

Parshat Sh'lach Lecha

Two Prayers of Moses

From a theological perspective, the notion of Man arguing with the Almighty is the epitome of absurdity. But in Chumash it is the most elementary and natural gesture: Man can pray to God, argue with, debate, and even accuse God. Every Jewish schoolchild takes this point for granted. And from whom do they learn this radical principle? From Moshe Rabbeinu¹.

First, at the Golden Calf, and again in our parsha after the debacle of the Spies, God pronounced a devastating decree of imminent death against the entire nation of Israel. In each case, Moshe immediately approaches God, and takes up the defence of Israel. Praying? No! Confronting, persuading, insisting that Israel be saved. He is relentless, and he succeeds. In both situations, he averts the awful decree. Moshe, the towering figure of Chumash, is bestowed with many honoured titles expressing his leadership, however one particular appellation stands out in its boldness. Moshe is described as the "Defender of Israel"².

What are the tools of Moses' art of confronting the Almighty? Indeed, how does he seem to succeed in changing the pronouncement of the "Judge of the Universe?"

Chavruta:

NOTE: This is a textual shiur. It will be better appreciated with Tanach in hand.

We shall engage in a study and comparison/contrast of Moshe's prayers at the Egel, and at the Meraglim³.

1. First Shemot 32:8-14. (In truth the dialogue with God continues throughout ch.33-34)

List the arguments Moshe uses at the Egel. What is the basis of each point?

¹ Maybe the first character to really challenge God's judgement is Avraham in his prayers for Sedom – Bereshit ch.18.

² Shemot Rabba 43:1; Yalkut Shimoni Ekev #852.

³ Nehama Leibowitz relates to the comparisons between Shemot and Bamidbar both in her "Studies in Bamidbar" pgs. 157-163 and in her book "Torah Insights," pgs.13-19. Both pieces are useful.

2. Bamidbar 14:11-20

- What arguments are used here?
- Account for the differences between Shemot and Bamidbar

3. Is God concerned about what the nations will say about Him?

In this context, see:

- Yechezkel 36:16-36
- Devarim 32:36 and Ramban there "VehaTaam beTaana Hazot."

4. Compare Moshe's use of the 13 Attributes of Mercy here and in Shemot 34:8-10

- See the Ibn Ezra and the Ramban 14:17-18. How does they explain Moshe's "adjustments" to God's 13 attributes of Mercy?

Shiur:

SECTION I – MOSES' PRAYER AT THE EGEL HAZAHAV.

Our starting point this week will be the Egel, the Golden Calf. There we witness a most fascinating exchange between Moshe and Hakadosh Baruch Hu. God tells Moshe:

"Hurry down, for your people, who you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely ... they have made themselves a molten calf and bowed down to it and sacrificed to it ... I see this is a stiff-necked people. Now, let me be , that My anger blaze against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation." (32:8-10)

We should not minimise the enormity of the threat here. God has decided here to kill the entire nation, leaving only Moshe alive to serve as the beginning of a new Jewish people! Moshe is not willing to accept this scenario, and he immediately rises to the defence of the nation:

(11)...Why, O Lord, let Your anger blaze forth against Your people , whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand. (12) Let not the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth.' Turn from your blazing anger and renounce your intent to punish Your people! (13) Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, how you swore to them ... ' I will make your offspring numerous as the stars of the heaven, and I will give your offspring the whole land of which I spoke to possess forever.' (14) And the Lord renounced His punishment that he planned to bring upon His people." (32:10-14)

THREE ARGUMENTS

In three verses Moshe manages to reverse the fortune of the Jewish nation. Three critical verses transform God's decree:

"Now, let me be , that My anger blaze against them and that I may destroy them"

To:

"And the Lord renounced His punishment that he planned to bring upon His people"

How did Moshe do it? Let us analyse this passage.

In this masterful speech, each line skilfully aimed to target a new line of defence. If we analyse Moshe's speech here, we can identify THREE distinct lines of argument. Two of the arguments are self-evident the third is more subtle.

Passuk 12 presents the first argument. It relates to God's world reputation to the world, His public "image." Moshe relates to the stated goals of the Exodus. Yetziat Mitzrayim was aimed at proving God's supremacy to the Egyptians: "By this you shall know that I AM THE LORD'." (7:17) If God kills the people in the Midbar, he will be demonstrating that he is a capricious cruel deity and not a dependable benevolent God. If God will enact the Exodus and then kill the people it will not merely be a tragedy for Bnei Yisrael, it will be an affront to the concept of a God committed to liberty, covenant and kindness⁴. God will be seen as "evil."

Let not the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth.'

And hence, Moshe argues, even if the Israelites deserve the worst punishment, the effect on God's world reputation will be devastating. God's hands are tied. God cares about what Man thinks about Him, and since the death of the Israelites will be viewed as the absolute failure of God, God will have to resign his plan.

That is the first line of defence.

PROMISES

Verse 13 presents Moshe's second argument. This one addresses God's prior commitments, God's promises - what we know as "Covenant." Throughout Sefer Bereishit⁵ God repeatedly promises the Patriarch's two

⁴ This is the concept that we nowadays call Kiddush and Chillul Hashem. The notion of God caring what the nations think is widespread in Tanach: See Devarim 32:26-27; Yehoshua 7:9, Melachim I 20:28, Yirmiyahu 20:44, Yechezkel 20:44, 36:16-36, Tehillim 79:10, 115:2. I hope to devote a future shiur to this topic – It is currently half written. For now, you can look at Nechama Leibowitz "Studies in Bamidbar" pgs. 157-163.

⁵ see Bereishit 12:7, 13:15-16, 15:4-5, 7, 14-21; 17:7-8, 26:4; 28:13-14; 35:12

specific things. These two things are consistent. They are the LAND of Canaan, and an OFFSPRING (in Hebrew, ZERA) who will inherit and live in that Land. God establishes these promises in the form of a covenant.

What is a covenant? In modern terminology we would talk about a treaty, a pact or a contract between two parties. When God makes a covenant with Avraham or with Am Yisrael, he is signing a treaty with us. He is binding Himself with a set of commitments to man. And this is certainly remarkable, radical! The all-powerful, all-knowing God decides to commit himself contractually to man. But God does this.

Now, Moshe utilises this covenant. He says to God, You promised to the patriarchs that their offspring will be numerous and inherit the land. If you kill everyone, then how will you fulfil your promise? Are you intending to wait another 500 years? In other words, Moshe says to God, You have prior commitments. You are bound by contract to the ongoing survival of the Jewish People! You simply cannot destroy the Children of Israel.

Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, how you swore to them ... ' I will make your offspring numerous as the stars of the heaven, and I will give your offspring the whole land

WHOSE PEOPLE?

We have explained verse 12 and 13. Verse 14 gives us the resolution. How do we explain verse 11? What does verse 11 add to the debate? With a close reading of the text, we can identify a third argument, and a very subtle but powerful debate between Moshe and God that drives to the very heart of the God-Israel relationship.

Let us begin with a *mashal* – a regular life situation – which might exemplify the debate here. Imagine a house where a parent is finding the children unusually difficult. A parent might turn to their spouse and say, "The kids are driving me crazy." However, when the kids irritate a parent to the point of despair, a parent might turn to their spouse and yell: "YOUR kids are driving me crazy!" Why do we do this? At times we disassociate ourselves from the source of our distress by a process of dis-ownership, a form of rejection. In our story here, God does this too! Let us look at the text. He says to Moshe:

(7) Hurry down, for YOUR people, who YOU brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely...

What is God saying here? God says to Moshe, they're yours! They are YOUR people, who YOU brought out from Egypt. God is disassociating Himself from the Jewish nation! He acts as if it's Moshe's problem!

It is here that we begin to see the power of verse 11. How does Moshe reply in his prayer?

(11) Why, O Lord, let your anger blaze forth against YOUR people, whom YOU delivered from the land of Egypt

In other words, Moses is saying to God: It is YOUR people, not mine. YOU brought them from Egypt, not me! You cannot dis-own the people. They are not my people, says Moshe! You cannot escape the fact that the nation is God's nation!

So to summarise, we have 3 arguments:

1. God- they are YOUR nation, your responsibility
2. What will Egypt say?
3. The promise to the Patriarchs.

The combination of these three formidable arguments achieves the desired effect. Moshe's pleas are met with a happy end. God is "persuaded!" The imminent danger of destruction is averted.

II - BACK TO BAMIDBAR – THE MERAGLIM

Moshe's prayer-plea after the Meraglim bears striking similarity to his prayer at the Egel, however, we shall see that there are significant differences too! Let us read the prayer:

God said to Moses 'How long shall this nation continue to provoke Me? How long will they not believe in Me, despite all the miracles that I have done among them? I will kill them with a plague and annihilate them. Then I will make you into a greater, more powerful nation than they. Moses replied to God, 'And what will happen when the Egyptians hear about it? You have brought this nation out from among them with Your great power! And what if they tell the people who live in this land? They have heard that You, God, have been with this nation [Israel]. You, God, have revealed Yourself to them face to face, and Your cloud stands over them. You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire at night. 'Now you want to kill this [entire] nation like a single man! The nations who hear this news about You will say that God was not able to bring this nation to the land that He swore to them, so He slaughtered them in the desert. 'Now, O God, is the time for You to exercise even more restraint. You once declared: 'God! slow to anger, great in love, forgiving of sin and rebellion. Yet not remitting all punishment, but keeps in mind the sins of the fathers for their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.' 'With Your great love, forgive the sin of this nation, just as You have forgiven them from [the time they

left] Egypt until now.' God said, 'I will grant forgiveness as you have requested" (14:11-20)

First let us look at the similarities. First, the death threat is the same; the annihilation of the people allowing Moshe to remain as progenitor of a future nation. And second, the appeal to "what the nations will say."

DIFFERENCES

But here the similarities end. We spoke earlier of the 3 elements of Moshe's prayer at the Egel. Here with the spies, the long intercession contains only a single argument – that of bringing God's name into disrepute.

As for the first argument - YOUR people – here, very emphatically the nation are described only as "HA"AM HAZEH" – THIS people. They are not associated with God, nor with Moshe.

"After the Jewish people had proved so faithless, preferring the tendentious reports of the spies despite all the miracles they had been granted in Egypt and the Wilderness, Moses had no more the heart to call them "YOUR people" but merely refers to them by the distant appellation of "THIS people." (Nehama Leibowitz.)

As regards the argument of the promises to the Patriarchs, the promise of LAND and OFFSPRING, one could hardly argue the promise of the land while the nation are in a state of rejection and insurrection about their refusal to enter that Land.

Only a single argument is left! An appeal to God regarding the manner in which it will be viewed by the surrounding nations.

ADJUSTMENTS

But even here, as he repeats this argument of "What will Egypt say," we can note Moshe's skill in his defence plea on behalf of the Jewish nation.

1. He stretches the point, making this passage longer and more impressive, compensating, if you will, for the lack of other arguments.
2. He adjusts the argument. In Shemot, he speaks of how God will be perceived as cruel. Here in Bamidbar, he talks of how God will be perceived as impotent, as weak. In Shemot he refers to the effect upon Egyptian public opinion. In Bamidbar he widens the effect to the inhabitants of Canaan.

What is the basis of this "adaptation" of the earlier argument? I would claim that it must be understood within the context of the parsha of the Meraglim.

Moshe raises the probability that the slaughter of the Israelites here at the border of Eretz Canaan will be perceived as a reflection of God's inability to bring them into the Land of Canaan. Moses says, everyone knows that God is leading the

nation. After all: "Your cloud stands over them. You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire at night." So what will Egypt and Canaan say? So if they all mysteriously die there can be no cause other than God! But why would God destroy his nation? What is the motive? Rashi comments:

"Because the inhabitants of Canaan are strong and powerful, and Pharaoh cannot be compared to Thirty-one kings⁶ (of Canaan) ... Because he was unable to take them there he slaughtered them." (Rashi 14:16)

What is behind all of this? We have just experienced the Israelites rejection of Canaan on the basis that Canaanites are too strong. Moshe ironically allows this attitude of the invincibility of the Canaanites, so resonant in the episode of the Spies, to resurface⁷. Here he uses it subversively, to convince God that the destruction of the Israelites now would be viewed almost in the same manner as the Spies. It would present Canaan as strong and God as weak!⁸. Moreover, the perception of God's cloud constantly above the nation and His revelation allow Moses to bring the notion of God's positive relationship with Israel "through the back door," reminding God, so to speak, that beneath the current crisis lies a deeper love of God to Israel.

THIRTEEN ATTRIBUTES OF MERCY

Moses' prayer concludes with a reworking of the 13 attributes of mercy: "Hashem Hashem Kel Rachum VeChanun..." These attributes of God's mercy also have their origins in the drama surrounding the Golden Calf. See Shemot ch.34 where God pronounces the 13 attributes in order to state His willingness to forgive Israel for the sin of the Calf. Moshe refers back to these qualities of God in order to arouse His spirit of mercy and forgiveness. Once again, a keen student of Tanach should take the two lists and make a comparison/contrast list in order to assess the manner in which Moshe "reworks" the Thirteen Attributes to maximum effect here.

⁶ See Joshua ch.12

⁷ There are interesting linguistic connections here as well, for example the notion of *עין בעין* in 14:14 is a counterbalance to 13:33 *וְנָהוּ בְעֵינַי כְּחַגְבִּים וְכֵן הָיְינוּ בְעֵינָהֶם* - Likewise we might contrast the phrase (14:9) *וְעָנַן מֵעַל יָהֵם* with (14:14) *וְעָנַן מֵעַל יָהֵם*.

⁸ Let us note, by the way, that the notion of the perception regarding God's power were critical in the eventual conquest of Canaan. (see book of Joshua 2:9-11, 5:1, 9:9-11.) We also mention the impression that God's power had on the Nations in the Shirat Hayam recited daily:

"The Nations heard and trembled,
The people of Canaan quivered
... terror and dread descend upon them."

The Ramban relates to some of the differences:

SHEMOT	BAMIDBAR
Hashem Hashem	Hashem
El Rachum VeChanun	-
Erech Apayim	Erech Apayim
V'Rav Chesed	V'Rav Chesed
V'Emet	-
Notzer Chesed La'Alafim	-
Noseh Avon VaPheshah	Noseh Avon VaPheshah
Vechata'ah	-
VeNake lo Yenake	VeNake lo Yenake
Poked Avon Avot al Banim	Poked Avon Avot al Banim
....

"He (Moshe) did not include the virtue of "Emet " because in the perspective of truth they were indeed guilty. He omitted "Notzer Chesed La'Alafim" - the extension of kindness, "chesed" for the thousandth (generation) -because he was not praying by virtue of "Zechut Avot" – the merit of the Patriarchs ... for the Land was granted to the Avot and it is from them that we inherit it, and they betrayed their forefathers by rejecting the gift that the Avot dearly desired ... He omitted: "VeChata'ah," for these were deliberate sinners (rather than inadvertent sins.)

I don't know why he failed to mention "Rachum VeChanun." Maybe Moses knew that the Divine Justice was stretched to its' limit and that God was not going to forgive them, hence, he requested "Erech Apayim - slowness to anger" that they should not be killed in one fell swoop, not to be slaughtered collectively ... as in a plague. Hence because he requested a slowness of anger (rather than absolute atonement,) God replied "I pardon you, as you requested." (Ramban 14:17-18⁹)

Indeed one of the puzzling questions about the punishment of the Meraglim is the fact that God states:

"And the Lord said 'I pardon, as you requested'." (14:20)

This sounds like the quintessential statement of forgiveness; indeed we chant this phrase at the start of the Kol Nidrei service. And yet, does the nation gain their pardon? The next phrase talks about how the nation will all wander for forty years, will die in the desert. Forgiveness? Pardon? Are the people forgiven or are they not? Seforno (on 14:20) comments:

"I have forgiven you to the extent that I will not destroy you (v.12)... I will not annihilate the nation at once, however I will kill you off in stages, year by year, and not one person will enter the Land."

⁹ The Ramban then continues to develop the notion that not only is the punishment for the Meraglim spread over 40 years, but it is spread throughout time!

The Ramban seems to indicate that it is quite literally "as you requested." That Moshe did not request an absolute atonement of the sin, but a mere delay, a suspension of the sentence, a deferment.

It is here that we will end with a difficult question from the Ramban that you can discuss around your Shabbat table:

In Deuteronomy Moshe recalls the Golden Calf and the prayer that he prayed for the: And I fell before God and prayed (9:18) and he also mentioned Aharon's prayer (9:20.) In the context of the Meraglim, he never mentions his having prayed. This is what I have said – that Moshe did not pray that they be forgiven but merely that God should tolerate their sin...and his prayer was not ideal and perfect." (Ramban on 14:19)

One wonders why. Why did Moshe not ask for more. What was stopping him from asking for absolute forgiveness?

And one wonders; had he requested total forgiveness, would God have complied with his wish?

Shabbat Shalom