

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Beshalach

The Individual and the Community

וְהַמַּיִם לָהֶם חֹמָה מִיְמִינָם וּמִשְׂמֹאלָם

And the water was a wall for them, on their right and on their left (14:29)

ANGER IN THE WALLS OF THE RED SEA

The Midrash¹ notes that the word for “wall” in this pasuk – “חֹמָה” is missing the letter *vav*, and thus expounds that this word also has a connotation of “חמה – anger” that was levelled against the Jewish People at that time:

This teaches that Samael (the spiritual overseer of evil) rose up and said: “Master of the world, did the Jewish People not (also) serve avodah zarah in Egypt, yet You are performing miracles for them?” Hashem responded: “Did they serve avodah zarah while in a settled state of mind? Behold, they only served it out of oppression and desperation! Are you judging an act performed under duress as (equal to) one performed of one’s own volition?”

The Meshech Chochmah asks a simple question concerning the above Midrash. This was not the first time or place where Hashem performed miracles for the benefit of the Jewish People. Over the course of the entire preceding year, Hashem had brought plagues against the Egyptians, while at the same time miraculously protecting the Jewish People from harm. Why do we not find any objection by the forces of evil to these earlier miracles? Could they not have accused: “Why are You miraculously sparing them from the plagues? Did they not also worship avodah zarah?”

¹ *Yalkut Shimoni sec. 234.*

TWO CATEGORIES OF TORAH PROHIBITION

In order to appreciate the background to the above Midrash, the Meshech Chochmah prefaces with a most thought-provoking observation.

It is possible to divide the Torah's prohibitions into two categories:

1. Things the Torah has forbidden on account of their spiritual damage, such as *avodah zarah* and forbidden relationships (*arayos*).
2. Things which are damaging to others and which reflect a corrupt character and moral deficiency, such as *lashon hara*, robbery and *machlokes*.

If we compare the punishments proscribed by the Torah for violating these two types of prohibitions, we will find something quite surprising.

- Violating prohibitions within the first category incurs punishments ranging from *malkos* (lashes, e.g. for eating non-kosher food) to *kares* (Divine excision, e.g. for eating on Yom Kippur or eating chametz on Pesach) and even capital punishment (e.g. for profaning Shabbos).
- Violating prohibitions within the second category generally does not incur *any* formal punishment. Sins such as *lashon hara* and *machlokes* are not punishable by *beis din* since they do not involve an action (only speech); while with sins such as robbery, the obligation to return the object or reimburse its value replaces the liability of *malkos*.

Based on the above differentiation in terms of punishments incurred, we would likely conclude that sins belonging to the first category are more severe than those belonging to the second.

FROM THE INDIVIDUAL TO THE COMMUNITY

However, all the above pertains only to sins committed by the individual. When it comes to the community, however, we find that the situation is practically reversed! Many sources seem to indicate that interpersonal wrongdoings result in far more dire consequences than do violations of other mitzvos. Thus we find, for example, the *Talmud Yerushalmi*² compares and contrasts two generations, that of David and that of Achav:

In David's generation, they were all righteous. Nevertheless, since there were slanderers among them, they fell in battle. Achav's generation, however, were idolators, yet since there were no slanderers among them, they would go out to battle and would be victorious.

This is most astounding. Given that David's generation are referred to as righteous with regards to most aveiros, being lax "only" in the relatively less severe sin of slander, how did they suffer defeat while the idol-worshiping generation of Achav experienced victory?

The Meshech Chochmah explains. The success or the lack thereof which the Jewish People enjoy in confronting their enemies is a function of the proximity of the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence). In this regard, the Torah expresses the principle, that Hashem "שֵׁכֵן" **אֵתָם בְּתוֹךְ טְמֵאתָם** – Dwells among them in the midst of their impurities."³ This means

2 *Peah* 1:1.

3 *Vayikra* 16:16, see *Yoma* 56b.

that although there will ultimately be a reckoning for each and every wrongdoing for each and every individual, nonetheless, the Shechinah remains among the community of Bnei Yisrael and protects them. This was the situation as it pertained in Achav's time.

However, when it comes to sins which cause friction and fragmentation within the community, this causes the Shechinah to depart from it,⁴ leaving the Jewish People vulnerable to their enemies, as happened in David's generation.

THE FLOOD, THE GOLDEN CALF AND THE SPIES

With this idea in mind, the Meshech Chochmah explains a statement that Chazal make relating to the generation of the flood. The Gemara⁵ states that although that generation were remiss in matters including avodah zarah and forbidden physical relations, nonetheless, their judgment was only sealed on account of the sin of robbery. Here, too, we wonder: given that they were involved in such severe sins, why was it specifically the sin of robbery which sealed their fate?

The answer, says the Meshech Chochmah, is as per the above. As serious as that generation's sins may have been, nevertheless, had they not included robbery among them, the merit of the community would have protected them from calamity. However, since they also engaged in robbery – which is a crime that tears the very fabric of the community and is ultimately a crime against the community itself – they lost any protection which being part of the community could have afforded them. Once this happened, their status reverted to that of individuals, leaving them fully exposed to the consequences of their many sins, and thus the Gemara says that “their judgment was sealed on account of the sin of robbery.”⁶

4 This is derived by the Meshech Chochmah from the abovementioned discussion in the *Yerushalmi*, for following David's reference to the slanderers among the Jewish People (*Tehillim* 57:5), he says (pasuk 6), “רוּמָה עַל הַשָּׁמַיִם אֱלֹהִים – Be exalted above the heavens, O God,” which the *Yerushalmi* interprets to mean, “Remove Your Shechinah from among them!”

5 *Sanhedrin* 108a.

6 A careful analysis of the Meshech Chochmah's words indicates that sins in the area of interpersonal relationships bring about two negative effects: Firstly, they remove the protective element afforded by being part of a community, thereby leaving its members exposed to indictment from their wrongdoings as individuals. Secondly, it is no longer even in the interest of those people to be judged as a community, for on the contrary, a community that sins against itself is judged more harshly by Hashem than one which sins against Hashem Himself!

In this vein the Meshech Chochmah cites the Gemara (*Yoma* 9b) which discusses the sins that led to the destruction of the first two Batei Mikdash. The first Beis Hamikdash was destroyed on account of the three cardinal sins: avodah zarah, arayos and bloodshed. In contrast, the generation at the time of the destruction of the second Beis Hamikdash is described as being involved in Torah, mitzvos and acts of kindness; however, since there was sinas chinam – baseless hatred – among them, the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed. The Gemara concludes that not only does this teach us that sinas chinam is equal in severity to the three cardinal sins, it is even worse, for the exile following the first destruction lasted only seventy years, while the current exile which resulted from the destruction of the second Beis Hamikdash has yet to end. Here, too, the second generation is described as one that had no indictment in the area of Torah and mitzvos, with their only failing being in the area of sinas chinam. Nevertheless, we see that this failing alone – involving as it did a sin against the community – was severe enough to incur an exile which exceeded the first exile many times over and which persists until our time.

Similarly, we find that when Bnei Yisrael sinned with the *Egel* (Golden Calf), Hashem forgave them, whereas when they sinned with the *Meraglim* (the spies), they were not forgiven. The Meshech Chochmah explains that, here too, the different outcomes of these two sins derive from their differing nature. The *Chet Ha'egel* was in the area of *avodah zarah*. As such, Hashem was prepared to forego punishment at that time due to their status as a community.

In contrast, the *Chet Hameraglim* involved wrongdoings that relate to moral conduct and “*menschlichkeit*”, such as spreading slander about the land – and about the One who was leading them there – as well as lack of gratitude towards Hashem Who had taken care of their every need and Who clearly had their best interests in mind. As such, there was no defense for their actions based on their status as a community, for their wrongdoing was in the area which undermines the very concept of community!⁷

THE JEWISH PEOPLE IN EGYPT AND AT THE RED SEA

With the above idea in mind, let us return to the Midrash which describes the accusation against Bnei Yisrael during the splitting of the Red Sea, namely, that they, too worshiped idols. We asked, why was this accusation not levelled against them earlier on during the entire year that they were miraculously spared from the ten plagues?

The Meshech Chochmah answers: although Bnei Yisrael had committed serious sins in Egypt, nevertheless, there was internal harmony among them, as pointed out by the Midrash⁸ that there was no *lashon hara* between them. Under these circumstances, their status as a community afforded them protection from their sins.

However, upon finding themselves pursued by the Egyptians and trapped at the Red Sea, the Midrash relates that they split into four groups: One group advocated throwing themselves into the sea, a second group said they should return to Egypt, a third group argued that they should fight the Egyptians while the fourth group said they should pray that Hashem deliver them. This divisiveness and fragmentation had the effect of divesting them of their status as a community. Once they lost that status, they found themselves susceptible to an accusation concerning sins such as *avodah zarah* which they had committed earlier on!⁹

7 Perhaps here, too, the Meshech Chochmah means to say that in compromising their community status through the *Chet Hameraglim*, the Jewish People thereby retroactively forfeited their defense in the face of the *Chet Ha'egel*, which was based on their being a community. Indeed, Rashi (Bamidbar 14:33, s.v. arbaim) states that the *Chet Hameraglim* “reopened” the indictment against the Bnei Yisrael for making the *Egel*, which had been in a state of suspension prior to that time. That “reopening” can be understood in light of the Meshech Chochmah’s discussion here (suggested by R’ Yisrael Moshe Aryeh Bernstein).

8 *Mechilta Parshas Bo, mentioned in the essay on Parshas Va'eira.*

9 In fact, the Meshech Chochmah takes the issue of the timing of the accusation one step further. The allusion within the pasuk to the accusation is the fact that word “*chomah*” (wall) in pasuk 29 is written without the letter *vav* – “*חמה*” – which allows it to be read as “*cheimah*” (anger). However, an almost identical phrase appears just a few *pesukim* earlier (*pasuk* 22) as Bnei Yisrael first enter the Red Sea and there the word is written with a *vav* – “*חומה*”! Why is the accusation not alluded to in the earlier *pasuk*?

There is a fascinating parshanut point here. Sometimes, the Torah will forego communicating an idea at an earlier opportunity if the idea will be expressed more potently in a later setting. As we have discussed, the Jewish People in their fragmented state were susceptible to indictment regarding their *avodah zarah* in Egypt. However, one could seemingly respond to this accusation by

With these words, the Meshech Chochmah is guiding us in terms of how to access the protective element of community that we all need, it happens through us being protective of the community itself. With the Divine Presence in close proximity we can be hopeful in setting our sights on removing all imperfections – both as a community and as individuals!

pointing out that they had in fact done teshuvah for this by bringing the Korban Pesach, a primary element of which was the public disassociation with and repudiation of avodah zarah! Once they have done teshuvah, they are no longer equated with the idol-worshiping Egyptians!

However, at a certain point in the splitting of the Red Sea, we find that the Egyptians themselves realized the worthless nature of their idolatry and that their deities were useless and powerless to protect them from Hashem's punishment. Pasuk 25 reads: **וַיֹּאמֶר מִצְרַיִם אֲנוֹסָה מִפְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי** – Egypt said, 'I shall flee before Yisrael, for Hashem is waging war for them against Egypt.'" In a sense, one could say that with these words, the Egyptians were also doing teshuvah for their earlier idolatry. This being the case the accusation against Bnei Yisrael has gained momentum, for the disparity between them and the Egyptians has now been removed: in terms of the sin of avodah zarah – both were guilty, while in terms doing teshuvah – both had done so! It is for this reason the accusation is alluded to in the later pasuk, for in the interim it has attained greater potency. Samael now asks: "Why did you accept Bnei Yisrael's teshuvah for their avodah zarah but not the Egyptians' teshuvah for theirs?"

In truth however, the two acts of teshuvah are not comparable. In the same way that Hashem responded to the accusation concerning avodah zarah by saying that Bnei Yisrael did so out of oppression and desperation, not from a settled frame of mind, the same may be said regarding the Egyptians' teshuvah which occurred when they frantically realized that they were trapped between the walls of the sea. This cannot be compared to the teshuvah done by the Jewish People who, by bringing the Korban Pesach, were deliberately and courageously defying their surroundings and cutting ties with avodah zarah, all this at a time when they were no longer being oppressed. The Meshech Chochmah concludes this section with the words: "May Hashem grant that Yisrael return to Him from a fully settled state of mind.