PARSHAS VAYEITZEI

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Vayeitzei, TRMD, Paragraph 3

This Ma'amar focuses on an incident in the parasha which may seem utterly devoid of ruchniyus or spiritual guidance. I refer to the pesukim (Bereishis 29:2-4), which tell us what happened when Ya'akov Avinu reached his destination. Ya'akov arrived at a well on the outscirts of Charan at mid-day. What he saw at the well surprised him. Even though there was still ample time left in the day to pasture sheep, Yaakov saw a number of shepherds who had congregated at the well, basically calling it a day.

As we know from his dealings with Lavan, Yaakov believed that a hired worker owed his employer an honest day's work. Accordingly,Yaakov asked the shepherds why they were stopping work at mid-day ? To which they replied: to avoid theft, having a large boulder covering its mouth safeguarded the well. But the boulder was so heavy that they needed to wait for other shepherds to lend a hand and remove it.

So much by way of introduction. We can now move on to see how the Sfas Emes viewed this reality. Based on earlier learning of the Sfas Emes, You can relax, in full confidence that the Sfas Emes can transform a situation which to a naive observer seems 'utterly devoid of spiritual content' into one that can help us grow in our Avoda.

The Sfas Emes begins with a quote from the parasha (Bereishis, 29:2) : *"Veha'even gedola ahl pi habe'eir..."* (*"The boulder was big on the well's mouth..."*) The Sfas Emes reacts immediately to language that may also have bothered you. Why does the Torah say "the" boulder was large..." --i.e., the well-known boulder?

The Sfas Emes replies that (*"Veyita'chein ";" possibly"*) that "the boulder " impeding access to the well may be an allusion to the well-known obstacle-- the yetzer hara--who impedes access to ruchniyus. The Sfas Emes adds: the yetzer hara is everywhere, and is especially powerful at the well (a symbol of ruchniyus) . The Sfas Emes continues. The yetzer hara is the one who prevents us from opening our mouths in Tefila (prayer).

(Wait a minute! How did Tefila get into this discussion? The answer is simple. The Torah speaks here of "pi habe'ier"--the mouth of the well. And when the Sfas Emes sees mention of "mouth", he sees an allusion to a key mitzva that we do with our mouth-- namely,Tefila.)

(The Sfas Emes also includes another potential victim of the yetzer hara in this context. Thus he briefly mentions the yetzer hara's commitment to denying access to Learning. But the Sfas Emes makes it clear that he has in mind only Learning of a special kind:"Torah sheb'ahl peh , she'hi tefila " That is.Torah Learning which is, in effect, Tefila. That is, Learning that, like Tefila , tries to bring a person closer to Hashem.

The Sfas Emes explains that this is the context within which we implore : *"Hashem, sefa'sai tiftach..." (Hashem, open my lips, so my mouth (!) can say your praises)* (Tehilim, 51:17, a text also said as a preface,hopefully,to Tefila.)

So here we are. We are trying to daven, ie. To connect with Hashem.; but we need help. Why? Because the Sfas Emes tells us," as every Oveid Hashem knows ", our Tefila must contend with the yetzer hara, a clever adversary who was put in this world for the sole purpose of blocking our connection with Hashem.

(At this point, note two observations. First, we now see how apt is the Sfas Emes' non-pshat view of the boulder blocking access to water in the well. Second,the Sfas Emes was undoubtedly a great ah'nahv (humble person). But there was no way he can escape being classified in the category of *"Oveid Hashem."*

The fact that the Sfas Emes identified himself as an *"Oveid Hashem "* gives us an opportunity for a rare insight on the religious life of a Tzadik. Clearly,the Sfas Emes did not live an easy relationship with Hashem. Thus, as we have seen,he speaks of his struggle with a powerful yetzer hara even to open his lips to daven. What's more, he speaks of these difficulties not as occasional, emergency episodes but rather as standard, day-to -day conditions of the religious life. And what makes the situation worse is recognition of the benefits forgone by refusing to buckle under to the pressure for collapse. Thus, the Sfas Emes is well aware of the potential benefits of coming out on top in his struggle with the yetzer hara. As he phrases it:" *Mahn de'natzach le'chivia lin'sov barta de'malka. " ("The man who trounced the snake is the one who shall have the king's daughter in marriage.")*

Victory in the struggle for quality tefila would be gratifying ; but the Sfas Emes does not say how to achieve it. On the contrary, he tells us *" Veha'emes ki ein eitza litfila." ("In truth, there are no clever ideas to advise on Davening.")*

In conclusion, I see three major take-home points in what the Sfas Emes has been trying to tell us. First is a thought that we have often heard before, but one on which the Sfas Emes evidently believes that we can benefit from a reminder.

A major theme has been the importance of Davening as a potential connection with Hashem. I say "potential" because Tefila is so central that the yetzer hara sets it as a prime target to block. Another key point has been implicit in the discussion: awareness that no reality is devoid of a teaching in

ruchniyus. Thus, the Sfas Emes has shown us even a boulder set on the mouth of a well can have much to teach us.

A final point is one that I find exciting--indeed, inspiring. The Sfas Emes was also the Gerer Rebbe, and as such, had thousands of Chassidim. This Ma'amar gives us something of an "inside look" at this giant. The Sfas Emes has let us know that notwithstanding his unique greatness and special status,the Sfas Emes faced problems similar to those with which we must contend when we (attempt to) daven. We know what the Sfas Emes did when he found that the yetzer hara attacked his Tefila. He became--and remained-- the Sfas Emes. A relevant question is: what do we do when the yetzer hara attacks our Tefila ?

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