

Parashat Eikev 5783, 2023:

The Great, Mighty, and Awesome Hashem

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains a phrase that is found in the first *bracha* of the *Shemoneh Esrei*:

G-d your L-rd is the ultimate Supreme Being and the highest possible Authority. *HaA-le great (HaGadol), mighty (HaGibor) and awesome (v'HaNorah)*, who does not give special consideration or take bribes. (*Sefer Devarim* 10:17, translation, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*, *The Living Torah*, with my emendations)

In addition, we find that *Ezra HaSofer* deploys this expression in his prayer before the Jewish people: “And now, our G-d, *HaA-le HaGadol, HaGibor, v'HaNorah*, Who keeps the covenant and loving-kindness...” (*Sefer Nechemiah* IX:32, this and the following Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

In his commentary on *Talmud Bavli, Berachot* 33b (s.v. *va'takninahu b'tefilah*), Rashi (1040-1105) maintains that Ezra's prayer is the source of our phrase's inclusion in *the Shemoneh Esrei*. His assertion, however, is not universally accepted, since the Sha'agat Aryeh (Rabbi Aryeh Leib ben Asher Gunzberg 1695-1785), among others, maintains that Ezra's use of this expression was a momentary event, whereas its permanent placement in our liturgy is based on our *pasuk*. (*Turei Even, Talmud Bavli, Megillah* 25a, s.v. *hashta hachi telata*) In either case, the phrase, “*HaA-le HaGadol HaGibor v'HaNorah*,” has become an integral part of our *tefilot*.

We might think that since we declare, “*HaA-le Hagadol HaGibor v’HaNorah*,” it should be permissible to add other descriptions of the Almighty during the recitation of the *Shmoneh Esrei*. In early Talmudic times, an anonymous *shaliach tzibbur* followed this approach, and quickly found himself under the critical scrutiny of the great Rabbi Chanina bar Chama:

A certain [reader] went down in the presence of Rabbi Chanina and said, “O’ G-d, the great (*HaGadol*), mighty (*HaGibor*), awesome (*v’HaNorah*), majestic, powerful, awe-filled, strong, fearless, sure and honored.” He [Rabbi Chanina bar Chama] waited until he had finished, and when he completed [his prayer] he said to him, “Have you concluded all the praise of your Master? Why do we want all this?” (*Talmud Bavli* 33b, translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my emendations)

Rabbi Chanina was clearly unimpressed with the *shaliach tzibbur*’s seven additions. As such, he asked him the same rhetorical question that *David HaMelech* expresses in *Sefer Tehillim*, “Who can narrate the mighty deeds of Hashem? [Who] can make heard all His praise?” (106:2) Moreover, Rabbi Chanina teaches us that even our phrase, “*HaA-le Hagadol HaGibor v’HaNorah*,” would have been prohibited, “had not *Moshe Rabbeinu* mentioned them in the Torah and had not the Men of the Great Assembly come and inserted them into the order of prayers.” Little wonder, then, that Rabbi Chanina subsequently proclaimed to the would-be creative *shaliach tzibbur*, “And you say all these and still go on!”

The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) codified these ideas in the following *halacha*:

A person should not be profuse in his mention of adjectives describing G-d, and say: “The great, mighty, awesome, powerful, courageous, and strong G-d,” for it is impossible for man to express the totality of His praises. Instead, one should mention [only] the praises that were mentioned by Moshe, of blessed memory (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefilah* IX:7, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

The Rambam's reasoning as to why one is proscribed from adding new expressions in honor of Hashem in the *Shemoneh Esrei* is clear, "for it is impossible for man to express the totality of His praises." Quite simply, finite man is incapable of properly representing the majesty and greatness of the Creator. Therefore, we must limit our words to the exact phrase found in the Torah.

We are now ready to analyze the three descriptions of Hashem's actions in our *pasuk*. I believe each may be viewed as corresponding to one of the three Avot: That is, Avraham's destiny is inextricably interwoven with the word, "*gadol*," Yitzchak's to "*gibor*," and Ya'akov's to "*norah*."

The word *gadol*, and its verbal variant, appear in reference to Avram/Avraham in Parshiot Lech Lecha and Vayera:

And I will make you into a great (*gadol*) nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great (*va'agadlah*), and [you shall] be a blessing." (*Sefer Bereishit* 12:2 with my emendation)

And Avraham will become a great (*gadol*) and powerful nation, and all the nations of the world will be blessed in him. (*Sefer Bereishit* 18:18)

In addition to *gadol* as a description of Avram/Avraham, there is an amazing *midrash* that presents him as he who enabled the entire world to recognize the greatness (*gedulto*, a variant of *gadol*) of Hashem:

And there are those who say that he [Mordechai] was the equivalent to Avraham in his generation. Just like our father, Avraham, allowed himself to be tossed into [Nimrod's] fiery furnace, and in so doing enabled the people of the earth to return to and recognize the greatness (*gedulto*) of the Holy One blessed be He, as it is written: "and the souls that they made [that is, Avraham and Sarah converted] in Haran..." (*Midrash Esther Rabbah* VI:2, translation my own)

As such, Avraham is forevermore connected to the expression *HaA-le Hagadol*.

Yitzchak was in many ways the epitome of *gevurah* (great might), in the manner in which *Chazal* utilized the term in *Pirkei Avot* (IV:1): “Who is a hero (*gibor*)? One who overpowers his desires.” On measure, it was precisely this *middah* that enabled Yitzchak to submit to the Almighty’s will at the *Akeidah*. Little wonder, then, that both Kabbalistic and Chasidic literature perceive him as personifying this quality.

Ya’akov has a very clear connection to “*norah*.” This is the case, since he declared, “*Mah norah hamakom hazeh!*” (“How awesome is this place!” *Sefer Bereishit* 28:17) after discovering he had inadvertently slept on the *makom HaMikdash* (the place of the future *Beit HaMikdash*). Consequently, since that grand moment in time, Ya’akov is associated with the *norah* aspect of the Almighty.

With Hashem’s help, and our fervent desire, may we, as heirs of the *Avot*, come to acknowledge Him as “*HaA-le HaGadol HaGibor v’HaNorah*.” *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s English language audio *shiurim* (MP3

format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Ray](#)