

PARSHAS NOACH

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas V'zos Ha'beracha, 5654

The Sfas Emes begins this ma'amar by referring us to a comment of Rashi on a pasuk in the parasha. The pasuk says (Devarim, 33:25): "Barzel u'nechoshes min'alecha, u'che'yamehcha dov'echa".

As you see, this pasuk contains some unfamiliar, difficult words. We might be tempted to skip these unknowns. But that would be a mistake. Why? Because to understand what the Sfas Emes is trying to teach us by sending us to this Rashi, we must make sense of the pasuk on which Rashi made his comment. And to reach even a simple understanding of this pasuk, we must first clear away the unknowns.

I have looked up the pasuk's difficult words, and this is what I found:

"min'alehcha" = your "lock up"; your constraint;

"ya'mehcha" = your good days, a reference to: the days of your youth;

"dov'echa" = the days of your suffering, a reference to your old age.

B"H we can now understand ArtScroll's translation:

"May your borders be sealed like iron and copper, and like the days of your prime, so may your old age be." Finally, the Rashi to which the Sfas Emes sent us says: -- "Your old age will not be yemei hara'ah (the bad days)".

This is all straightforward and non-contentious. You may even be wondering: what can the Sfas Emes say to add to this discussion? Read on and see.

Quoting the Chidushei Harim, the Sfas Emes adds two new ideas. First, he reads the "lock up" (min'alecha) as applying not to geographic borders, but rather to human borders; i.e., to ourselves. Such a reading -- emphasizing the need for controlling ourselves if we want to grow -- comes as no surprise in the Sfas Emes.

Second, the Sfas Emes shows us a connection between the first and the last half of the pasuk. For, if you read the pasuk out loud, you will see that the two halves seem to be totally independent, bearing no relationship to each other. The Sfas Emes comes to remedy this seeming incongruity. He does this by pointing to a link between the pasuk's two halves -- a link of causality.

Reading the pasuk's two halves in the form of a causal connection makes a colossal difference for our understanding of what the pasuk (and the Sfas Emes) are telling us. And taking us a step further in this approach, the Sfas Emes gives us a sense of what drives this causality. He tells us that to the degree that a person holds on to his or her strengths and good character traits ("kochos " and "midos") in their youth, the person will retain these assets to help him handle old age.

The danger that concerns the Sfas Emes here is serious - namely a young person's possible lack of focus. Hence, the Sfas Emes' emphasis on the need, when a person is young, to lock up (control; discipline) the gifts that he or she has from HaShem lest they get lost in dissipation ("le'hispasheit lachutz").

The discussion of youth leads the Sfas Emes logically to a discussion of old age. Chazal, who are the Sfas Emes' starting point on this topic, had a well-developed attitude toward old age. Their approach comes out clearly in their reactions to a well-known pasuk in Koheles (12:1):

"U' zechor es bor'echa bi'mei be'churo'sehcha ahd ahsher lo yavo'u yemei 'hara'a; ve'higi'u shanim ahsher tomar ein li bahem cheifetz."

(Art Scroll: "So remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come, and the years arrive of which you will say 'I have no pleasure in them.'")

Medrash Raba on that pasuk comments:

"yemei hara'a" -- "Eilu yemei hazikna" ("the evil days ": This refers to old age")

"the years no pleasure in them"); "Eilu ha' yisurim" ("This refers to the painful ailments of old age")

The Sfas Emes continues on old age. He follows the approach just cited, which views old age in extremely negative terms. As part of this mind- set, he prefers youth to old age. Thus, "ha'bachrus ikar ha'koach" ("When a person is young, he is at his maximum strength.") The Sfas Emes does quote a Zohar which says that old age is not necessarily bad. But -- sorry to say for most of us -- the Zohar reserves that favorable possibility for people of great virtue (Tzadikim).

Further, nothing is for free in this Beis Din. Thus, "od yenuvun beseiva." (Tehilin, 91:16) (ArtScroll: "They will still be fruitful in old age "). But -- the Sfas Emes hastens to add -- that depends on their having been "shesulim beveis HaShem". (Tehilin, 92: 15 ArtScroll: "Planted in the house of HaShem").

Continuing, the Sfas Emes tells us that if a person is aware of HaShem -- with all that such awareness implies -- in his youth, he will not have a hard time when he is old.

I find this last statement extremely disappointing. Why? Because it has the Sfas Emes taking us back to the principle with which we started: namely, "ke'yamecha dov'ehcha ". (The quality of a person's life when he is old depends on how he conducted himself when he was young). The Sfas Emes has not advanced this discussion nor changed its parameters.

We can now sum up on this ma'amar. The Sfas Emes' choice of texts on old age to include (as well as the texts he chose not to include) leave us with an overall picture of his attitude to old age. Clearly this is not a typical upbeat Sfas Emes ma'amar. Indeed, this ma'amar sounds so pessemistic that it might qualify as remarkably "downbeat".

Thus, as the discussion of the pesukim from Koheles make emphatically clear, for most people, old age is a bad time. The Sfas Emes' perspective on old age is so negative that he does not mention some conditions that might alter a totally negative view. Thus, he says nothing about old age as a repository of experience (and in some cases, perhaps even of wisdom). Similarly, the Sfas Emes does not speak of the honor and respect that the Torah mandates for our elders.

Another feature involves the non-peshats that we have seen the Sfas Emes deploy in other contexts. Those other contexts were typically situations that were apparently unwelcome; but in which the Sfas Emes' bold, innovative readings sometime enabled him to view with a more positive perspective. Why has the Sfas Emes not used innovative readings of the text to rescue us here? Perhaps he said nothing because in the context of old age, there was nothing to say.

A fair question now: why is the Sfas Emes so negative about old age? An answer comes readily to mind. Perhaps the Sfas Emes' view of old age was simply a reflection of the reality of old age. And as an Ish Ha'emes, the Sfas Emes had to tell it the way it is.

A Post Script

For the reasons presented above, I described this Sfas Emes ma'amar as "downbeat". But an alternative interpretation is possible on whether this ma'amar is more accurately considered upbeat or downbeat. In an alternative view, the Sfas Emes is always upbeat; for he recognizes the reality that Hashem is in control and we can do nothing on our own. These two interpretations look like polar opposites; but I think they can be reconciled. How? By recognizing that the "upbeat" view may reflect the attitude of tzadikim like the Sfas Emes; while a "downbeat" perspective is the way that "ordinary" people react to the conditions discussed in the text above.

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