

Parashat Vayechi 5782, 2021:

Am I Instead of Hashem?

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The Torah contains two instances of the phrase, *hatachat Elokim*, the first, in Parashat Vayatzte (30:2), and the second, in our *parasha* (50:19): “But Yosef said to them [his brothers], ‘Don’t be afraid, *ki hatachat Elokim ani*, for am I instead of Hashem?’” (This and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Rashi (1040-1105) suggests this interpretation of our phrase: “Am I perhaps in His [Hashem’s] place? [A statement] of wonder. [For even] if I wanted to harm you, would I be able? Did not all of you plan evil against me? The Holy One, blessed be He, however, designed it for good. So how can I alone harm you?”

Rashi’s analysis is analogous to a passage in the 11th century work, *Midrash Bereishit Rabbati*:

hatachat Elokim ani: Rabbi Yona the father of Rabbi Moneh explained: “Yosef said to his brothers: ‘Who can change the order of the world? There are 12 hours during the day, and 12 hours at night. There are 12 major constellations, 12 months and 12 stones that in the future will be placed upon Aharon’s heart [in the *choshen mishpat*]. And what is the purpose of all of these [that focus upon the number 12]? None other than to highlight the [eternal] significance of the number of the [12] tribes of the Jewish people. And am I Hashem, that is, am I able to alter the order of the world?’” (Parashat Vayechi, beginning on page 225, translation and brackets my own)

The similarity between this midrash and Rashi’s gloss is quite notable. Both focus on the idea that Yosef declared to his brothers that only Hashem can change the order of the world, and as such, he, alone, cannot harm them.

In his *Commentary on the Torah* on our verse, the Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel Wisser, 1809-1879) focuses on Yosef's recognition of Hashem's *hashgacha* (divine providence) as the lens through which to view our phrase:

This means that after I [Yosef] have seen that this matter [my sale as a slave and rise to second-in-command in Egypt] was completely under Hashem's *hashgacha*, how can I possibly question it, since it was done by Almighty? For am I instead of Him and in His place to do the opposite of His action? In addition, the core of this *hashgacha* was for me to help and support you; if so, how can I change the will of the Almighty and all that He has done through His *hashgacha*? Moreover, since you [my brothers] did not do evil to me in actuality—as Hashem changed your actions toward me for the good—I am unable to repay you in an evil manner like you initially did to me, as that was transformed into good. This is the case, since I am not in Hashem's place, and I cannot know that good will [ultimately] result from an evil action I might seek to do against you. [It is therefore impossible for me to do evil to you my brothers]. (Translation and brackets my own)

In sum, the Malbim suggests that when Yosef utters the phrase, “*ki hatachat Elokim ani*,” he acknowledges that *hashgachat Hashem* is the driving force behind all the trials and tribulations he has faced, as well as his rise to *mishneh l'melech* (second-in-command of Egypt). Hashem, he asserts, changed the brothers' actions toward “or the good.” Consequently, he maintains, he can neither question Hashem's actions nor counter His will.

On measure, in their examination of the phrase, “*ki hatachat Elokim ani*,” *Midrash Bereishit Rabbati*, Rashi and the Malbim, unhesitatingly proclaim the primacy of Hashem's *hashgacha* in the world. I believe this is the message Yosef is teaching his brothers, and by extension, the entire Jewish people for all time. Little wonder, then, that a powerful allusion to this idea is found in the paragraph following the recitation of the private *Shemoneh Esrai*: “As for all those who design evil against me, speedily nullify their counsel and disrupt their design...let Your right hand save and respond to me.” (*The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*, page 119) *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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