YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARASHAT SHELACH**

**"And Now, I Pray You, Let the Power of the Lord be Great"**

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**Dedicated in memory of Mira Koschitzky *z"l*,**

**a staunch supporter of both Yeshivat Har Etzion and the
Beit Midrash for Women Migdal Oz,**

**as well as Torah and Jewish causes throughout the world,**

**whose *yahrzeit* is 22 Sivan.**

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**I. God’s Case Against the People, and Moshe’s Answer**

In *Parashat Shelach*,we meet the spieswho are sent by Moshe to scout the land but instead spread an evil report about it among the people of Israel, which leads to a severe punishment. In the wake of the spies’ offense, God initially says He will destroy the entire nation of Israel:

And the Lord said to Moshe: How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, for all the signs which I have wrought among them? I will smite them with pestilence, and destroy them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they. (*Bamidbar* 14:11-12)

We will try to understand how exactly Moshe Rabbeinu manages to appease God’s anger. But in order to understand Moshe's response, we must first understand God's case against the people of Israel.

On the face of it, God has good reason to punish Israel: “And how long will they not believe in Me, for all the signs which I have wrought among them?" God gave Israel the ten plagues, brought them out from Egypt with miracles and wonders, split the sea, and has provided for all their needs in the wilderness – and now the people do not trust Him and fear that it is not within His power to save them? God sees this lack of faith as a “spurning” on the part of Israel. God's name is profaned when the Israelites refuse to recognize the powers of the Creator.

Moshe’s answer consists of two parts.

First, Moshe describes the desecration of God’s name that may result from the destruction of the people of Israel, especially in the eyes of the nations who have already seen God’s actions and greatness:

And Moshe said to the Lord: When the Egyptians shall hear – for You brought up this people in Your might from among them – they will say to the inhabitants of this land, who have heard that You, Lord, are in the midst of this people, inasmuch as You, Lord, are seen by the eye, and Your cloud stands over them, and You go before them, in a pillar of cloud by day, and in a pillar of fire by night – and [if] You kill this people as one man, then the nations that have heard the fame of You will speak, saying: Because the Lord was not able to bring this people into the land which He swore to them, therefore He has slain them in the wilderness. (Ibid. vv. 13-16)

This part of Moshe’s response parallels, to a large extent, his argument on the people’s behalf after the sin of the golden calf:

Why should the Egyptians speak, saying: For evil He did bring them forth, to slay them in the mountains, and to eradicate them from the face of the earth? Turn from Your fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against Your people. (*Shemot* 32:12)

In the second part, Moshe uses the 13 attributes of mercy that God revealed to him when he ascended Mount Sinai with the second tablets. Moshe prefaces the 13 attributes with the following:

And now, I pray You, let the power of the Lord be great, as You have spoken, saying… (*Bamidbar* 14:17)

Instead of desecrating the name of God further by destroying the people of Israel, there is an opportunity here to sanctify His name.

In this verse, Moshe suggests that God, as it were, can “take advantage” of the situation that has arisen. Even though the name of God was desecrated by the spies, the situation can be used to sanctify and magnify His name.

The tarnishing of God’s name through the sin of the spies stems from the spies’ unwillingness to recognize the greatness of God and His providence over the people of Israel. Despite the fact that God has performed signs and wonders for them all along the way, they refuse to put their trust in Him. When the spies deny the reality of God and His express promise regarding conquering the Land of Israel, they are essentially saying that the inhabitants of the land are stronger than God and can stand against His word.

This argument itself detracts from God’s holiness and makes Him out to be comparable to mortals, which is a terrible desecration of His name however strong the mortals may be. However, Moshe Rabbeinu, with his breadth of mind, understands that even from the depths the people of Israel have reached, it is actually possible to derive great benefit and magnify the name of God.

The *Or Ha-Chaim*, in his commentary to the verse, suggests two ways in which such a reality of the desecration of God’s name can be turned into a magnification of His name. These two ways correspond to two aspects of the concept of the “sanctification of God’s name.”

**II. Sanctification and Desecration of God’s Name – In the Eyes of Mankind**

Seeing that Moshe had wisely offered a compelling argument about the desecration of God’s name which killing the Israelites would entail, he added that there was another advantage for God, if He would allow His anger to dissipate and let the Israelites enter the land of Canaan, which had not existed before this event. Namely, that now that the spies had given an exaggerated report of the toughness of the inhabitants of that land, God's power will indeed be perceived as great when He helps the Israelites conquer them. When Moshe said: "according as You have spoken," this is a reference to the instruction: "Send men… to scout the land of Canaan, which I give to the children of Israel" (13:1). We explained there that the land was not subject to conquest by the Israelites and could only be attained by them as a gift from God. God had told Moshe [at the time] to convey this detail to the Israelites; this is the meaning of "according as You have spoken, *saying*." (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Bamidbar* 14:17)

According to this first explanation, Moshe explains why bringing the people into the Land of Israel after their complaints against God involves a greater sanctification of God's name than bringing them into the land *without* the claims of the spies. How is this possible? Surely the spies' claims include a denial of God's abilities! Moshe argues that this is precisely the point that magnifies the name of God.

In order to understand the depth of this argument, we will have to first better explain the concepts of the sanctification and desecration of God's name.

Sanctification of God's name in the world stems from the fact that people recognize the power of God. After all, God’s power itself is infinite, and His name is certainly greater than anything else. The concepts of the sanctification and desecration of God's name relate to the *human perception* of God's abilities. As people become more aware of those infinite powers, God's name is magnified in the world. When people compare His name to the name of human beings, His name is desecrated, as it is treated like any other mundane thing.

**II. The Greater the Hope, the Greater the Salvation**

Now that we understand the concepts of the sanctification and desecration of God's name as relating to human perception of God, we can return to Moshe's argument.

The more difficult and impossible something seems to be, in human eyes – the greater and more impressive it appears. For example, when a muscular man manages to lift a heavy weight, it is not very impressive, because his body structure is suited for lifting weights. But if a skinny and weak-looking person lifts those same weights, it is certainly far more impressive. Let us imagine for a moment that the same weak, skinny person is also standing before a large crowd of people who are all shouting at him that there is no way he will be able to lift the weights. In that scenario, the action makes an even greater impression because it demonstrates that the person is much stronger than the people had expected.

The same can be said, *mutatis mutandi*, about God and Israel. Moshe Rabbeinu notes here a fundamental point: since the sanctification of God's name does not depend on God's absolute power, which of course is unlimited, but on the human perception of His abilities – to the extent that humans *underestimate* His abilities, the actual revelation of those abilities will constitute a much *greater* sanctification of His name!

If Israel had not sent the spies, many people would not have been aware of the enormous power of the land's inhabitants, of the fortified cities in which they live, and the like, and thus the work of God would not have been fully apparent to them. It is precisely due to the sin of the spies, and the existential fear of the Israelites in the face of anticipated dangers in the land, that God's salvation will be perceived as so much more miraculous!

**IV. One Who Repents vs. One Who Never Sinned**

The *Or Ha-Chaim* delves into this idea even more deeply, suggesting an analogy to a repentant sinner:

He said, "Let the power of the Lord be great," in accordance with what *Chazal* said (*Berakhot* 34b): "In a place where repentant sinners stand, those who are absolutely righteous (*tzaddikim gemurim*) cannot stand." The reason is that God's name is sanctified more when the world perceives that sinners have improved their ways. This is the meaning of what Moshe said: "Let the power of the Lord be great," i.e., Your power, O God, will be even greater now, when they repent after the rebellion… In accordance with what *Chazal* said (*Avot* 4:17): "More beautiful is one hour spent in repentance [and good deeds in this world, than all the life of the world to come]." (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

At first glance, it seems that this is a different explanation: when the people of Israel repent, they will achieve the level of repentant sinners, which is a higher rank than that of the absolutely righteous. But upon closer examination, we find that this is another expression of the same idea.

The statement in tractate *Berakhot*, that repentant sinners stand in a place where the absolutely righteous cannot stand, is exceedingly difficult; surely it is better to be righteous than to sin and then repent! Why then do repentant sinners stand at a higher level?

The answer to this is simple: when a person has never sinned, his commitment to the Torah's *mitzvot* may depend on many different things – it is convenient for him, he has limited desires, and so on. But when a person falls in sin, the possibility of sinning is no longer theoretical, but real, and therefore every moment that he refrains from sinning involves struggle and the strength to overcome. Thus, the repentant sinner is on a higher level than the absolutely righteous man.

Understood in this light, the parallel to the sanctification of God's name becomes apparent: when the people of Israel diminish God's honor and *then* merit to see His greatness, God's name becomes much more sanctified in their eyes. The more they recognize the power of the enemy, the more they recognize the greatness of the miracle.

**V. Executing Justice Against the Wicked**

In addition to the magnification of God's name as a result of understanding the greatness of His actions, Moshe proposes another way that the current situation actually provides an opportunity for greater magnification of His name:

Another approach to our verse is this: Moshe did not ask God to extend His pardon to all the people who had spurned Him, but rather: "Let the power of the Lord be great," that is, to take revenge against the wicked who spurn [God], i.e., the spies – for when God executes justice against the wicked, His name is magnified and elevated. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

Another way to sanctify God's name in the world is to execute justice against the wicked. Here too, in order to explain how the killing of the wicked magnifies God's power, let us return briefly, as an introduction, to the principle that we saw above. The sanctification and desecration of God's name relate not to Divine truth – as from this perspective, it makes no difference who lives and who dies – but to man's perception of God's existence in the world.

One of the most troubling issues in Jewish thought is that of the adversity suffered by the righteous and the prosperity enjoyed by the wicked. The Gemara in tractate *Berakhot* explains that this is the question Moshe asked God when he stood in the cleft of the rock and implored God (*Shemot* 33:13): "Show me now Your ways" and (ibid. v. 18): "Show me now Your glory":

He asked that He should show him the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, and it was granted to him. For it is stated: "Show me now Your ways" – Moshe said before Him: Lord of the Universe, why is it that some righteous people prosper and others are in adversity, and some wicked people prosper and others are in adversity? (*Berakhot* 7a)

It is impossible to see the full glory of God in this world; "man shall not see Me and live" (*Shemot* 33:20). The way to see Him is to recognize His ways.

God's providence in the world does not manifest itself in a revealed way; we all know righteous people who suffer adversity and wicked people who enjoy prosperity. This reality prevents man from perceiving how God acts in the world. Jewish thinkers explain that this is a basic element in man's ability to serve God in the world, because if God's providence were manifest in the world, and reward and punishment were administered immediately upon an action, lack of faith would be impossible. God would be evident to all.

This is how Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag formulates the issue:

And let us say, for example, that the Holy One, blessed be He, conducted Himself with His creatures with manifest providence. For example, whoever eats something that is forbidden would immediately choke on the spot, and whoever performs a mitzvawould find wonderful pleasure in it, similar to the most excellent pleasures in this physical world. In such a case, who is the fool who would even think of tasting a forbidden food, knowing he would immediately forfeit his life because of it? [No one would,] just as he would not think about jumping into a fire. Likewise, who is the fool who would forsake a mitzva, without immediately fulfilling it with all haste? Just as he would not be able to withdraw or delay a great physical pleasure that came his way, without accepting it immediately with all possible alacrity. Surely then, if we had manifest providence before us, everyone in the world would be completely righteous. (Rabbi Ashlag, introduction to *Talmud Eser ha-Sefirot*)

We see, then, that the vagueness of reward and punishment in the world causes people to mistakenly think that God does not watch over the world and that there is no reward and punishment at all. Thus, when we do see immediate reward and punishment, it is a tangible and clear manifestation of God's word in the world. We see an expression of this in *Parashat Korach*:

And Moshe said: Hereby you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works, and that I have not done them of my own mind. If these men die the common death of all men, and they are visited after the visitation of all men, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord makes a new thing, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up, with all that appertains to them, and they go down alive into the pit – then you shall know that these men have spurned the Lord. And it came to pass, as he made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground did split that was under them. (*Bamidbar* 16:28-31)

Moshe Rabbeinu says from the outset that the direct and immediate punishment of Korach’s supporters is reliable evidence that Moshe was given his mission by God. In essence, what we have here is a revelation of God that verifies the prophecy of Moshe.

We find something similar in the account of the spies: Moshe tells God that there is an opportunity here to reveal the *Shekhina* in the world, by administering the punishment due to the wicked.

Indeed, after the sin of the spies as well, we see that those who slandered the Land of Israel died immediately:

And the men, whom Moshe had sent to spy out the land, and who, when they returned, made all the congregation to murmur against him, by bringing up an evil report against the land – those men that did bring up an evil report of the land died by the plague before the Lord. (*Bamidbar* 14:36-377)

This stands in contrast to the rest of the generation of the wilderness, who died over the course of time. The death of those who spread the evil report about the Land of Israel indeed increased faith in God immediately, as Moshe had argued – for just after the description of the punishment of the spies, the Israelites ask to go up to the top of the mountain:

And Moshe told these words to all the children of Israel, and the people mourned greatly. And they rose up early in the morning, and got them up to the top of the mountain, saying: Lo, we are here, and will go up to the place which the Lord has promised; for we have sinned. (*Bamidbar* 14:39-40)

And thus, God's power was made greater.

**VI. Two Aspects of the Sanctification of God's Name**

We have seen that the *Or Ha-Chaim* offers two interpretations of Moshe’s argument before God. At the foundation of both approaches is the impressive perspective of Moshe, who wishes to see, even in a situation of the desecration of God's name, a way to turn it into a great sanctification of His name.

The first way is to magnify God's kindness to Israel by emphasizing the difficulty: the greater the distress, the greater the salvation. The second way also magnifies the name of God – though not in the manner of "do good," but rather through "turning away from evil" (see *Tehillim* 34:15). Bringing the wicked to their punishment is also a tangible manifestation of reward and punishment, which are an expression of the *Shekhina* in the world.

These two paths relate to the sanctification of God's name in the eyes of man and stem from a problem inherent in the world – the fact that it is a material world that cannot, and does not have to, grasp the essence of the *Shekhina* as it is. That's why we need Moshe Rabbeinu to show us how to make maximal use of the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

(Translated by David Strauss)