

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd after all the service-age men finished dying from amongst the people,” and the only ones left were those that would be able to enter the Land of Israel, then, “and G-d spoke to me (Moshe)” (Devarim 2:16-17). “However, between the sending of the scouts until now it doesn’t say ‘and He spoke’ (“vayedaber”) but ‘and He said’ (“vayomer”), in order to teach you that for the entire 38 years that the Children of Israel were rebuked (i.e. unable to enter the land because of those that were part of the sin of the scouts), the word (of G-d) did not come to him (Moshe) in a form of cherishment, face-to-face, with peace of mind” (Rashi). In other words, because it says “vayedaber” instead of “vayomer,” saying that G-d “spoke” to Moshe rather than “said” to Moshe, we know that only now did Moshe’s relationship (at least as it manifested itself in the way G-d communicated to him) return to the level attained at Mt. Sinai (and maintained until the nation sinned).

The commentators ask how “speaking” can indicate a closer relationship than “saying,” since Rashi elsewhere (e.g. Shemos 32:7, Vayikra 10:19, Bamidbar 12:1) tells us that “spoke” is much harsher than “said,” indicating less closeness! Another question that is raised is how it could be said that G-d didn’t “speak” to Moshe for those 38 years, when there are numerous times (e.g. Bamidbar 16:20, 17:1, 17:09, 17:16, 18:25) that the Torah says that G-d did in fact “speak” to him (not just “say” things to him), including immediately after the incident of the scouts (Bamidbar 14:26, 15:1, 15:17)! A third question that could be asked is based on the way the Talmud (Ta’anis 30b) describes this same lesson. “Until those that died in the desert had finished (dying) there was no [communication in the form of] ‘dibur’ (speech) [from G-d] with Moshe, as it says, ‘And after all the service-age men finished dying, and G-d spoke to me;’ [Moshe was saying] ‘the [communication in the form of] ‘dibur’ was with me.’” The implication is that Moshe’s indicating that G-d communicated “with him” is what teaches us that the communication improved. How can the Talmud imply that the word “with me” indicates such when throughout the Parasha (e.g. Devarim 1:42, 2:2, 2:9) Moshe related that “G-d said to me,” using the same “to me” that the Talmud seems to use to show that Moshe’s communication

improved only after the generation of the scouts died out.

It therefore seems that the main impetus for learning that Moshe’s relationship with Hashem improved at this time was the *change* from “said” to “spoke.” Until this point, when Moshe is recapping what had transpired in the desert, Moshe uses the expression “and G-d said to me.” Even afterwards (Devarim 2:31), when the relationship has already been restored, Moshe says “and G-d said to me.” It is only in this one place that Moshe changes it to “and G-d spoke to me,” indicating that a change in the form of communication occurred after the generation had died out. Our original question now changes from how “spoke” indicates a closer relationship than “said” to why, if a change in verbs is being employed to indicate a change in the communication, was “spoke” used when the relationship improved, if “spoke” is a harsher expression than “said.” Shouldn’t Moshe have said that G-d “spoke” with him all along, and changed it to the softer “said” when the relationship improved?

The Aruch La-ner (Makos 11a) says that “spoke” is not a harsher form of communication than “said,” just a stronger one. Often times, such as during a rebuke, the stronger form of communication is employed. Nevertheless, the implication of “spoke” is not necessarily one of being more “in your face,” although it may be more direct. It is therefore fitting that the term used to indicate a stronger, more direct communication between G-d and Moshe is “spoke” rather than “said.” It is also appropriate to use the term even for communication that was not at the high level Moshe attained at Sinai, as long as the intent is to imply a stronger form of communication than something being “said.”

We find this in numerous instances, such as when Avraham “spoke” to the Hitites about acquiring a grave for Sara (Beraishis 23:3) and then to Efron about it (23:13). Avraham certainly didn’t have a close relationship with Efron (who was trying to rip him off), nor was he trying to be adversarial (since he wanted Efron to agree to sell him the property). It was because Avraham wanted to indicate his strong desire to acquire this particular property that he “spoke” with them rather than just “saying” it to them.

It is therefore not contradictory that the Torah tells us that G-d “spoke” to Moshe so many times during those 38 years, as they were all strong forms of

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communications, even if they weren't the strongest. It is only because of the change of terms within Moshe's narrative that "speaking" indicates a return to the strongest form of communication, not because "speaking" itself indicates such. The Talmud isn't focusing on Moshe saying that G-d spoke "to him" when it adds "G-d spoke with me," but that the difference in the communication reflected on G-d's relationship with him, just as His having only "said" things "to him" previously indicated something lacking in their relationship.

Had Moshe not changed the verbs used to describe the communication, we may not have noticed that there was a change in the form of communication. Once the change was made, the verb indicating a stronger communication had to be the one used where the communication became stronger, indicating a return to the close relation that Moshe had with G-d.

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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The last book of the Chumash differs in tone and content than the previous books of the Chumash.

Most of the book concerns itself with the final oration of Moshe. This oration is a combination of history and prophecy. Moshe reviews for Israel, especially for the new younger generation that did not live through the Egyptian experience of slavery and deliverance, the telling of the story is particularly necessary in order to place into context their own personal lives and the campaign to conquer the Land of Israel on which they are about to embark. But Moshe speaks not only to that generation. He peers down the long corridor of Jewish history and speaks to us as well.

He warns of the difficulties that settling the Land of Israel will bring to the Jewish people. He negates the idea that adopting the local culture, becoming part of the Middle East, will bring any peace, security or spiritual gain to the Jewish people. He senses that Israel will stray from the path of Torah to find for itself strange, new G-ds, attractive to the eye and politically correct to the mind. He thus accurately predicts that Israel will not be able to survive interminably as a national entity in the Land of Israel

because of its rejection of Torah and its holy value system.

In Moshe's words and tone, exile, dispersion and Jewish wandering become almost a foregone conclusion. Moshe's warnings were not enough to forestall the eventual collapse of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in First Temple times and of Judea in the Second Temple era. The predicted disasters occurred just as he predicted that they would.

But Moshe is not ready to give up on the Jewish people. And apparently neither is G-d, so to speak. Eventually, the Jewish people will come to their senses and forsake all of the foreign ideologies and cultures that have so badly served them. Moshe sees to "the end of days" when Israel is oppressed, isolated and in great difficulty, that there will be a process of return that will take place. There will be a return to the Land of Israel, a return to the G-d of Israel and the observance of His Torah, and a return to its own vision, values and destiny.

It is not clear whether this process of return is meant to be instantaneous or will take place gradually over time and generations. But Moshe assures us that this process of return is certain and that the entire lesson of the book of Dvarim is that this panorama of Jewish history is part of G-d's will, so to speak, for Israel and the world.

Because of the importance of this subject matter and its relevance to our generation and times particularly, it behooves us to listen intently and concentrate on the words of Dvarim. As Moshe himself states in Dvarim "for it is no empty matter" this process of Jewish history and eventual return. The Torah comments upon our current situation. We will do well to hearken to its words and message during the coming weeks when Dvarim is read in the synagogue. © 2006 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.

RABBI LEVI COOPER

Finding Meaning in Suffering

Tisha Be'av - which this year falls on Wednesday night-Thursday - is the established day for commemorating the calamities that have befallen our people. The Mishna details five tragedies that occurred on this day (M. Ta'anit 4:6).

After the giving of the Torah, spies were sent to Canaan to see the Promised Land. They returned with a harsh account and the Jewish people wept in response to that report. G-d then decreed that they would wander in the desert and that all adult males of that generation would not merit entering the Land of

Israel. That decree was handed down on the ninth of Av, 1312 BCE (B. Ta'anit 29a).

Second, many years later the First Temple was destroyed. Though one verse indicates that the destruction occurred on the seventh of Av (II Kings 25:8-9) and another cites the 10th of Av (Jeremiah 52:12), rabbinic tradition reconciles the conflicting accounts: On the seventh of Av the sanctuary was breached and the heathens performed depraved acts there on that day and on the following day. On the ninth of Av in the afternoon they set fire to the Temple and it burned throughout the 10th. The ninth was designated by the sages as the day of commemoration since the start of a catastrophe - namely the lighting of the fire - is more significant than its unfolding.

Rabbinic tradition adds the third tragedy that transpired - the Second Temple was also destroyed on the ninth of Av, 70 CE, as the sages explain: "good things are brought to pass on an auspicious day, and bad things on an ominous day".

Over half a century after the destruction of the Second Temple, the great city of Betar was destroyed and all its inhabitants were slaughtered on the ninth of Av. Elsewhere in the Talmud, we have graphic descriptions of the blood from the massacred men, women and children flowing from Betar, south of Jerusalem, all the way to the Mediterranean (B. Gittin 57a).

The fifth blow on the ninth of Av occurred when the Roman general, Turanus Rufus, plowed over the site of the Second Temple and its environs. Jerusalem was subsequently rebuilt as a pagan city known as Aelia Capitolina, and access for Jews was prohibited.

This ill-omened date reverberated later in our history. In 1095, Pope Urban II proclaimed the beginning of the first Crusade, and in 1290 Jews were expelled from England on this day. The expulsion of the Jews from Spain was originally set for the end of July 1942. A two-day extension meant that the ninth of Av was the last day that a Jew was allowed on Spanish soil. The Nazis cynically began the deportations from the Warsaw ghetto to the Treblinka death camp on the ninth of Av, 1942. Most recently, in 1994, terrorists bombed the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, Argentina, killing 86 people and wounding some 300 others.

On an international scale, the ninth of Av has also been an unfortunate day. On the eve of the ninth of Av, 1914, Germany declared war on Russia, thus beginning World War I, and more recently in 1989 Iraq walked out of talks with Kuwait, leading up to the first Gulf War.

How are we to relate to events such as these that are filled with physical, emotional and spiritual pain? Our rabbinic tradition deals extensively with this general question. In one collection of rabbinic statements unconnected to the ninth of Av, we

encounter the sages trying to give meaning to suffering (B. Berachot 5a-b).

Thus one sage tells us that three good gifts were given by G-d to Israel, all of them given through suffering: Torah, the Land of Israel and the World to Come. The suggestion here is that these valuable assets can only be attained through pain.

At different times in our lives we all deal with hardship. One person's suffering may objectively pale in contrast with another's anguish. Subjectively, though, when we are faced with difficulties, any comparison is empty as it is our current plight that we must face.

Elsewhere in rabbinic literature, we have recognition of the universality of distress: "There is no person in the world who does not suffer hardship. If he is worried about his tooth, he cannot sleep. If he is worried about his eye, he cannot sleep. If he wearies himself in Torah, he cannot sleep. This one and this one are both awake."

The passage concludes: "Fortunate is the person whose troubles are wrought through Torah," implying that since we will all have sleepless nights we may as well lose sleep over something of enduring worth (Tanhuma, Miketz 16; Yalkut Shimoni, Tehillim 850).

Hard times befall us all, albeit to differing extents. The challenge is, how do we respond to such difficulties. Are we able to find meaning in the trials that stand before us? How do we respond to such hard times? How do we frame our experiences?

Undoubtedly this is a gargantuan task. The Talmud relates that once Rabbi Hiya bar Abba was ill and Rabbi Yohanan went to visit him. Rabbi Yohanan queried: "Are these afflictions dear to you?" He was perhaps asking whether he was framing them in meaningful terms. Rabbi Hiya bar Abba responded: "Neither they nor their reward!" indicating that he was unable to find value in his suffering, and was willing to forgo the opportunity for reward as long as the pain would cease. Rabbi Yohanan turned to him and said: "Give me your hand." Rabbi Hiya bar Abba gave Rabbi Yohanan his hand, and the latter revived him.

The famed hassidic leader, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev (c. 1740-1810), sometimes referred to as the Defender of Israel, was often willing to make demands of the Almighty on behalf of the Jewish people. On the ninth of Av, he perchanced upon a fellow Jew not observing the day in an appropriate manner. Instead of reading the Scroll of Eicha and the Kinnot, instead of crying over the fragmentation of Jewish society and the loss of Jewish sovereignty, this Jew was oiling the wheels of his wagon. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak looked up to the Heavens and cried: "Master of the Universe! If Your children cannot keep this day of memorial appropriately, take it away from them!"

May we have the strength to internalize the ninth of Av with all its meaning; and if we do not

succeed, may we merit that our hardships - as individuals and as a nation - are taken from us. © 2006 Rabbi L Cooper. Rabbi Levi Cooper is Director of Advanced Programs at Pardes. His column appears weekly in the Jerusalem Post "Upfront" Magazine. Each column analyses a passage from the first tractate, of the Talmud, Brachot, citing classic commentators and adding an innovative perspective to these timeless texts.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

There is a Talmudic story that reveals a lot about how we should react when facing adversity. It is one that is obviously an appropriate one to focus upon just days before Tisha B'Av, the 9th of Av, when both Temples were destroyed in Jerusalem.

The story goes as follows: Rabbi Yossi said: "Once I was traveling on the road and entered one of the ruins of Jerusalem to pray." Elijah appeared and said, "My son, why did you go into the ruin." Rabbi Yossi responded, "To pray." Elijah then said to Rabbi Yossi, "You should have prayed on the road." Rabbi Yossi answered, "I feared that a passerby would interrupt me." To which Elijah said, "You could have then said a short prayer."

Rabbi Yossi concluded that he learnt several principles from the words of Elijah. First, it is important not to enter a ruin. Second, it is permissible to pray on the road, as long as the prayer is short. (Berachot 3a)

What is the message that underlies these principles? Rabbi Shlomo Riskin argues that it's important to recognize that Rabbi Yossi was a sage who was suffering, living as he did in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple. The prophet tells us that Elijah will announce the coming of the Messiah. Elijah is therefore known as the teacher, par excellence, of how to achieve redemption. Thus, Rabbi Yossi states, "I have learned from Elijah important ideas concerning how to turn destruction into rebuilding, galut into ge'ulah, exile into redemption."

It is first of all important not to enter into rooms that represent tragedy and not to get side tracked by wallowing in disaster. Elijah was teaching Rabbi Yossi to stay on the road, to stay the course of human action and effort to repair the Jewish people, an act through which the whole world will be repaired.

But Elijah also taught a second message. He was teaching that on that road to redemption, it is important to pray. But the prayer itself should be short in order to make time for investing incredible amounts of energy into human activity and initiative.

Life requires a combination of action and prayer. History is a partnership between human endeavor and divine intervention.

A story is told of Rabbi Isaac Blazer, Reb Itzele Petersburger. One day, a rumor spread that he was a Zionist. The community decided that he would be fired.

After all, in the prayers we speak of G-d as the builder of Jerusalem. Yet, Reb Itzele was declaring that he would do his share in building Jerusalem himself. Reb Itzele turned to one of the leaders of the community and responded, "But when your daughter was sick, did you not seek out a doctor, even though G-d is spoken of in the prayers as the healer of Israel?" And turning to another, Reb Itzele said, "don't you do all you can to make a living, even though in our prayers we speak of G-d as the provider of sustenance?" If health and sustenance is a combined effort of human beings and G-d, so too in Zionism, prayer must work hand in hand with action.

When one acts, one must act as if everything depends on us and when one prays, our must pray as if everything depends on G-d. We must live a life where we honor both sides of these two seemingly contradictory directives - action and prayer.

As we prepare our prayers for Tisha B'Av we must make them ones of meaning and concentration, yet realize that full service of G-d is incomplete without action on the part of each and every one of us. © 2006 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

This week we begin the fifth book of the Five Books of Moses (Pentateuch), generally referred to by our Biblical Commentaries as Mishneh Torah, or a second rendition of our Sacred Torah (See the Ramban's introduction to this Book). The fifteenth century philosopher and Biblical commentator Don Isaac Abarbanel explains it as Moses commentary to the prior three books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, which deal with our freedom from Egyptian enslavement, the desert experience and the many laws which G-d gave the Israelites during this momentous forty-year period.

Our Sages, however, have simply called this book Devarim, or Words, and indeed it contains the farewell speech, which was Moses final legacy to the Israelites. It is almost ironic that Moses - who, when he was attempting to decline the position of leadership offered to him by G-d, described himself as "not being a man of words" - now takes his leave of this world and his vocation within it with the longest farewell speech in history, his words encompassing thirty-four Biblical chapters. Perhaps this was because he really did not wish to be retired at all!

The very appellation Devarim or Words for a Biblical book appears to deny the validity of a popular children's jingle, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words (or names) can never harm me;" it rather corroborates the Yiddish aphorism, "A slap goes

away, but a word continues to stay" ("a patsch dergeyt, a vort bashteyt"). Indeed, I would argue that words play a crucial role in our tradition making a decisive contribution in the three areas of establishing new realities, of cementing obligations and relationships and of reaching out into eternity.

Let us begin with the simple Hebrew linguistic fact that *davar* can mean both word and object - in no small measure because a spoken word often leads the most impressive objects and activities. The Hebrew word *dabar* is a leader, who has the ability to move people to the most positively creative or negatively destructive acts by force of his rhetoric and oratory; witness Winston Churchill on the one hand and Hitler on the other. Hence the last chapter of our Ethics of the Ancestors (*Mishnah Avot*) opens with the declaration: "By means of ten statements of words did the Almighty create the world." There are two separate Talmudic tractates, *Nedarim* (Promises) and *Shavuot* (Oaths), which teach us how words can create new realities and can alter one's life to an amazing degree; an oath to stop talking to a specific individual or not to eat meat products or to exercise every morning can certainly dramatically change one's daily regimen.

Every parent can well understand the difference between calling a child a good person or chiding a child for having committed an improper action, between casting a child as stupid or constantly praising a child for his every academic advancement. Parental words often become self-fulfilling prophecies. And when our Sages teach us that "life and death reside in the word"(or tongue), journalists reinforce that message every day that we read a slanderous allegation about one of our supposed leaders.

Secondly, words establish or destroy relationships and obligations. Even if the words "I love you" have unfortunately lost their significance in most places of western culture, the verbal formula "You are sanctified unto me with this ring in accordance with the laws of Moses and of Israel" (in front of two valid witnesses) creates a marriage between two individuals with all that such a relationship implies. The declaration of the Israelites at Sinai "We shall do and we shall obey" conveniently obligated at least that generation to uphold the Divine law, and many of our Sages maintain that those words obligated their future descendants as well. And words such as "forgive us for we have sinned" brings exoneration for sins against G-d on Yom Kippur as well as during the year, and for sins against one's fellow human being when expressed directly and sincerely to the individual we have wronged. Such words of admission of guilt may well recreate the individual entirely.

And finally, words - and the ideas and ideals, which they embody - reach out into eternity, because - unlike material structures and even Holy Temples - they cannot be physically destroyed. The great pyramids of

Egypt have ceased influencing even today's Egyptians, whereas the Ten Words of our Decalogue continue to inspire the entire free world.

Maimonides teaches that the sanctity of Jerusalem is an eternal sanctity, because it is the sanctity of the Divine Presence, and the Divine Presence can never be destroyed (*Laws of the Chosen House*, 6, 16). Now Maimonides certainly cannot mean that the Divine Persona cannot be destroyed, because that famed philosopher insisted that the Divine has neither personal nor physical presence (see his 13 articles of Faith). He can only mean that the Divine words which will emanate from Jerusalem (*devar HaShem Mi Yerushalayim*) can never be destroyed, the words which teach how we must "turn our swords and plough-shares and our spears into pruning - hooks, and not learn war any more" (*Isaiah 2, Micha 4*). And these swords are not only eternal; they are the gateway of the free world into the future, because without their being put into practice there will be no future world. © 2006 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI MORDECHAI WOLLENBERG

Weekly Thoughts

A lady who overheard two ladies in the local supermarket lamenting the behavior of a certain teenage girl. As the lady overheard more and more of the conversation, she became increasingly irritated by the bad behavior she was hearing about and found herself wondering what kind of parents could be so bad and irresponsible as to allow the situation she was hearing about continue. Subsequently, one of the ladies mentioned the name of the girl in question and she realized, to her horror, that they were discussing her own daughter! Of course at that point, she realized how differently she would have judged the situation had she known. After all, when it comes to ourselves and 'our own' we always see things differently!

The very first verse of this week's Parsha tells us that "These are the words which Moshe spoke to all of Israel..." The Torah then relates how Moshe (in a very subtle and non-offensive manner) reminded the Jewish people of their various failings throughout the years in the desert. The Torah specifically relates that he spoke of these failings "to all of Israel". When Moshe spoke to G-d, however, he related only the positive traits and virtues of the Jewish people. He argued on their behalf, no matter what they did wrong. He always sought to justify their actions, however difficult it was to do so.

We can learn a lot about good middos (character traits) from these events. Often we find ourselves in a situation of hearing something about somebody else and being in a position to say something that might change things for the better. However it is all too easy to remain silent. Moshe teaches us that this is not so. If absolutely necessary,

we may find an appropriate moment to mention something that we feel needs attention to a close friend or acquaintance. This only applies to our relationship with that person and to our private communications with that person. When speaking to others about that person, or hearing that person discussed by others, we must always seek to be 'melamed zechus', to give the benefit of the doubt, to advocate on their behalf however unlikely the scenario. Taking this one step further, the ideal would be for us to advocate on that person's behalf in our own mind and not just with other people. Just as I will always have a good excuse and justification when it comes to my own actions and inadequacies, if I truly cherish and respect my colleague, I will apply the same generosity when it comes to their apparent failings.

Chassidic tradition takes this idea even further and teaches that when it comes to myself I should be very critical, always looking to improve my behavior and never being satisfied with weak excuses. When it comes to somebody else, I should go to the opposite extreme and seek to ascribe positive motives or good justifications to their actions, however far-fetched this may seem.

As mentioned previously, we are in a time of the Jewish calendar which mourns the destruction of the Second Temple as a result of 'baseless hatred'. The only antidote to baseless hatred is unconditional love. A good start is to be "melamed zechus" on others, to give them the benefit of the doubt and to always judge favorably.

May all of us find favor with each other and with G-d and may we merit peace and harmony in our days.
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RABBI MORDECHAI KAMINETZKY

Unquestioned Answers

Recently, the expression that Jews traditionally wished each other before the start of the Tisha B'Av fast was replaced by what one might call a more evocative one. What was once "have an easy fast" has been transformed into "have a meaningful fast." While "easy" or "meaningful" are not necessarily contradictory, nevertheless, in order to make any fast meaningful, we first must understand why we are fasting. And in order to understand why we are fasting, we must think. A good place to begin is a verse in Eicha, the Book of Lamentations, composed by the prophet Yirmiyahu as he watched the Temple, and the society of his times, erode and crumble, and the Jewish people go into exile.

Despite suffering a terrible fate, seeing his leaders, his beloved people, and his cherished Temple all destroyed, he tells the nation: "Of what shall a living man complain? A strong man for his sins! Let us search and examine our ways, and return to Hashem" (Lamentations 3:39-40).

The prophet's question, "Of what shall a living man complain?" is difficult to understand. People always complain. Didn't Yirmiyahu experience enough to complain about? Also why does Yirmiyahu ask about a living man? Dead men don't tell tales, and they don't complain either. So why the extra word?

Perhaps the second question answers the first, and the second verse emphasizes the answer.

The Chasam Sofer once met a very old man and asked him the secret of his longevity.

"I know that long life is a gift," the great sage said. "Tell me, what exemplary act did you do that merited you these long years?" The old man looked up and smiled. "Actually, I did nothing special. You see I have a different theory about long life. I stuck to my theory, and it worked for me."

"And what is that theory?" the great sage inquired.

The old man wrinkled his deeply lined face. "Like myself, all my friends went through their share of tzorus and misfortunes. We all do. They are, however, not here any longer. I am."

"But why?" prodded the Chasam Sofer. "That was exactly my question. What is the secret of your longevity? Yes! We all have our tzorus. But they didn't break you! You are still alive and in very good health. What is the difference between you and your friends?"

"You see," answered the old man., "my friends asked 'Why?' I, however, did not."

The Chasam Sofer seemed puzzled, but the man continued his monologue. "You see, every time tragedy struck, my friends would ask the Almighty, why did this happen? How did I come to deserve this? They would plead and prod the Creator for answers that no mortal mind could understand. And you know what happened?"

The Chasam Sofer shook his head, careful not to interrupt the man's train of thought.

"Hashem said, 'Do you really want to understand? Come, I will show you.' And so He took them to a place where all the mysteries of life are revealed, a place where the past and the future collide and today's actions are the answers to history's expostulations."

The man continued. "I, on the other, hand, was not so curious. And if I was, I did not turn to Hashem and ask, 'Why?' Rather, I accepted what happened."

Then the man's face began to glow. "And do you know what? He never invited me upstairs to explain anything!"

Perhaps the essence of our annual mourning service can be summed up with Yirmiyahu's word's that analyze a mortal approach to immortal justice. "Of what shall a living man complain? A strong man for his sins! Let us search and examine our ways, and return to Hashem."

We may have questions, but such questions do not require us to obsess about finding new answers. Instead, the only answer we can have is to search our own souls with introspection and return to Hashem.

In truth, we are not put in this world to demand answers. We are here to improve ourselves and ultimately, the world. And we are here to understand when to turn to our own lives for answers, instead of to the Almighty with questions, so that we may survive the tragedies with both faith and life intact.

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MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

In Moshe's description of the war with Sichon, as part of his sermon in this week's Torah portion, Moshe describes something new which was not noted in the book of Bamidbar. According to Moshe, the Almighty said to him, "Look how I have given over to you Sichon, King of Cheshbon, the Emorite, and his land. Begin to take possession, and challenge him to war." [Devarim 2:24]. But this presents a big problem in understanding the way the rest of the story develops. If the war with Sichon followed a direct command by G-d, how could Moshe propose peace with him, as he describes? "And I sent messengers from the Kedemot Desert to Sichon, King of Cheshbon, with words of peace, saying: Let me pass through your land, I will take the main road, I will not turn to the right or to the left. You will provide food for me in return for money and I will eat it, and you will give me water in return for money and I will drink. Just let me pass through on foot." [2:26-28]. This implies that if Sichon had agreed to Moshe's request Yisrael would not have taken possession of his land but rather would have continued to Eretz Yisrael. But this is against an explicit command by G-d, "Begin to take possession..."

Rashi explains that when Moshe sent his message to Sichon he knew very well that he would be refused, and he sent the messengers in order to show that the proper way to begin is by offering peace. Ramban rejects this, since there is no point in sending a messenger when the outcome is known in advance. He therefore explains that G-d's command was given after Moshe sent the messengers and the offer was refused. But this is also difficult to accept, since in the Torah G-d's command appears before Moshe sends the messengers, and there is no hint that the events are not described in their proper sequence. The simplest way to interpret the passage is that G-d's command was given before Moshe sent his message, in line with Rashi's approach, and that Moshe did not know in advance what the answer would be, as Ramban wrote. But this then brings us back to the

original question: How could Moshe do something against a direct command by G-d?

Perhaps the Torah presented the situation in this way on purpose, in order to teach us about the complex status of the "other side" of the Jordan River. At first it seemed that this side, on the eastern bank of the river, was not meant to be part of the heritage of Yisrael, since the Land of Canaan, the promised land, is on the western side of the Jordan. For this reason, of course, Moshe asked when he was standing on the eastern side to cross over to the west and see the land, and the Almighty refused his request. "You will see the land from far away and you will not go there" [32:52]. On the other hand, there is no obstacle in principle to adding the land of Sichon to the heritage of Canaan, since the only people to whom G-d granted a heritage on the eastern side of the Jordan were Amon and Moav, the children of Lot.

Thus, when the Almighty first told Moshe to take possession of Sichon's land, he understood that this was a suggestion and not a definite command. And, because of his love of peace, Moshe first turned to Sichon, leaving him an option to keep his land. In his evil way, Sichon rejected the offer of peace and started a war, which led to the total destruction of his nation and his land. And after Sichon's rejection of Moshe's offer, G-d once again said to Moshe: "See that I have begun to give you Sichon and his land, begin to take possession of his land" [2:31]. This time there is no room for any misunderstanding. In summary, it was Sichon's evil nature that led to the addition of his land within the boundaries of Eretz Yisrael and to provide land for two and a half tribes.

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftarah

This week's haftarah concludes the three week series related to the exile of the Jewish people and the destruction of their Bais Hamikdash. This final reading goes down on record as the strongest message of reprimand ever delivered to the Jewish people. The prophet Yeshaya depicts the moral conduct of the Jews as being the most corrupt and wicked one since the days of Sedom and Gemorah. He declares the Jews to be even worse than animals, and says in the name of Hashem, "The ox knows his master and the donkey his owner's feeding tray but My nation doesn't know and doesn't even consider Me. Woe guilty people, heavy with sin, evil and corrupt children who forsook Hashem and disgraced Israel's Holy One." (1:3,4) Yeshaya continues with more harsh words of chastisement, and says, "Why should you continue to be beaten if you just increase your straying? From head to toe there is no clear spot, only stabs, bruises and open wounds. But you have not treated them, not bandaged them or even softened them." (1:5,6) The prophet indicates that after all the beatings they have

received the Jewish people haven't even made an attempt to rectify their faults.

Yeshaya then concentrated on the Jewish service in the Bais Hamikdash and attacked them even on that account. He expressed that Hashem was displeased with their sacrifices and lacked interest in their service. Hashem says, "When you come to see Me who asked you to trample on My courtyard? Don't continue bringing useless offerings; your incense is disgusting to Me. I cannot tolerate your gatherings on Shabbos and Rosh Chodesh, and I despise your festivals and celebrations; they're too much bother for Me." (1:12,13) The Jewish people were going through the motions of Judaism but lacked any level of sincerity. They assembled in the Bais Hamikdash during the holiday seasons but did not dedicate their efforts to Hashem, rather to themselves. Even their prayers, their direct line to Hashem, were being rejected. Yeshaya said in the name of Hashem, "When you stretch out your hands in supplication I will ignore you; even when you increase your prayers I won't listen because your hands are full of blood." (1:15) These last words refer to the increasing number of murders and crimes that were taking place amongst the Jewish people, even in the Bais Hamikdash proper. Yeshaya said that Hashem had literally closed the door on His people and was not interested in seeing or hearing from them anymore.

Suddenly, we discover a complete change of nature and the prophet extends the Jewish people an open invitation. Hashem says, "Please go and reconcile; if your sins are likened to scarlet they will be whitened like snow and if they are like deep red crimson they will be like white wool. If you consent and listen then you will eat the goodness of the land." (1:18,19) This seems to indicate a total reversal of direction. Moments earlier, the prophet proclaimed that Hashem had absolutely no interest in His people and despised their trampling on His property. Hashem was so angry and disgusted with them that He severed all lines of communication. And now, one passage later Hashem was prepared to brighten and whiten the Jewish people to the extent of glistening snowflakes?!

The answer to this perplexing message is found in the insightful words of Chazal in explanation of a profound statement of the Jewish people in Shir Hashirim. Shlomo Hamelech presents the feelings of the Jewish people during their last moments before their bitter exile from their homeland. They describe themselves in the following succinct manner, "I am asleep but my heart is awake." (Shir Hashirim 5:2) Rashi (ad loc.) quotes the words of Chazal in the Pesikta which explain the Jewish people's message. The Jews stated that although they fell into a deep slumber and basically abandoned Hashem's service, Hashem, the heart of the Jewish people, will always

remain awake. The inner contact between Hashem and the Jewish heart can never become disconnected.

The Jewish people's message to Hashem was that He overlook their atrocities and focus on their inner essence. Even if the external expression of the Jewish people displays total disinterest in Hashem the internal bond between Hashem and His people will always remain. Buried beneath the many thick layers of indifference which coat the heart is a pure and sincere feeling for their true beloved father, Hashem. True, their actions do not display any semblance of interest in Hashem, however the fact remains that the Jewish heart can always be motivated. Hashem can always reach the bottom of their hearts and reengage them in His perfect service.

We now understand the sudden change of nature in this week's haftorah. The behavior of the Jewish people was truly abhorrent but this only represented the external layers of their heart. When addressing their actions Hashem stated in the most harsh terms that He had no interest in His people. However there always remains an inner dimension to the Jewish people, the faint call from within them to return to their true source of existence, Hashem. When addressing this inner essence Hashem is always prepared to motivate His people and even invites them to be cleansed and glisten like snowflakes.

This is the hidden secret of the Jewish people's eternal existence. From the vantage point of their actions, the Jews, at times, fall into a deep coma developing the most inconceivable immoral behavior. They do not demonstrate any inner interest to be with Hashem or any sincerity to serve Him. But Hashem, the heart and pulse of the Jewish nation remains connected to His people. His love for them is so boundless that He never gives up on them. And so, when their actions are totally corrupt He addresses that inner dimension of theirs. He beckons them to reconcile their ways and informs them that He is prepared to do virtually anything for them. If they do return He will cleanse them and even brighten them like glistening snowflakes. This remarkable dialogue reinforces the fact that Hashem always cares about us and is forever awaiting our return. He constantly yearns for that glorious moment when all of His people will reflect the name of our month, Av, and proclaim, "You are our (Av) father and we are Your sons!" May this day come speedily in our times. © 1998 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

