

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

SHELACH

Praying for Someone Else's Choices

ויקרא משה להושע בן נון יהושע

Moshe called Hoshea, son of Nun, Yehoshua¹

The Gemara² explains that by adding the letter *yud* to the beginning of Hoshea's name and changing it to Yehoshua, Moshe was praying on his behalf: 'יה ישיעך מעצת מרגלים' – May Hashem save you from the counsel of the spies.' This idea raises a basic question: How can Moshe pray that Hashem should save Yehoshua from making the wrong decision? Does this not contradict the principle of free-will, whereby a person's decisions are theirs alone to make, as the Gemara states: "הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים" – Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for the fear of Heaven?³ Seemingly, then, Moshe's prayer for Yehoshua is one which is not in the hands of Heaven to grant!

Moreover, if Moshe feels that it *is* possible to pray for someone to make the right decision, why does he pray only for Yehoshua? Yehoshua is arguably the one *least at risk* in this enterprise; if the rest of the spies act correctly, Yehoshua will be fine! As such, it is they who are more urgently in need of divine assistance. Why, then, does Moshe not pray for *them*?

R' Yosef Chaim of Baghdad⁴ explains: For the other spies, the issue of whether to bring back a good or bad report about the land was a *moral* one. The Zohar explains that the spies feared they would be demoted from their positions of authority once the Jewish people entered the land of Israel. This factor served as an impetus for them to then dissuade the people from entering the land, by arguing that involvement in its physical pursuits would a spiritual *step down* from their lofty existence in the Wilderness. This being the case, the decision whether or not to do the right thing was one which could only be made by them, for it related to the distinctly human faculty known as 'fear of heaven'. A prayer offered by someone else in this area could not help them.

For Yehoshua, the matter was different. It was already known that he would take over as leader of the

¹ Bamidbar 13:16.

² Sotah 34b, quoted in Rashi to Bamidbar ibid.

³ Berachos 33b.

⁴ Author of the *Ben Ish Chai*, in his commentary on *Aggados Ben Yehoyadah* to Sotah ibid.

Jewish people when they entered the land of Israel.⁵ As such, Yehoshua was in danger of falling in league with the spies' arguments *out of fear of heaven!* The worry was that his humility might make him doubt his resistance to the words of his peers, and he may come to be swayed by them. For Yehoshua, the antidote was not a boost in moral fiber, which he had in abundance, but *added insight* to allow him to see through the specious nature of the spies' claims. Added insight is something that is in the hands of heaven, and thus Moshe was able to pray for Yehoshua, even though that insight would directly affect Yehoshua's decisions.

In this regard, R' Tzaddok Hakohen of Lublin⁶ reveals a fascinating further dimension within the adding of the letter *yud* to the beginning of Yehoshua's name. As we know, although the spies' argument against entering the land may have sounded correct, in fact, the exact opposite is true; for entering into the more earthly sphere of the Land of Israel was in order to attain a higher spiritual level, namely, that of bringing the spirituality of the Torah and mitzvos into day-to-day living and sanctifying their earthly existence.

The letter *heh* is actually a word in Hebrew; it means 'here it is'.⁷ The letter *yud*, by contrast, refers to the future, as we see that a word in the future tense begins with the letter *yud*. Initially, Hoshea's name began with a *heh*, which left him inclined to relate to a situation the way it appears in front of him now. This would leave him prone to agreeing with the argument of the spies that it is not a good idea to enter the land, for at face value they are right. By having the letter *yud* added to the beginning of his name, Yehoshua received the capacity to judge a situation in terms of what could come from it. This helped him stay firm in his understanding that *ultimately* the idea of moving from the desert to the Land of Israel was a good one.

5 See Rashi to Bamidbar 11:28 quoting Sanhedrin 17a.

6 *Likutei Ma'amarim* sec. 44

7 See Bereishis 47:23.

אָמַר אֱלֹהִים... בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה יִפְּלוּ פְּגָרֵיכֶם וְכָל פְּקָדֵיכֶם... מִבֶּן עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמֵעַלָּה אֲשֶׁר
הָלִינְתֶם עָלַי

*Say to them... in this wilderness you shall fall, all of you who were counted... from twenty years and above, whom you provoked against Me.*⁸

The punishment of those who believed and supported the spies' negative reports about the land took place over the forty years in the wilderness. Each year, on the ninth of Av, those who were in their sixtieth year would perish. The Talmud relates that, in the final year, those who were approaching the age of sixty prepared for their demise, yet it did not come. By the time the fifteenth of Av had arrived, they were sure that they had not miscalculated the date and, realizing that they had been spared, the rejoiced and declared that day, Tu b'Av, as a festival.⁹ The basic question is, why did this group initially think that they too would be included in the punishment, given that, as it turned out, this was this not actually the case? Did they simply make a mistake in understanding the punishment? If so, why establish a festival over what was simply an error on their part?

The Ohr Hachaim explains that, often, when Hashem foretells a punishment, He formulates it with an element of ambiguity, thereby providing a certain latitude, allowing for clemency if the person or people do teshuvah. Indeed, this idea can be seen in the very first warning of punishment, issued to Adam, where Hashem said, “כִּי בַיּוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת” – for on the day that you eat from it [the Tree of Knowledge] you will surely die.”¹⁰ In the event, as we know, Adam lived for close to a thousand years. The commentators explain that the term “day” for us means twenty-four hours, but for Hashem is a thousand years.¹¹ Hashem left the interpretation of “day” open to whether Adam would prove himself deserving of mercy, such as by doing teshuvah, and in the end, defined “day” in His terms.

Here, too, Hashem proclaimed that the punishment would include all those who were over the age of twenty, adding, “who provoked against Me.” The question is, to which provocation was He referring? In an earlier verse, Hashem said that the people had tested Him on ten occasions, dating back to when they left Egypt. And this was the matter that was left open: Whether the punishable age was for those who were twenty years old at the episode of the spies, or only those who were already twenty years old from the first of the provocations – which became a year earlier. The group who would be affected by this were those were approaching the age of sixty in the fortieth year in the wilderness. According to the stricter interpretation of the decree – including anyone who was twenty at the time of the spies – they, too should have perished. However, Hashem ultimately had mercy on them and adopted the more lenient interpretation, which included only those who were twenty when they left Egypt. In recognition of this kindness, they declared the fifteenth of Av a festival of thanksgiving!

8 Bamidbar 14:28-29.

9 Taanis 30b.

10 Bereishis 2:17.

11 See Tehillim 90:4.