualified to help his/her child grow up properly. Similarly, a specific person may be the only one in the world with the qualities necessary to give his/her spouse -- with his/her unique needs -- a tolerably happy life. These too are cases to which the Chidushei Harim's reading of "Im ein ani li ..." may apply. Thus even in apparently mundane situations, a person can be a sheliach mitzva, chaviv (beloved) to HaShem.

Text Copyright © 2005 by Rabbi Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff and **Torah.org**.