

# PARSHAS SHEMOS

*by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari*

The midrash that tells us that Moshe was wrong to say that, 'they will not believe me'. To which HaShem replied,, 'They will listen to you; they are believers, descendants of believers, even as it is written 'and he [Avraham] believed in G-d' ( Bereishit). It is difficult to understand exactly what Moses had done wrong. He had not doubted the People's belief in G-d but only their belief that HaShem had appeared to him. It is clear that when a prophet is sent to men, he is given a sign so that the people would believe him ( Rambam, Hilkhos Yesodei HaTorah, chapter 7,halakha 7), even as He had given Moshe. Moshe never said that the people would doubt G-d's ability to redeem them or for that matter that such redemption would come. Both Joseph and Jacob had told them that the day would come when G-d would remember them and redeem them. In addition to the signs that Moshe had given them, we know from the midrash that Israel in Egypt possessed scrolls telling them of their future redemption and throughout the exile they studied and read these scrolls. Furthermore, since Moses had only questioned their belief in him and his message, it is difficult to see the comparison with Avraham.

It was the fear of their own religious abilities and their lack of confidence in their own spiritual worth, that concerned Moses and led him to question their belief in him.

Moses had told them that he came in the name of the G-d of their fathers, Avraham, Yitschak and Yaakov so that they had no need of signs or actions. This, however, was the crux of their dilemma. According to Chazal, the merit of the Fathers- zechut avot- is only valid when the actions of the descendants are consistent with those of the fathers; where this is not so, then the merit of the fathers does not avail or save the descendants. Israel in Egypt could not believe that their actions in any way resembled or were close to those of the Patriarch's and therefore their merit would not be able to ensure the redemption, despite the Divine promise. According to the Master Menachem Mendel of Kotsk, there is no person who could be so arrogant or so stupid as to think that his actions could emulate those of the Patriarch's, so that this could not be the meaning of the passage in the Midrash. There use is made of the

word 'to reach -magi'ah', which comes to teach us that, even though it is impossible to emulate the actions of the Fathers, every person should make every effort always to at least touch them, negiah, so that there would be a connection between the actions of the generations. By doing so Israel would bring down on themselves the merit of the Patriarchs, as though the connection was made in reality.

Had they had this faith in themselves, they would have had no need for signs. However, because of their lack of faith in them-selves, G-d gave Moses the staff that became a snake, leprosy of the hand and the water that turned to blood. These signs were meant to demonstrate that even though Israel had no actions that would be similar to those of the Patriarch's, nevertheless, they would still be redeemed through the merits of these Fathers. The snake is the merit of Jacob, even as it is written, 'He made the two great Taninim' ( Bereishit 1:21), that refer to Yaakov and Eisav. In the Talmud we need read that the snake, unlike all other animals, injects its poison even though it has no pleasure from it.

This was exactly what Pharaoh and the Egyptians did to the Jews when they gave them work to do from which they themselves had no benefit and only deprived the slaves of any self respect or value. Since Yaakov had struggled with the angel of Eisav and overcome him, so too the merit of Yaakov would be able to overcome Pharaoh. There are 72 aspects of tumat tzara'at and [perhaps because they are the punishment for social sins] these are the opposite of chesed whose gematria is 72.chesed. Pharaoh represented the evil and negative use of chesed; 'and they embittered their lives through strenuous labor ', even as Eisav was. Avraham's chesed is the sanctification of this merit, whereby Eisav became rejected as the p'solet of Avraham. By this merit, Israel would be saved from Pharaoh, just as the hand of Moshe became cured when he replaced it in his chest. We know that Eisav's characteristic is bloodshed and murder, reflected in Pharaoh's order to throw the sons into the Nile. Yitschak is the merit of din and justice that prevents bloodshed and averts murder, even as he was prepared to sacrifice himself. So the sign of the water turning to blood corresponds to the merit of Yitschak.

It is not that one sign is better or more important than the other, rather they all came to provide the self- confidence and the belief that the merits of the Patriarch's would avail Israel, even though they themselves did not have the actions or merits to justify the redemption. This is the connection, referred to in the midrash, to Avraham, ' who believed in HaShem, and this was considered for him as tzedakah' a free gift.

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