

PARSHAS TAZRIA & HACHODESH

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes Study List: Parashas Tazria and Parashas Hachodesh

In 5631 (1871)-- the Sfas Emes's first year as Gerrer Rebbe-- Shabbos Parashas Tazria coincided with Rosh Chodesh Iyar. The Sfas Emes said Torah on both topics, as well as on the closely related topic of Parashas Hachodesh.

In that context, the Sfas Emes focuses on the words that begin the special Torah> reading (Shemos 12:2) of this Shabbos : 'Hachodesh ha'zeh la'chem'. (Literally, " 'This month shall be for you...' ").. The Sfas Emes had much to say on these words. Here are two of his thoughts.

As you might have expected, the Sfas Emes sees the word 'chodesh' (month) as an allusion to the word 'chadash' (new, fresh). Thus he reads the pasuk just quoted ('Ha'chodesh ha'zeh lachem ') as HaShem telling us : : You have it within yourselves to find the Newness -- i.e., the Presence of HaShem -- in everything that you do ('be'chol ma'aseh') ! .

Later in this ma'amar, the Sfas Emes reads 'Ha'chodesh ha'zeh la'chem' in another way. The word 'chodesh' can also refer to the moon. Thus, the Sfas Emes reads 'Ha'chodesh ha'zeh la'chem ' as giving Klal Yisroel a mission. The moon (" hachodesh ") lights the darkness. So too it is our assignment to shine light, and thus to find HaShem's Presence in the Hester behind which He often chooses to hide Himself

As noted, this Shabbos coincided with Rosh Chodesh. This happy coincidence gave the Sfas Emes good reason to quote what may have been his favorite pasuk in all of Tanach --(Yekhezkel, 46:1). The pasuk, which is the one he cites most often, says : "...Sha'ar hechatzeir hapenimis haponeh kahdim yiheyeh sagur sheshes yemei hama'aseh; uveyom HaShabbos yipasei'ach, uveyom HaChodesh yipasei'ach." (That is, "The entrance to the [Temple's] inner court, which faces east, shall be closed during the days of week-day activity, but it shall be open on Shabbos and on Rosh Chodesh.")

The Sfas Emes reads this pasuk as telling us that on weekdays, access to chiyus from HaShem is blocked. (I.e., the entrance to the inner court is closed). But on Shabbos and Rosh Chodesh, the entrance is open, and we have easier access to kedusha.. . The Sfas Emes adds that: with the perspective on the world that we gain on Shabbos, we can keep our close connection with HaShem on weekdays as well.

Sfas Emes, Tazria, 5631

This ma'amar begins with a reference to the first Medrash Rabba on the parsha. That Medrash comments on a pasuk in Tehillim (139:5): "Ahchor vakedem tzartani ..." (ArtScroll: "Back and front You have restricted me ... ") Notwithstanding ArtScroll's effort to help, it is hard to understand what this pasuk is telling us. Nor are we the only ones who find it difficult to pin down the pasuk's meaning. This pasuk's message is so unclear that Medrash Raba presents four (!) alternative ways -- of understanding it.

The Sfas Emes quotes the interpretation presented by R. Yochanan: "Ahchor vakedem tzartani ... Im zacha adam, nocheil shetai olamos -- hazeh, vehaba". The pshat pashut of R' Yochanan's interpretation of this Medrash is straightforward. He is telling us that if a person is privileged, and does things right, he/she will have a portion both of olam hazeh (this world) and of olam haba (the world to come). Thus, Rabbi Yochanan is reading the pasuk as: "You have formed me to take possession of olam haba - - which comes after (ahchor) everything; and of olam hazeh -- which comes before (kedem) everything." At this point, the Sfas Emes enters the discussion with his reading of R' Yochanan's reading. The Sfas Emes construes R' Yochanan as saying: If a person does things right, he connects the two worlds. How does "connect" come into this discussion? Simple. The Sfas Emes is reading the word "nocheil" in the pasuk as coming from the same root as the word "nachal" (a brook, a flow). Hence, he can see the word "nocheil" as meaning: to open a channel.

Thus, the Sfas Emes sees R' Yochanan's statement in Medrash Rabba as teaching us an important fact of life. He is saying that as a consequence of doing things right, a person opens a channel that connects olam hazeh with olam haba. This link is crucial for the world's functioning. For, as the Sfas Emes points out, this channel permits chiyus from olam haba to flow to the Hester of olam hazeh.

(Yes. We are back to the problem of "Hester panim." -- HaShem's "hiding Himself" from our view. If I remember correctly, the last time the Sfas Emes and we encountered this problem was in Parashas Toldos. Note that this problem has resurfaced despite such intervening experiences as the Redemption from Egypt and the splitting of the Red Sea. Apparently, Hester is so powerful a feature of reality that even witnessing those extraordinary events had no lasting effects on our capacity to deal with Hester panim.).

Continuing, the Sfas Emes asks: : if we do not connect the two worlds, what would we gain from having olam hazeh? Apparently the Sfas Emes feels that a world without a channel providing chiyus would not be worth very much.

The Sfas Emes quotes the Mishna: "Kohl Yisroel yeish lahem cheilek la'olam haba. (That is: "All Jews have a share in the world to come.") The Sfas Emes reads this Mishna as telling us that in olam HAZEH, too, we can have a portion of olam haba. How? By living in constant awareness of HaShem's Presence, our lives here can also be illuminated by the "ohr haganuz." ("Ohr Haganuz" is the brilliant

light that HaShem initially created for this world. But then -- seeing that this world does not merit such bright illumination -- HaShem stored that light in olam haba.)

Thus, when the Sfas Emes speaks of our having a portion of olam haba in olam hazeh, he had something very specific in mind: namely, ohr haganuz. Having access to that bright light is especially meaningful in the context of the Hester that the Sfas Emes mentioned earlier. For bright light can enable us to see meaning and beauty that the darkness of Hester had previously obscured.

The Sfas Emes moves on to a new line of thought. We usually view the imperfections of this world -- and hence the need to set the world straight (tikun) -- essentially as "accidents" or anomalies from the basic order that HaShem built into the world. Not so, says the Sfas Emes. Those imperfections are part of the basic order deliberately created by HaShem. Moreover, He also created us precisely to set straight the world -- specifically with its imperfections. For this reason, as soon as HaShem created human beings, He created Hester and klipa (the husk of evil). For our role in this world is exactly this: to handle these basic challenges to our serving HaShem.

This is the context within which the Sfas Emes sees the role of the "ahdam hashaleim," a person who is complete, and who can therefore complete creation. This person justifies all creation. How does he/she achieve this powerful result? By focusing thought and action on HaShem, the source of life.

Earlier, the Sfas Emes cited the text of the Medrash: "... nocheil shenei olamos." (That is, if a person does things right, he will have two "olamos.") The pshat meaning of "olamos" is: "worlds." But the Torah also has meaning via allusion. And in that mode, the Sfas Emes reads the word as "he'eleimos": hidden realities.

Olam haba is obviously one such hidden reality. For it is beyond our capacity to imagine what olam haba is. And olam hazeh is a second hidden reality. Hester and klipa get in the way, making it hard for us to get an accurate picture of reality. The Sfas Emes adds that to the same degree that a person clings to the true reality of olam hazeh -- e.g., recognizing that HaShem is really there -- so, too, will he be privileged to hold fast to olam haba.

This ma'amar is long and rich. In fact, so long and so rich that it may be hard to remember any thing of the ma'amar after we finish reading it. What can we retain once we have been through the ma'amar? People differ in their tastes and interests. So, all I can do in this context is to mention two images that have stayed with me with particular force as I have learned Sfas Emes over the years.

One powerful image is the picture of the person who does things right, and thereby opens a channel for chiyus to flow to our world. The other image that stays with me is the picture of the gate to the inner court being opened on Shabbos and Rosh Chodesh to give us easier access to kedusha on those days.

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