

PARSHAS VAYEILECH

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Vayeilech, 5631 (1871)

A key feature in the Sfas Emes's *derech ha'limud* (intellectual style) is an approach that he learned from his Grandfather. Like the Chidushei HaRim, the Sfas Emes often reads words or phrases in a totally innovative way. His non-conventional manner opens new vistas to people with the imagination to follow him. But the approach also raises questions.

First, how do the Sfas Emes (and the Chidushei Harim) apply their approach? Do they follow the rules of Hebrew grammar when they reveal previously unknown allusions and word associations ("remazim")? Or are their non-peshatim simply a free-for-all - unconstrained subjective musing? Second, why do the Sfas Emes and the Chidushei HaRim use this approach, in preference to more conventional ways of understanding Torah and life? To address both questions, we will examine a "case study" -- a ma'amar of the Sfas Emes on VaYeilech.

In his ma'amar of the year 5631 (1871), the Sfas Emes recalls how the Chidushei HaRim understood a pasuk in this parsha. The pasuk (Devarim,31:28) says: "Ve'a'ida bahm es ha'shamayim ve'es ha'aretz". (ArtScroll: " ... I shall...call heaven and earth to bear witness against them". In other words, heaven and earth will be called to testify as witnesses in a din Torah if Bnai Yisroel do not keep the Bris (covenant) with HaShem.

The Chidushei HaRim reads this pasuk very differently. He understands it as telling us: HaShem has given Bnai Yisroel the responsibility of clarifying the inner reality of creation -- i.e., of heaven and earth. You may ask: What do we do that clarifies the reality of the cosmos? The Chidushei HaRim answers: "by bearing witness that heaven and earth -- the whole world -- exist only through the power of HaShem".

Different people may react differently to the Chidushei HaRim's interpretation of this pasuk, You may be especially struck by the wide gap between ArtScroll and the Chidushei HaRim. The former has Bnai Yisroel being testified against; the latter has us doing the testifying. The Chidushei HaRim's non-pshat (echoed by the Sfas Emes) may delight, and/ or unsettle, and/ or disturb you, (and/ or all of the above). Once past one's first emotional reaction, their non-pshat raises two questions.

First, how can the Sfas Emes and Chidushei HaRim arrive at their totally different interpretation of the pasuk? And second, why do they choose to learn this pasuk -- and Chumash in general -- using the non-pshat mode, an approach that some people may find unsettling?

The "How?" question is easily answered. Interpretation of the pasuk depends on how one understands the word "bahm", and especially, the letter "b" in the pasuk's phrase -- "Ve'a'ida bahm ...". The pshat reading -- as per ArtScroll -- sees the "b" in the word "bahm" as meaning "against". Hence, the phrase can be taken as meaning: "I will bear witness against them, with heaven and earth". By contrast, the Sfas Emes reads the "b" as: "by means of". This is consistent with: "I will use them (Bnai Yisroel) to bring testimony concerning heaven and earth" (i.e., about creation).

As you see, the Chidushei HaRim and the Sfas Emes did not distort or take liberties with the text. They merely read it differently. Why did they choose to go with the alternative reading? Here I can only offer a surmise. Their reading presents two facts: that HaShem gives life to all creation ; and that He has given Klal Yisroel the responsibility of making that reality known. The truth and the relevance of those two facts must have borne down very heavily on the Chidushei HaRim and on the Sfas Emes. I suggest: so heavily that, in effect, they had no choice. They had to go with the non-pshat reading.

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