

PARSHAS SHEMOS

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Shemos, 5631/2

The Sfas Emes begins this ma'amar by quoting the first pasuk of the parsha: "Ve'eila shemos ... " ("These are the names of Ya'akov Avinu's sons, who descended to Egypt with him ... ")

I have translated the word "shemos" as "names". However, in other contexts the word "sheim" (singular form of shemos) has a slightly different meaning: reputation. The Sfas Emes reaches for a Medrash in Medrash Rabba on Koheles which works with this different meaning of sheim. The Medrash is reacting to the pasuk (7:1) "Tov sheim mishemen tov ... " (ArtScroll: "A good name is better than good oil ... ") The Sfas Emes quotes the comment of the Medrash, which tells us that Chananiah, Mishoel and Azariah, who had "only" a good reputation in their favor, did better than Nadav and Avihu, who had been anointed with the sanctifying oil of the Mishkan.

The Sfas Emes explains. Chananiah, Mishoel and Azariah were "self-made men." That is, they reached a high stature in their avoda only through their own effort and striving. And in the merit of that effort, they emerged safe and sound from the fiery furnace into which the wicked king of Babylonia had thrown them (Doniel, Ch.3). By contrast, Nadav and Avihu had been granted high status by HaShem -- as symbolized by their being anointed with oil. Notwithstanding this initial advantage, they ended their lives in disgrace -- with their neshamos burnt to a crisp -- on the day the Mishkan was inaugurated. The contrast between those with the shem tov and those with the shemen tov is clear.

[Question: Does this model apply to contemporary "ba'alei teshuva" and "frum from birth?"]

The Sfas Emes moves on now to a new line of thought. The reason the shevatim (Ya'akov Avinu's progeny) descended to Egypt was to extend the light of kedusha (sanctity) to the world of hester (HaShem's "hiding" Himself). The Patriarchs had been on an extraordinary spiritual level -- "lema'ala min hateva." But apparently their spiritual achievements had an inadequate impact on the world as a whole. Hence, the need for the shevatim to come and make the world aware of HaShem's Presence in ordinary life.

The Sfas Emes immediately draws our attention to a parallel in our own experience. Shabbos is also a context of extraordinary kedusha, but that kedusha is not reserved for Shabbos. On the contrary, the Sfas Emes tells us, what Shabbos is all about -- i.e., the "inyan" of Shabbos -- is to activate sanctity in our weekday activities as well. Thus, during the week, we are also engaged in Avoda --

written with an upper-case letter "A". For the Sfas Emes sees our work as having the potential for being Service of HaShem -- to bring the quality of Shabbos into the weekdays ...

We move now to the first paragraph of the Sfas Emes for the year 5632. The Sfas Emes quotes the first Rashi on this parsha. Rashi asks : why do the parsha's opening sentences go into the seemingly unnecessary detail of listing the sons of Ya'akov by their individual names. Rashi answers: "Le'hodia chi'basam". That is, the reason for the individualized listing is to tell of Hashem's love for Bnei Yisroel. HaShem treasures each one; and therefore, identifies by his individual name.

The Sfas Emes asks a basic question: "Ul'emi le'hodia?" "To whom does the Torah intend to convey this message of HaShem's love?" The Sfas Emes answers: HaShem had in mind to convey this information to Bnei Yisroel themselves. Each of us should be aware that he/she has been sent to this world with his own mission. And, just as the stars light up the night, so, too, were we sent to Egypt to find the light that is present even there. We do well to note the Sfas Emes's assumption that there is light to be found even in Egypt, as well as the sense of mission that attaches to all of us.

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