

PARSHAS VAYIGASH

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Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas Vayigash, 5631

The parsha begins: "Vayigash eilav Yehuda". The simple/pshat translation of which is: "Yehuda approached him [Yosef]." But these words prompt the Sfas Emes to recall a comment of his Grandfather on the name "Yehuda". The Chidushei HaRim's comment is especially pertinent because our people takes its name from Yehuda. That is, we are called "Yehudim". Thus, this comment on the name Yehuda sheds light on what the Chidushei HaRim and the Sfas Emes view as the essence of being a Jew.

As the Sfas Emes sees it, the name "Yehuda" is related to the word "hoda'a." I would translate it as I suggest that the accurate translation of 'hoda'a' in this context is: 'concession' or 'acknowledgement'. [For further support of this translation, see endnote 1]. This translation implies a tense, and likely, a conflicted relationship. For a person can 'concede' a point reluctantly or grudgingly -- perhaps only between gritted teeth.. Thus, the Sfas Emes is telling us that we 'Yehudim' are a people who acknowledge that -- whether we like it or not -- HaShem's Presence is everywhere. And 'everywhere' includes situations in which an observer without Torah would bemoan HaShem's absence.

We move on to another line of thought. The Sfas Emes tells us that when a person encounters a rough patch in life, he should realize that he is also gaining the opportunity for a richer relationship with HaShem. Further, the Sfas Emes advises that the way to handle such an encounter is to come closer to the penimiyus (the inner reality) of the situation; that is, to HaShem. Thus, in the present case, Yehuda reviewed in his mind the events that had befallen the brothers. Acknowledging that the entire episode came from HaShem, he accepted it "besimcha" (with joy).. Yehuda could then take what was for him the obvious next step: to come closer to HaShem.

The Sfas Emes has just given us a radically new nonpshat on our parsha's first sentence. The text says: "Vayigash eilav Yehuda". As noted above, the conventional reading of this phrase is: "Yehuda approached Yosef". By contrast, the Sfas Emes is reading this text as: Yehuda came closer to HaShem!

Note another feature of this model on how to handle a rough patch in life. To come closer to the penimiyus, we must first remove the intellectual and emotional blockages that obstruct our access to HaShem. Thus, before Yosef revealed himself to his brothers -- and thereby showed them the

penimiyus of what they had been experiencing -- he had to have the room cleared. Hence, we hear Yosef saying (Bereishis, 45: 1): 'Hotzi'yu kohl ish'.

The Sfas Emes points to a similar process in our own lives. He quotes a passage in the Zohar, a text that we also saw him cite a few weeks ago. (Nusach Sfarad says this paragraph before "Borchu" on leil Shabbos.) "Vekol dinim mis'abrin minei". Thus, when Shabbos arrives and we come closer to the penimiyus, we try to remove all the extraneous elements in our minds, to have those distractions leave us. Yosef had to take a concrete action to remove impediments to perceiving the penimiyus. Similarly, to free ourselves on Shabbos from thoughts that are not "Shabbosdick", we too must take action. If we want to experience Shabbos as coming closer to HaShem, we must be careful about not only what we do, but also what we say, and indeed, what we think. That is, on Shabbos, we should strive not only for: shinui ma'aseh but also for shinui dibur; and even for shinui mach'shava. Clearly, this lineup has implications for what we read and what we talk about on Shabbos.

The Sfas Emes moves on, and we attempt to follow. Yehuda says (Bereishis, 44: 18): "Bi adoni". The pshat translation of this phrase is: "Please, my lord". But the Sfas Emes quotes a nonpshat of the ARIZL on this phrase and on the name "Yehuda". The ARIZL read the words "bi adoni" as: "My Lord is within me". That is, if we examine the letters with which the name Yehuda is written -- i.e., YHDAH - we find the letters of HaShem's name ("YKVK")!

At this point, a basic question may arise in your mind. The ARIZL's reading -- "My Lord is within me" - bespeaks a close, positive relationship between Yehudim and HaShem. But this ma'amar began with the Sfas Emes observing that we are a people who (sometimes) are willing to concede (perhaps only reluctantly) that all that happens in life comes from HaShem. Is this not a blatant contradiction with the picture of a people who can say "bi adoni"?

In addressing this question, it helps to be aware of a key feature of the Sfas Emes. The Sfas Emes is not afraid of internal inconsistencies and blatant contradictions. As we look at the world, we observe many contradictions between what we (think we) know and what we (think we) see. Part of the gadlus (greatness) of the Sfas Emes is his willingness to make such inconsistencies explicit; indeed, to put them up for all to view. In practical terms, the Sfas Emes has given us a model to follow: demonstrating that we can take apparent contradictions in stride as obvious facts of life, and continue our lives as Ovdei HaShem be'simcha.

In the present context, however, we need not posit inconsistency. For, in fact, a person may live both relationships with HaShem -- i.e., "bi adoni" and "hoda'a" -- at different times of his life. Likewise, a person may live both relationships with HaShem at different times of the same day. Indeed, a person may well live both relationships with HaShem simultaneously! That state of mind has a name; it is called "ambivalence". It is important to recognize that ambivalence is not an aberration or a deviation from normal behavior. In fact, such feelings are so common that the Torah takes them explicitly into account. Where? In a basic text, the Shema, in which the Torah tells us to serve HaShem "bechol

levavecha". The word "levavecha" is plural, connoting multiple mindsets -- for example, both 'bi adoni' and 'hoda'a'.

We conclude with still another line of thought that the Sfas Emes includes in this one ma'amar. He quotes the first Medrash Rabba on Parshas Vayigash. Remember the context within which this parsha begins. Yehuda had put himself forward as the guarantor of Binyomin's safe return. The situation of guarantor ("oreiv") evokes for the Medrash a posuk in Mishlei (6: 1) in which a guarantor figures prominently. The pasuk says: "Beni, ihm oravta le'rei'echa" (That is: "My son, if you have gotten into the situation of being a guarantor (oreiv) for your friend").

A question: Who is this 'friend' of whom the posuk speaks? One commentary on Mishlei provides an answer to this question. He tells us "Rei'echa, zeh Hakadosh Baruch Hu". ("The friend to whom you have made this commitment is: HaShem.") Seeing 'rei'echa' as HaShem is daring enough. But seeing klal Yisroel as -- kivyachol (so to speak) -- guarantor of HaShem is extreme in the extreme. Being a guarantor means taking the responsibility for making good if the one being guaranteed does not come up to standard. In our context, the metaphor seems to be saying, that if HaShem seems to under-perform, we -- klal Yisroel -- have the responsibility of compensating for His apparent deficiency. I find this idea totally mind-boggling.

You may wonder who is the author of the far out, apparently Chassidische understanding of the word "rei'acha" that we cited above? The answer is Rashi, a mainline commentator reputed to be an extreme pashtan. Thus, we see here another case in support of a key Sfas Emes theme: namely, that we live in a complex world, a world in which things are not always what we initially perceive them to be.

We conclude with an exhortation of the Sfas Emes. Echoing the Medrash, he tells us: If you have made this commitment -- to be a guarantor of HaShem -- "kabeil adnuso". Accept His kingship! By which the Sfas Emes means: do it in a conscious, active mode.

Endnote 1. In support of translating "hoda'a" as "acknowledgement" rather than as "gratitude", I cite the Sfas Emes's ma'amar on the third night of Chanuka, 5631. In that that ma'amar, he quotes the Chazal's phrase: "u'modeh -- mich'lal dipligei". That is, when a Mishna uses the word "u'modeh" it is saying that on this point under dispute, the tanna concedes. However, on other points, he continues to disagree. As this example indicates, translating the word 'u'modeh' as "concedes" makes sense; translating it as "expresses gratitude" does not. For another instance in which being "modeh" is clearly used to express a person's conceding something, see Rashi on Bereishis, (33, 9.)

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