

Parshas Va'eschanan

Presented By Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky Shlita, Dean

1. The Limitation of Man's Understanding

The Torah tells us that Moshe pleaded with Hashem to allow him to cross the Jordan and enter into the Land of Israel; however, Hashem rejected Moshe's request. The Torah states that Moshe spoke to the Jewish people saying, "**But Hashem became angry with me because of you, and He did not listen to me; Hashem said to me, 'It is too much for you! (*rav lach*) Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter.'**" Rashi explains the words "*rav lach*" (It is too much for you) to mean that Hashem wanted Moshe to cease beseeching Him to enter into the Land because it would reflect negatively on Hashem. Hashem did not want the people to say that the Master is inflexible and without compassion for His student (Moshe).

In the Portion of Devarim, Moshe recounts the incident of the meraglim (the spies). He says that when Hashem told the generation of the spies that they would not enter into the Land of Israel, "**They retreated and wept before Hashem, but Hashem did not listen to your voice and He did not hearken to you.**" Rashi cites the Midrash (Tanchuma) which explains that Hashem did not listen to the cries of the Jewish people because "they transformed the Attribute of Mercy and caused Him to be perceived as cruel." Hashem is not cruel. One would think that the Midrash should have said that since the Jews were unworthy of entering the Land, their prayers were rejected based on the Attribute of Justice which dictates that only the deserving are rewarded. If so, why does the Midrash say that Hashem's treatment of them appears cruel when in fact it was really proper Justice?

The Gemara in *Tractate Succah* tells us that *vayetar* is an expression of tefilla (prayer) that is so overpowering that it overturns the attribute of cruelty and establishes the Attribute of Mercy. The difficulty with the terminology used by the Gemara is that there is no such attribute as the "cruelty" of Hashem. The Gemara should have said that it overturns the Attribute of Justice and establishes the Attribute of Mercy.

The answer is that when the Midrash and the Gemara refer to the attribute of "cruelty" it is in fact referring to the Attribute of Justice. However because of the limited human perception of one's lack of worthiness the Attribute of Justice is viewed as "cruelty". It is only because of a person's lack of understanding spiritual failing that he sees G-d's reaction as cruel. Therefore when a Jew prays to Hashem to alleviate his plight and Hashem does not respond, the individual views this as cruelty rather than understanding that he is unworthy of Hashem's Mercy. Therefore Hashem told Moshe to cease his pleading ("*rav lach* - It is too much for you") because if Moshe continued to beseech Hashem and He would not respond, it would appear that He was being "cruel" rather than a lack of understanding who is deserving and who is not. To perceive Hashem as being "cruel" is a *Chilul Hashem* (a desecration of Hashem's Name). Therefore, Moshe needed to be silenced.

When the Jews pleaded with Hashem to let them into the Land of Israel after the incident of the spies, the Attribute of Justice dictated that they did not have the merit to enter into the Land because of their failings. Hashem's lack of response to the beseeching of that generation caused G-d to appear as "cruel" from a limited human perspective.

With this understanding we can explain the Gemara in *Tractate Bava Basra* which says that at the end of time, Hashem will tell the angels to expand the boundaries of every city except that of the Holy city of Jerusalem. The Gemara continues to say that the angels will come to Hashem and ask Him, "How could You expand the boundaries of all the cities and not the Holy city of Jerusalem?" Hashem will answer, "If that is the case, then expand the boundaries of Jerusalem

also.” We see from the dialogue between Hashem and the angels that initially Hashem did not intend to expand the boundaries of Jerusalem; however, only after the angels questioned Hashem did he agree to have the boundaries of Jerusalem broadened. How do we understand this?

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers) tells us that one of the miracles which took place on the Temple Mount was that when the Jews worshipped in the Bais HaMikdash (the Temple) they were crowded in to the point that they were pressed against one another. However, when they heard the pronouncement of the Name of Hashem they prostrated themselves on the ground and miraculously there was sufficient room for them to do so. How was this possible? Although the Bais HaMikdash was a physical structure with specific dimension, the essence of the location was spiritual. The spiritual dimension has no limitation – it has an unlimited capacity. Therefore when the Jews would prostrate themselves on the ground there was sufficient room for them to do so.

Jerusalem is the Holy City and its dimension is spiritual, which has an unlimited capacity. Therefore, Jerusalem (unlike all other cities of the world) will not need its boundaries to be expanded. Despite its physical limitation it has an unlimited capacity. However the angels will say to Hashem that although it may be true there is no need to physically expand the boundaries of Jerusalem, nevertheless, since the world has no understanding of the reality of Jerusalem, their perception will be that all cities of the world would be expanded except for Jerusalem. The angels will be saying to Hashem that this misconception will be a Chilul Hashem. Hashem’s response will be, “If this is the case, in order to avert the Chilul Hashem – expand the borders of Jerusalem as you have done with all other cities.”

Often we find that Hashem overturns the Attribute of Justice to establish the Attribute of Mercy in order to avoid a Chilul Hashem. He does this not for our sake but rather for the sake of His Holy Name. Thus when we pray to Hashem, even though we may not be deserving, we should pray for His Mercy so that there should not be a Chilul Hashem.

2. Who is Truly Deserving?

Moshe prayed to Hashem saying, “*Va’eschanan el Hashem – I implored Hashem ...*” Rashi cites Chazal which explains that the word “Va’eschanan” refers to graciousness of Hashem. Moshe beseeched Hashem as one who is undeserving and it is only through Hashem’s graciousness will Hashem respond. Chazal tell us that although Moshe was an tzaddik (righteous person) who had sufficient merit to be deserving, nevertheless when taddikim pray to Hashem they ask for “*Maatnus Cheenam- free gifts*”. That Hashem’s graciousness should favor them. The question is – if in fact Moshe was the most deserving, then, then why would he pray to Hashem as if he were not?

It would be disgraceful for a person has the means to purchase a certain item to ask the seller to release it to him without any cost. For example, in the Portion of Devarim when the Jewish people came near Edom, Hashem told Moshe to tell the Klal Yisroel that they should “purchase food and drink from the Edomites.” Rashi cites the Chazal which states that Hashem wanted the Jews to pay for their food and drink (their needs), in order to not appear as if they were, “paupers”. If they would then they would be “ingrates.” Simply, one could understand the words of Chazal to mean that if one could afford what one desires he should pay for it. However, this is not what the Midrash is saying. The Midrash is saying that if a Jew understands that the resources which he was endowed with by Hashem was only given to him to accommodate his function as a Jew, then he would not want to not utilize the blessing for that purpose. If he does not utilize his blessings as they were meant to be expended then he is considered “ingrate”. If Hashem gave wealth to the Jewish people it was only for them to be able to utilize it and not appear as paupers, which would be considered a Chilul Hashem (Desecration of G-d’s name) –that G-d’s people have to beg for their existence. Therefore by not using the wealth that was given to them they would be considered “ingrates”.

If one does not utilize the resources that have been given to him by Hashem appropriately, then it

is a statement that he himself is the source of his own blessing.

Every tzaddik throughout his life accumulates an unlimited amount of mitzvos. The Mishna tells us that the “true reward for a mitzvah is not possible in this existence.” If a tzaddik has such a wealth of merit then why did Moshe Rabbeinu plead with Hashem to respond to him based on His Graciousness? The question is- why? The answer is- A true tzaddik understands that although his own spiritual accomplishments are numerous and maybe even unlimited, nevertheless it all emanates from Hashem. As Dovid HaMelech says in Tehilim (Psalms), “I am fortunate that You (Hashem) have given me the clarity of mind.” Meaning, the tzaddik is endowed by Hashem with a clarity that allows him to do the right thing. Even the ability to execute the mitzvah is only possible because Hashem Wills the function of our existence. If this is the case a person is truly undeserving because whatever we have or accomplished is in fact a gift of Hashem.

The Gemara tells us, “All is predestined by Heaven (G-d) except the fear of Heaven.” The basis for deservingness is only if we make the right choice. It is difficult for the tzaddik to understand his deservingness when Hashem provides him with every conceivable need to be able to fulfill his mission in existence. This is why Moshe beseeched Hashem as if he was undeserving.

The question to ask ourselves is – what is the basis for disappointment in life? The answer is- the greater the expectation the greater is the disappointment. When things do not turn out the way we thought they would, we are disappointed. The basis of the expectation is our sense of self worth, thus we feel we are deserving. Hashem does not owe anyone anything. It is similar to a child becoming enraged with the parent if he does not give him what he wants. A tzaddik always praises Hashem regardless of his personal situation because he understands that whatever he receives is only through the Grace of Hashem.

If we recognize that we are the beneficiaries of Hashem’s endless Kindness, then we will remove disappointment from our lives, thus being happy.

3. The Intrinsic Value of Mitzvah (FROM DEVARIM)

The Torah tells us that when Moshe Rabbeinu approached Og, he was fearful that he would not be able to defeat him. Hashem reassured Moshe by saying, “**Do not fear him.**” Rashi cites the Midrash which explains that Moshe was concerned because Og had special merit from doing a kindness for Avraham Avinu hundreds of years earlier. As we said last week, Og had intended that Avraham be killed battling against the Four mightiest Kings so he could take Sarah (Avraham’s wife) for himself. Nevertheless he received great reward for informing Avraham about the capture of his nephew. He lived an additional 500 years and because of this merit Moshe was concerned.

We learn from this that despite the degree of deficiency in the performance of a mitzvah it nevertheless has spiritual value. If someone benefits from another’s actions, there is merit in that action regardless of the ulterior motive behind it. The Gemara in Tractate *Avodah Zorah* says that at the end of time Hashem will sit with a Sefer Torah in His lap and He will announce to the world, “Whoever has a share in this Torah, let him come and take his portion (reward)!” The first nation that will come to claim their reward will be the Romans (who destroyed the Second Temple). They will claim, “Whatever we did in this world such as going to battle, amassing large amounts of money, building boulevards and bathhouses was all so that the Jewish people would be able to learn Torah. Therefore we do deserve reward.” Hashem will respond, “You fools! Everything that you did was for your own self-interest.” Hashem will then dismiss them from His Presence. Just like the Romans, one nation after the next will approach Hashem believing that they have a claim to a share in Torah. They will all be dismissed on the same grounds –whatever they did was for themselves and not so the Jews should be able to study the Torah.

The Brisker Rav z’tl asks, “How is it possible that at the end of time, which is a time of Truth, the nations of the world come before Hashem and blatantly lie that all of their endeavors were only so the Jews should be able to study the Torah?” He explains that at the end of time Truth will

become known to all mankind and the nations of the world will realize that nothing in this existence could happen unless it directly or indirectly relates to accommodating the Torah. This is based on the principle that all of creation was made and exists for the sake of the Torah and the Jewish people. So, although at the time of their endeavors the nations of the world did not have in mind that their initiatives were for the sake of Torah, (rather for their own glory and greed), they nevertheless believed that they had a claim to reward because the Jewish people were in fact the beneficiaries of their accomplishments. Hashem will dismiss them by claiming that since their intent was lacking, they are undeserving of any reward.

Seemingly the Gemara in Avodah Zarah is in direct contradiction with the Midrash regarding Moshe Rabbeinu's concern with Og. Although Og had the most sinister intent, Hashem rewarded him with longevity. Even Moshe was afraid of Og's merit. On the other hand the nations of the world will be dismissed by Hashem when they will come to claim a share in Torah because they did not have the proper intent. How do we understand this?

The answer is the Gemara in Avodah Zarah is addressing what will happen at the end of time when the physical world will come to an end and the context of reward will be within the spiritual realm. In the physical world, even the most deficient level of accomplishment is deserving of reward because the blessing itself is manifested in the physical. The fact that Og merited longevity because of the Kindness that he had done for Avraham was a reward in the physical world. However, if the initiative is lacking in purity then it has no relevance to the spiritual world. The nations who will approach Hashem at the end of time are claiming that they deserve a share in a spiritual context. Therefore since the intent of their actions was devoid of any relevance to Torah they do not deserve reward in the spiritual realm, despite the innate value of their actions (which was to accommodate the Torah).

The Gemara in Tractate Taanis states, "The Torah can be either a life potion or a death potion." The Gemara derives this understanding from a verse in the Portion of Haazinu, "**My Torah will decapitate as hard rain and My Word will flow like the dew.**" The Torah is saying that the study of Torah itself can either destroy a person like a destructive rain or enliven and invigorate like the gentle flowing dew. The Gemara explains that if one studies the Torah for its own sake with a pure intent (L'shema) then the Torah becomes a "life potion". However if one studies Torah for other reasons other than Torah itself (Shelo L'shema), then the Torah becomes a death potion.

Tosafos asks –"The Talmud teaches us that although a Mitzvah is not executed with a pure intent it nevertheless has spiritual value because of the principle that an impure intent will ultimately bring a person to a pure level of performance. If so how could the Gemara say that the Torah itself is a "death potion" if one studies it without the purest intent?" Tosafos answers that the impurity of the mitzvah that is discussed in the Gemara is not referring to a person who studies for the sake of financial gain or glory, but rather with sinister intent to destroy or undermine another person (L'kanteir).

If so this presents a difficulty in our understanding Og's merit. He had only informed Avraham that his nephew Lot was taken captive with the sinister intent that he should be killed in battle. Why was he deserving of reward?

The Gemara in *Tractate Taanis* is addressing the study of Torah specifically and not other mitzvos. Regarding the study of Torah, which is the spiritual Tree of Life (which is G-d's Wisdom), if it is tainted with sinister intent, not only is it not rewarded but it becomes destructive (a death potion). However regarding other mitzvos such as Chesed which was performed by Og, it has a degree of value vis-à-vis the physical world even though Og's intent was to destroy Avraham.