

מתוקים מדבש



Dei'ah, Binah and Haskel on the weekly parashah

RABBI GIL STUDENT

Bemachshvah Techilah

When Moshe and Aharon approached Par'oh and attempted to prove their divine mission by turning Aharon's staff into a serpent, Par'oh called in his wise men who did likewise. "Par'oh, too, summoned his wise men and sorcerers, and they, too – the necromancers of Egypt (*chartumei mitzrayim*) – did so with their incantations (*belahateihem*)."¹ What, exactly, did these Egyptian sorcerers do? R' Sa'adia Gaon claims that the Torah tells us about the acts of these sorcerers in order to compare their feats with those of Moshe. Moshe, with G-d's help, actually turned a staff into a serpent. These sorcerers, however, performed hidden acts of skill so that the observer would think that their staffs had turned into a serpent. Moshe displayed a miracle while Par'oh's entourage performed a mere illusion, skillful as it may have been.² R' Sa'adia Gaon is followed in this understanding by R' Yonah Ibn Janach³, R' Avraham ben Ha-Rambam, Ibn Ezra and, surprisingly, Rabbeinu Bachya.⁴ Rashi, however, follows the Gemara in Sanhedrin (67b) in explaining that the sorcerers

used different forms of black magic to perform their feats.⁵ Ramban also maintains that the Egyptian sorcerers actually turned their staffs into serpents and not merely created that illusion.⁶

According to Rashi and Ramban, that the Egyptian sorcerers had access to supernatural powers, the question remains why we do not see anyone with such powers today. Granted, there are skilled illusionists who can create the false impression that they have such powers, but there is no evidence that anyone has legitimate supernatural powers. In fact, a professional skeptic named The Amazing Randi has an outstanding offer of one million dollars to anyone who can display verifiable supernatural abilities. None of the many people who claim such powers have been able to prove the truth of their abilities, something that should be very simple for someone with real powers. Yet, if we accept that such powers are real and have historically been used, why does no one today have them?

R' Ya'akov Kamenetsky⁷ explains that this can be understood once we recognize two concepts. The first is that G-d created the world in such a way so that man will always have to

choose to follow the commandments. From the time of Adam through the end of this pre-messianic era, everything is in the hands of G-d except for the fear of Heaven. For that fear, we have the power to choose and G-d will not force us either way. If and when G-d's presence is obvious it becomes overwhelming and one is forced to believe in and follow Him. Thus, angels have no choice because they perceive G-d's presence in a clear fashion. This view compels them to follow the word of the Creator.⁸ Similarly, if man clearly saw G-d's presence then he would lose his freedom of choice and be compelled to follow the Torah. Therefore, G-d must make His presence unclear. When there are obvious miracles that imply G-d's existence then there must be similar occurrences that imply the opposite. When miracle-working prophets are common, wizards and sorcerers who do not preach G-d's word must also be common. When prophets can accurately predict the future, idolatrous seers must also possess a similar ability so that the common person is not forced to follow the prophets. Choice must exist and, for this reason, "black magic" must also exist to counter the effect of the prophets.

¹ Shemos 7:11

² Emunos VeDei'os 3:5

³ Sefer HaShorashim, sv. lahat

⁴ Commentaries of R' Avraham ben HaRambam and Ibn Ezra on Shemos 7:11, 22; Rabbeinu Bachya on v. 12. Cf. Or HaChaim on v. 11; Rambam, Commentary to the Mishnah, Avodah Zarah 4:7.

⁵ Commentary on Shemos 7:22

⁶ Shemos 7:11. Cf. Ramban, Vayikra 17:7, Devarim 18:9; Ramban's additional mitzvas aseh no. 14 in Sefer HaMitzvos.

⁷ Emes LeYa'akov al HaTorah, Shemos 7:22

⁸ Meshech Chochmah, introduction to Shemos, Vayikra 19:18, Devarim 5:25; R' Chaim Friedlander, Sifsei Chaim – Pirkei Emunah Ubechirah, vol. 2 p. 142 ff.

The second concept is that of the general decline of G-d's presence in the world. At the beginning of human existence, G-d's involvement in the world was enormous. His discussions with people, His punishments of cities and nations, His guidance of a people to greatness all implied a clear presence in the world. Of course, other powers were necessary to confuse the issue and allow freedom of choice. However, the choice was between an evident G-d and other evident forces. As time went on, G-d's presence become less and less noticeable. His involvement with the world became more distant.

Throughout the Bible there is a progression from comprehensible prophecies to those that are less and less clear. This is a declining power of prophecy. From G-d speaking directly to people, the times reach a point where G-d only speaks to prophets, and then prophecy ends. Malachi was the last prophet. During the times of the Second Temple there was still Divine inspiration, and a "bas kol" – a heavenly voice – is said to have operated. Eventually even this was

lost. During the medieval times, holy rabbis received occasional messages in dreams. But even that ended.⁹ This decline is a major theme in Ramchal's Da'as Tevunos.¹⁰ The world is increasingly descending into a lack of perception of G-d's presence until the messiah arrives and G-d's unity becomes complete. Incomprehensible evil, sophisticated philosophical obstacles, general religious chaos – these are all elements of the Divine plan of entropy that will only conclude when the messianic era arrives.

Combining these two concepts, we see that there was originally a need for wizards and sorcerers to counteract the strong evidence of G-d's presence. However, as that presence declined and the powers for good lost strength, so too the powers for evil needed to lose strength. During the times of the Second Commonwealth the witches had little power but there were "*sheidim*" to counteract the holy powers of the Tannaim. But as time

⁹ See the powerful remarks in Or HaChaim, Bereishis 6:3

¹⁰ See chapter 166.

went on even these powers lost strength, to the point that the Rambam could declare that "*sheidim*" do not exist. Perhaps they once did but by medieval times they no longer existed.¹¹ And today, when there is so little power of holiness there is, correspondingly, very little power of evil. Instead, the forces of chaos reign.¹²

¹¹ It is clear that the Rambam, cited above in note 4, would not agree with this statement because he claimed that *sheidim* never existed.

¹² This is consistent with the Chazon Ish's famous ruling that true heretics only existed in Talmudic times and prior, when G-d's presence was felt and rejecting it was true evil. Even in those times there was a freedom of choice. However, those who chose to reject G-d were choosing to repudiate something that they could perceive. Heretics today do not really recognize that which they are rejecting. While they are certainly acting improperly, they lack the tangible perception of G-d's presence that was once possible.

REB MICHA BERGER

Bakeish Shalom

The Rambam defines the ideal for any personality trait as being the middle between the extremes.¹ A person cannot be neither a doormat nor stubborn, neither impatient nor complacent. The middle path is a fusion of all *middos* and is therefore a true fulfillment of following G-d, walking *bederekh Hashem*.²

Then the Rambam qualifies his statement by describing two ideals. The middle path is what he calls the path of the *chacham*. The *chacham* is neither a *shefal ru'ach*, considering himself of lowly spirit, nor egotistical.

That balance is how the Rambam defines modesty. A *chassid*, however, tends to one side, chooses being a *shefal ru'ach* over harmony.³

While in general the Rambam focuses on the *chacham*, he later states, "There are *dei'os*, personality traits, for which one is prohibited from behaving according to the median. Rather, he should distance himself to one extreme. And that [trait] is haughtiness. It is not the good path for a person to be only modest, but he should be a *shefal ru'ach*... This is why Moshe is called

'very modest'⁴, and not simply "modest"... Also our sages said, "Whoever raises up his heart [in egotism], denies an article of faith."⁵

Anger is the Rambam's other exception. "Similarly anger, it is a very evil trait, and it is appropriate that a person distance himself from it to the other extreme and teach himself not to get angry.... Our sages said, "Whoever gets angry, it is as though he worshipped idolatry."⁶

If the path of the wise, the path of Hashem is to find balance, and this is

¹ Hilchos Dei'os 1:1 – 2:2

² Ibid. 1:6-7

³ Ibid. 1:5

⁴ Bamidbar 12:3

⁵ Ibid 2:3

⁶ Ibid.

even the ideal the Rambam gives in the previous chapter, why does the Rambam not recommend such balance in practice? Why does the ideal of the *chassid* uniquely apply to egotism and anger?

“And Aharon stretched out his hand over the water of Egypt, and the frog came up and covered the land of Egypt.... And Par’oh called to Moshe and to Aharon and said, ‘Plea to Hashem, that He take away the frogs from me and my people....’”⁷ Rashi on our *parashah*⁸ notes the use of the singular, “*hatzfardei’ah*”, “the frog,” when the plague begins, but both in the warning before the plague and in its ending, the *pasuq* says “*hatzefarde’im*”, “the frogs”, in the plural. One of Rashi’s explanations for this inconsistency is taken from the midrash. Only one enormous frog came out of the Nile (as the text says) but each time it was hit, the frog split

⁷ Shemos 8:2, 4

⁸ Ad loc.

into more frogs – thereby producing the many frogs of the plague.

The Steipler Gaon⁹ asks about this midrash. Why did the Egyptians continue hitting the frogs? How could they not have learned after a few attempts to destroy the frogs by violence, that all it would accomplish is to make the infestation worse? The Steipler explains that with each blow they truck the frogs, their anger and frustration built. Anger robs man of the ability to think clearly. It blinds.

This is akin to a broader question about the plagues except in that case the Torah clearly spells out the reason. Why didn’t the Egyptians release the Jews? Why did they stubbornly hold on to the Jews in the face of plague after plague? “Par’oh saw that there was respite, *vehachbeid es libo...*”¹⁰ The usual translation, that Par’oh “hardened his

⁹ Birkas Peretz, *parashas Va’eira*, 1

¹⁰ Shemos 8:11

heart” is not strictly loyal to the Hebrew. “*Hachbeid*” is *hif’il* (causative) of “*kaveid*”, heavy, massive. “*Hakhbeid*”, he made immobile. It is also from the same root as “*kavod*”, honor. Par’oh stood on his honor, unable to bend to the will of others, and that too blinds.

The way of the *chacham* is to seek the middle ground. However, as we saw, anger and ego make rational thought impossible; how then can we expect to allow even an admixture of either in our pursuit of being *chachamim*? What does one do when the *middah* itself clouds one from reaching *chochmah*, wisdom? While following the middle path is proper imitation of Hashem, even a touch of egotism is heresy, a single angry outburst, idolatry. The proper use of these two *middos* is a wisdom available to Hashem alone.

REB MICHA BERGER

Sefasai Tiftach

“**M**ar, berei deRavina, when he finished *tefillah*, would say like this: *Elokai, netzor...*”¹ The opening sentences of our *Elokai Netzor* are taken from his prayer, although they conclude differently.

Elokai Netzor is one of our few prayers written in the first person singular. We say “*Elokai – my G-d*”, not “*Elokeinu – our G-d*”. Another example of such a prayer is “*Modeh Ani – I thank*”, in contrast to *birkas Hoda’ah* in *Shemoneh Esrei*, which has “*Modim anachnu – We thank*”.

Second, note that Mar berei deRavina is described as saying this

¹ Berachos 17a

“*ki hava mesayeim tzelosa – when he finished his tefillah.*” *Elokai Netzor* was coined to be after *Shemoneh Esrei*, not part of it. This is why many say “*Yihyu leratzon – May the speech of my mouth be desirable*” before *Elokai Netzor*, rather than including it in the request.

The Vilna Gaon links these two observations. The mishnah states in the name of Rabbi Eliezer, “Whoever makes his *tefillah* fixed did not make his *tefillah* into *tachanunim*.”² The Gemara³ offers a number of opinions as to what is “fixed” in this context: that he

² Ibid 28b

³ Ibid 29b

considers his prayer a burden; that the language be one of pleading; that he adds nothing personal to the text of the siddur; or that he davens according to a fixed clock rather than doing do according to the motion of the sun.

All in all, the Vilna Gaon notes, the common theme is that all of these objections have something in common – they depersonalize the prayer. In order for prayer to be *tachanunim*, it must be personal, to speak to what the person needs to express to his Father in Heaven.

In contrast, the Gaon, as well as R’ Joseph B. Soloveitchik ז”ל and Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch see *tefillah* to be a basically reflective exercise. The verb form usually

used is the reflexive, *hispa'el*, conjugation; we say "*lehispalel*". *Tefillah* is taking the words of *Anshei Kenesses HaGedolah* and others, who better understood the appropriate relationship with Hashem than we do, and impressing them on ourselves. It is teaching oneself what ought to be one's priorities, how one ought to relate to our Creator.

Tefillah can cause Hashem to grant someone his needs because through *tefillah* one becomes the kind of person who ought to have those things granted. *Tachanunim*, however, is an expression of where one currently stands.

The appropriate placement for *tachanunim* is immediately after *Shemoneh Esrei*, the core of our *tefillah*.⁴ As it says in the Gemara immediately before the discussion of "*tefillas keva*", someone who forgot to say "*ya'aleh veyavo*" on *Rosh Chodesh*, finished *Shemoneh Esrei* and parted his feet must repeat *Shemoneh Esrei* from the beginning. However, if he usually follows *Shemoneh Esrei* with *tachanunim*, he goes back to "*Retzei*".

The Vilna Gaon proves from this that the list of prayers said after *Shemoneh Esrei*, of which Mar berei deRavina's is one, were *tachanunim*. This is why it was written in the singular. *Tefillah* must perforce always include the notion that one is praying as part of the Jewish people. *Tachanunim* can be an expression of a more individual need (but does not have to be).

An ideal prayer is one that conforms to both archetypes; one that is both *tefillah* and *tachanunim*.

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⁴ This is also the reason for the placement of *tachanun*

In Even Sheleimah, the Vilna Gaon gives the following explanation of the first six phrases of *Elokai Netzor*⁵:

*The sum of all evil middos are ka'as*⁶ [anger], *ta'avah* [desire], and *ga'avah*⁷ [egotism], which are "jealousy, desire and honor"⁸ [named in *Avos* as the three things which "remove one from the world"]. Each includes two [subtypes]. Of *ka'as*: *ra* and *mirma*. *Ra* is revealed, and *mirma* is "one thing verbally, and a [different] thing in the heart" [i.e. duplicity].^{9,10} *Ta'avah*: *ta'avah* and *chemdah*: *Ta'avah* is [desire for] the pleasure of the body itself, such as eating, drinking, and the like. And *chemdah* is like [that for] silver/money, gold, clothing and houses. In *ga'avah* [the two subtypes are] *gei'ah* and *ga'on*. *Gei'ah* is in the heart and *ga'on* is the desire to rule over others.

All this is included in the prayer of "*Elokai netzor leshoni meira usfasai midabeir mirmah* [- My G-d, stop my tongue from *ra*, and my lips from speaking *mirmah*]."¹¹ "*Velimkalilai nafshi sidom* [- may my soul be silent toward those who curse me]" is against *ga'avah*. "*Venafshi ke'afar lakol tihyeh* [- and my soul be like dust to all]" is against *ga'on*. "*Pesach libi be-Sorasecha* [- Open my heart with Your Torah]" is the opposite of *ta'avah*, which wants to sit in his home in tranquility to fulfill his *ta'avos*, and also for Torah he needs to sit in tranquility. And they say in the *midrash*¹², "Until the person prays for words of Torah that they should enter his innards, he should

⁵ 2:1, footnotes in the original

⁶ Nedarim 22a, 22b; Pesachim 66b, 113b

⁷ Sotah 4b, 5a; Sanhedrin 98a; Avos 4:2

⁸ Avos 4:21

⁹ Mishlei 4:24

¹⁰ Pesachim 113b; Bava Metziah 49b

¹¹ Berachos 17a

¹² Yalkut Shim'oni 830

be pray that food and drink shouldn't enter his innards." "*Uvmitzvosecha tirdof nafshi* [- and may my soul chase after Your mitzvos]" is the opposite of people of *chemdah*, because it is their way to constantly run ahead, "for a person does not die with [even] half his *ta'avah* in hand."^{13,14}

There are three basic forces of the *yetzer hara*: anger, desire and egotism. Each of the three can be expressed outright or left inside simmering, to express itself more subtly. One can be angry and act out against another. Or one can hold the anger in and pretend all is okay, immersing oneself in dishonesty. One can chase after the desires of the body. Or, one can suppress those desires, channeling that force into the means to obtain them without ever achieving satisfaction. One can lord over others, or one can simply think oneself superior.

Elokai Netzor gives us a moment to look at these destructive forces within ourselves and ask Hashem for help overcoming them.

¹³ Koheles Raba 1:13

¹⁴ C.f. Be'ur haGr"a Mishlei 1:11; 2:12; 4:24; 7:5; 12:25; 23:27; 24:11; 30:10

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