

Parashat Shemot 5776, 2016

Hashem – The Keeper of Promises

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Chapter five of our *parasha* presents a narrative fraught with anxiety, crisis and distrust. It tells the story of Moshe and Aharon's encounter with Pharaoh wherein they asked his permission for the Jewish people to go to the desert to offer sacrifices to Hashem. Their request generated an infamous response from the Egyptian monarch, "And Pharaoh said, 'Who is the L-rd that I should heed His voice to let Israel out? I do not know the L-rd, neither will I let Israel out.'" (*Sefer Shemot* 5:2, all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) True to the spirit of this audacious retort, Pharaoh did more than just refuse Moshe and Aharon's petition; instead, he decreed that the Jewish people must continue to meet their brick-building quota – even though they would no longer be provided with the straw necessary to do so. (5:6-19)

At this juncture, Moshe and Aharon were met by the officers of the children of Israel, identified by *Talmud Bavli, Nedarim* 64b as Datan and Aviram, who proclaimed with utter temerity, "May the L-rd look upon you and judge, for you have brought us into foul odor in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants, to place a sword into their hand[s] to kill us." (5:21) It seems that Moshe was overwhelmed and completely disheartened by this direct attack upon his person by members of his own people, to the

extent that he cried out to Hashem and questioned the Master of the Universe as to why He had harmed His people, and designated him as His emissary:

So Moses returned to the L-rd and said, “O L-rd! Why have You harmed this people? Why have You sent me? Since I have come to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has harmed this people, and You have not saved Your people.” (5:22-23)

Clearly, Moshe needed reassurance that his *shlichut* (role as messenger) was not in vain. Moreover, he needed to know that there was a future for the nascent nation of Israel, and that the Almighty would not abandon them. Therefore, the final verse of our Torah portion states, “Now you will see what I [Hashem] will do to Pharaoh, for with a mighty hand he [Pharaoh] will send them out, and with a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land.” (6:1, brackets my own) At first glance, this appears to be precisely what Moshe needed to assuage his fear and apprehension. Yet, *Chazal* (our Sages may they be remembered for a blessing) viewed Hashem’s words to Moshe in a startling different light, namely, as a rebuke:

And for this Moses was punished, as it is said, “Since I have come to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has harmed this people, and You have not saved Your people.” Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, “Alas for those [i.e. the Patriarchs] who are gone and no more to be found! For how many times did I reveal Myself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by the name of *E-l Sha-dai*, and they did not question my character, nor say to Me, What is Your name?” (*Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 111a, translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my emendations)

The Talmud continues, citing specific Torah texts that incontrovertibly demonstrate the Patriarchs’ unquestioning belief in Hashem – seemingly in stark contrast to Moshe. Indeed, Moshe’s questioning of Hashem in this episode is presented as one of the reasons he was ultimately barred from entering *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel). In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Rashi (1040-1105) summarizes the extended Talmudic narrative in this manner:

Now you will see: You have questioned My ways [of running the world, which is] unlike Abraham, to whom I said, “For in Isaac will be called your seed” (*Sefer Bereishit* 21:12), and afterwards I said to him, “Bring him up there for a burnt offering” (*Sefer Bereishit* 22:2), yet he did not question Me. Therefore, “Now you will see.” [This means,] what is done to Pharaoh you will see, but not what is done to the kings of the seven nations when I bring them [the children of Israel] into the land [of Israel]. (Some brackets and underlining my own)

Rashi was even more explicit in his gloss on our Talmudic passage regarding G-d’s deep-seated disappointment in Moshe at this point and time: **Alas for those [i.e. the Patriarchs] who are gone and no more to be found:** “There is a tremendous loss regarding the great ones that have perished – for I [Hashem] am unable to find other righteous ones that are like them. For you [Moshe] are not like Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov who never questioned My character [literally, attributes].” Therefore, according to Rashi’s interpretation of our *pasuk* (verse) and the Talmud, as great as Moshe surely was, he was second to the Patriarchs when it came to his *emunah* (faith) in G-d.

This approach of Rashi and the Talmud creates a serious conundrum. Somehow, the thought of G-d chastising Moshe for his advocacy on behalf of *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people) instinctively seems amiss. After all, Avraham, the first of the Patriarchs, famously tried to save the people of *S’dom* and *Gomorrhah* from destruction when he beseeched G-d to save them. It should be noted, moreover, that Avraham challenged the Almighty to act in congruence with the selfsame standards of justice He had previously modeled for him:

And Abraham approached and said, “Will You even destroy the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous men in the midst of the city; will You even destroy and not forgive the place for the sake of the fifty righteous men who are in its midst? Far be it from You to do a thing such as this, to put to death the righteous with the wicked so that the righteous should be like the wicked. Far be it from You! Will the Judge of the entire earth not perform justice?” (*Sefer Bereishit* 18:23-25, underlining my own)

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as the “Rav” by his students and disciples, addressed our issue in a novel manner that maintains both the internal integrity of the Talmud and Rashi’s explication. The Rav noted that a fundamental difference obtained between the Patriarchs and Moshe regarding the name by which each of them knew G-d. The Patriarchs knew the Master of the Universe by the names *E-l Sha-dai* and *E-lohim*, whereas, Moshe knew G-d by the additional name of *Hashem*:

G-d... told Moses that he had been singled out as the chosen prophet, the father of all future prophets. He was different from everyone else. “And I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, by the name *E-l Sha-dai*, but by my name *Hashem* I was not known to them” (*Sefer Shemot* 6:3) G-d did not make His explicit name available to them, but it is at Moses’ disposal. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Vision and Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses*, editors, David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky, and Reuven Ziegler, page 86)

This difference between the names of G-d that the Almighty shared with the Patriarchs and Moshe helps us to understand the latter’s reaction to the browbeating and denigration he suffered at the hands of Datan and Aviram. The Rav explained that “*E-l Sha-dai* and *E-lohim* represent promises and the ability to wait.” In contrast, the name “*Hashem*” connotes “the fulfiller of promises” and He who “bestows grace upon the people.” (pages 86-87) As such, the Patriarchs and Moshe had very different sets of expectations regarding G-d’s behavior toward the Jewish people:

E-lohim refers to G-d who requires that a Jew have faith, patience, and perseverance. It is very hard to wait. And yet, the Jew waits and waits. Every day he says the *Ani Ma’amin* – I believe in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he may tarry I will wait for him every day. The Jew who communicates with *E-lohim*, then, is greater than the Jew who communicates with *Hashem*, the fulfiller of promises. When G-d bestows grace upon the people, it is not difficult to be a Jew. Nevertheless, during the long, lonely night of exile, the Jew did not lose his faith in *E-lohim*; *Hashem* did not reveal Himself. The Jew who waits is great indeed. (Page 87)

Armed with the Rav's trenchant analysis, we are now prepared to re-examine Moshe's questioning of the Master of the Universe. Moshe's declaration to G-d is introduced by the words, "*Vayoshov Moshe el Hashem*" ("And Moshe returned to Hashem"). It is only afterward that the Torah states, "O L-rd! Why have You harmed this people? Why have You sent me? Since I have come to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has harmed this people, and You have not saved Your people." In my estimation, Moshe was singularly focused upon G-d as "*Hashem*, the fulfiller of promises" to the extent that the personas of "*E-l Sha-dai* and *E-lohim*" had become nearly eclipsed in his mind. He wanted an immediate solution to the misery of his beloved people, and the wanton violence perpetrated against them by Pharaoh. He no longer wanted to wait - 210 years of abject servitude at the hands of the Egyptian taskmasters had been enough! Therefore, in my view, Moshe's statement to G-d was not one that betrayed a lack of faith; instead, it represented his consummate belief in *Hashem's* ability to save the Jewish people – now! Our nation had waited long enough. It was time, at last, for the Redemption to unfold, so that our people could finally return to *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel) and live the lives of truly free men and women.

May the Almighty manifest His Divine Presence to us as "*Hashem*, the fulfiller of promises," so that we may be *zocheh* (merit) to witness the complete Redemption of our people led by His righteous *Mashiach* (Messiah), the rebuilding of the *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple), and the ingathering of our people to our holy land. With Hashem's endless kindness and mercy, may this take place soon and in our days!
V'chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom,

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.