

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

PARSHAS SHEMOS

Signs for the Non-Believers

וַיַּעַן מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר וַהֲלוֹן לֹא יֶאֱמִינּוּ לִי וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹלִי כִּי יֹאמְרוּ לֹא נִרְאָה אֱלֹהִים ה'

*Moshe responded and said, "But they will not believe me and they will not listen to my voice, for they will say 'Hashem did not appear to you'."*¹

INTRODUCTION: "BUT THEY WILL NOT BELIEVE ME"

The middle section of our parsha discusses the episode of the burning bush, where Hashem appears to Moshe and charges him with taking the Jewish people out of Egypt. As our verse relates, Moshe was concerned that the people would not believe him. In response to this, Hashem provided him with three signs to perform in order to verify his status as Hashem's emissary.

SHOULD MOSHE HAVE HAD CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

If we reflect on the situation of the Jewish people at that time we will better understand where Moshe's concerns were coming from.

- ▷ Timing: Firstly, it was well-known that their exile had been foretold to their forefather, Avraham, who had been informed that it would last for four hundred years. The people had currently been in Egypt for little over two hundred years. Even if they harbored hope for the future redemption, that was not something they were expecting to see in their lifetimes.
- ▷ Identity of the Redeemer: Additionally, even if they accepted the idea that they could be redeemed now, no one was expecting that the redeemer would be Moshe, whom they had not seen for decades. If anyone, it would be Aharon, who had been together with them and prophesying for them in Egypt during this time.

It would appear, then, Moshe was correct in suspecting that his message would be met with reservations on the part of the people. Moreover, the very fact that Hashem responded by providing Moshe with signs to verify his words, as opposed to simply saying "don't worry, they will believe you," indicates that Moshe was right in suspecting that such measures might be needed.

¹ Shemos 4:1.

And yet, at the same time, this entire matter is completely astounding. For when we look just a few verses earlier,² we see that Hashem has already addressed this matter, *explicitly* assuring Moshe, “וְשָׁמְעוּ לְקוֹלְךָ – they will listen to you”! How, then, could Moshe say – in direct contradiction of these words – that they people would *not* listen to him?³

TWO TYPES OF LISTENING

To answer the above question, let us consider that the idea of “listening to someone” can have more than one meaning:

- ▷ It is possible to “listen to someone” in the sense of giving them a hearing and considering what they have to say, without necessarily then going along with it.
- ▷ Another type of “listening to someone” denotes heeding their words and following what they say.

How can we know to which of these types of listening the Torah is referring? The key is in noting whether the “listening” is followed by the letter *lamed* – “*lishmoa le'kol*,” or the letter *beis* – “*lishmoa be'kol*”:

- ▷ The letter *lamed*, which means “to”, denotes distance from A to B. Hence, listening “לקול” indicates that the listener is distinct from the speaker and it is he who will determine whether or not he follows the speaker’s wishes.
- ▷ The letter *beis*, which means “with” or “in”, denotes the proximity of A with B. Accordingly, listening “בקול” entails B heeding A’s words and following them.

In Parshas Lech Lecha,⁴ we are told of how Sarah (then Sarai), upon seeing that she had not born children, advises Avraham (then Avram) to take Hagar as a wife. The verse describes Avraham’s response:

וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרָי

Avram listened to his Sarai’s voice.

In that instance, Avraham heard Sarah’s idea, considered it and concurred with it. Hence the term “לקול” is used.

In contrast to this, after the birth of Yitzchak, when Sarah sees that Yishmael is a danger to him and she demands of Avraham to banish Hagar and Yishmael from the house, we are told by the Torah that Avraham did not concur with this idea, rather, “the matter was very bad in his eyes”!⁵ Nevertheless, Hashem told Avraham to heed Sarah’s voice in spite of his objections, and hence the term used is “בקול”.

כָּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ

*Everything that Sarah tells you, heed her voice.*⁶

2 3:18.

3 See commentaries of Ibn Ezra and Ramban to our verse and Moreh Nevuchim sec. 1 chap. 63.

4 Bereishis 16:2.

5 Ibid. 21:11.

6 Ibid. verse 12.

Applying this idea to our verses, we can see that here, too, Hashem’s original assurance to Moshe was “וְשָׁמְעוּ לְקוֹלְךָ”. With these words, Hashem was telling Moshe that the people would give him a hearing. This, however, did not guarantee him a following, or that they would necessarily even believe him. This is especially understood when we consider why they would listen to him in the first place. Rashi explains that their attention was guaranteed on account of Moshe using the words “פָּקֹד פְּקֻדָּתִי – I have indeed taken account,”⁷ which were known to be the words with which the redeemer would introduce himself. However, the very fact that this was known meant that a person using these words did not necessarily mean he was the redeemer. It did ensure, however, that people would hear what he had to say, as denoted by the words “וְשָׁמְעוּ לְקוֹלְךָ”. In light of this, Moshe proceeds to raise the concern that, even after having heard his voice, “וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹלִי – they will not heed my voice.” This concern was indeed validated by Hashem, Who then gave Moshe the signs to perform before the people.⁸

A truly stunning example of how attention to detail, down to the letter, opens up the words and messages of the verses.

THE FIRST TWO SIGNS – WAS THE SECOND SIGN BETTER THAN THE FIRST?

In response to Moshe’s concerns, Hashem provided him with two signs in order to verify his status as the emissary for redemption:

1. His staff turned into snake upon being thrown onto the ground, returning to be a staff when he picked it up.
2. His hand became leprous when he placed it in his tunic, becoming healed again as he replaced it there.

After presenting the second sign, Hashem informs Moshe:

וְהָיָה אִם לֹא יֶאֱמִינוּ לָךְ וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ לְקוֹל הָאֵת הָרִאשׁוֹן וְהֶאֱמִינוּ לְקוֹל הָאֵת הַאַחֲרוֹן

*It shall be that if they do not believe you and do not listen to the voice of the first sign, they will believe the voice of the latter sign.*⁹

The basic question is: Why would they believe the second sign more than the first. Given that both signs were miraculous, why would one miracle be more convincing than another?

Rashi presents a most astonishing answer to this question:

Once you tell them “I was stricken on your account, because I spoke lashon hara (slander) about you,” they will believe you; for they have already learned regarding such matters that those who attack them in order to harm them are stricken with tzoraas, as were Pharaoh and Avimelech on account of Sarah.

The background to Rashi’s explanation is the idea that the second sign, which involved Moshe’s hand becoming leprous, came as a punishment for him speaking negatively about the Jewish people. Once he communicated this aspect of the sign to the people they would be more convinced that he was indeed Hashem’s emissary.¹⁰

7 Shemos 3:16.

8 Based on Gur Aryeh and Malbim to our verse. See also Shemos 18:19 and 24.

9 Shemos 4:8.

10 It is amazing to consider that the Jewish people, who had by now been subjected to decades of systematic, nation-wide oppression, with their tormentors apparently free of any repercussions, were convinced by the fact that Moshe, who had merely spoken negatively about them, was punished for doing so. This means that, although sorely tried, their expectation of Divine justice had not been extinguished.

What emerges from this explanation of Rashi is that there was nothing about the second sign *per se* that made it more convincing than the first; rather, it was specifically the accompanying commentary that it came as a punishment that would hopefully bring the people round.¹¹ Needless to say, this explanation is categorized as *drash*, as it draws on an aspect of the sign which is not contained in the words of the verses themselves. This then leaves us wondering: Is there a *pshat* answer to why the second sign would be more convincing?

One of the great commentators on Rashi, the Be'er Yitzchak, explains that in fact there is no *pshat* answer to this question, because on a *pshat* level, the question doesn't begin.

PSHAT AND DRASH – LITERAL AND NON-LITERAL?

When coming to formulate the difference between *pshat* and *drash*, we might be inclined to phrase it as being that *pshat* represents the literal meaning of the words, while *drash* is the non-literal meaning. However, that formulation is not only imprecise, sometimes the exact opposite is true.

Pshat represents the straightforward reading of the verse. Sometimes, in order to arrive at the straightforward meaning, one is required to exercise a certain degree of latitude with the words, not necessarily taking them literally as stated. In our instance, there are commentators who explain that when Hashem says "if they do not listen to the first sign, they will listen to the second," it means, "the second sign *together with the first*." According to this approach, the contribution of the second sign was not *qualitative*, but *corroborative*. In other words, there was not necessarily anything inherently more convincing about the second sign; rather, now there will be two signs, and two signs are more convincing than one.

Thus far on a *pshat* level. However, says the Be'er Yitzchak, one of the classic methods of *drash* is specifically to engage in the words *as they were literally stated*. In this instance, the words literally imply that the second sign by itself would be more convincing than the first, and hence the *drash* proceeds to explain why this is so, referencing the fact that it was a punishment for Moshe speaking negatively about the people.¹²

This is a truly fascinating idea in the world of the concepts of *pshat* and *drash*, as the Be'er Yitzchak himself describes it: "כלל גדול בדרך הדרשות – a Major principle regarding *drash* expositions!"¹³

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: WHAT DID MOSHE SAY WRONG?

The question that remains is: Why is Moshe considered to have spoken *lashon hara* about the Jewish

11 Rashi explains that the first sign also contained elements of censure for Moshe over his negative comments concerning the people: Hashem informed him that he deserved to be struck by the staff in his hand for speaking ill of them, and the staff then turned into a snake, the archetypal symbol of *lashon hara*. It is interesting, therefore, that the response if the people did not believe the first sign was to provide a second sign, the compelling factor of which would be the accompanying commentary of punishment for *lashon hara*, and not simply to provide the same commentary for the already existing first sign.

12 For this reason, when it comes to the third sign of turning water into blood, Rashi does not discuss why that sign would be more convincing than the first two. Since Hashem did not say regarding the third sign, "If they don't believe the first two, they will believe this third one," it is understood that the contribution of this sign was purely corroborative, i.e. there being three signs instead of two (*Be'er Yitzchak* *ibid.*).

13 Another classic illustration of this idea comes from Rashi's comments on various verses that mention peoples' hands, e.g. Yaakov sending gifts to Esav "from that which came to his hand" (*Bereishis* 32:14), or a lesson regarding Korach that came from "Moshe's hand" (*Bamidbar* 17:5). Rashi first presents the *pshat* explanation, which in the former case means "from his domain," and in the latter case is "through his agency." However, he then adds the *drash* explanation which translates the word "hand" literally – in the first case referring to jewels that Yaakov gave Esav, and in the second case referring to Moshe's actual hand which turned leprous when he spoke negatively about the Jewish people at the burning bush. Regarding this matter, it is fair to say that the *drash* has the "ability" to translate these words literally, since it has the option of explaining them in a way that does not rely on *pshat* context.

people? As we have seen, his concerns that people would not automatically believe him were perfectly legitimate and indeed corroborated by Hashem giving him signs to verify his status!

It appears that the answer lies in Moshe's opening word: "וְהֵן". This word simply appears to mean "And they [will not believe me]." However, if so, why does Moshe use the feminine form, and not the masculine form "וְהֵם"?

In truth, the word "הֵן" has another meaning – it means "behold" or "indeed", and denotes emphasis and certainty. When Moshe said "וְהֵן לֹא יֶאֱמִינוּ לִי", he was saying, "It is certain that they will not believe me." In this regard, Moshe was considered to have slandered the Jewish people, for even if he was entitled – and perhaps even required – to address the *possibility* that the people might not believe him, he was not entitled to assert that they would *definitely* not believe him.

Thus understanding is corroborated by a passage in the Midrash¹⁴ regarding Moshe's final days, during which Hashem informed him, "הֵן קָרְבוּ יְמֵיךָ לְמוֹת" – *Behold, your days are drawing near to die.*¹⁵ The Midrash states:

כך אמר משה, רבונו של עולם, ב'הן' קלסתיך שכן כתיב 'הֵן לָהּ אֶלְקֵיךָ הַשָּׁמַיִם וְשָׁמַיִם הַשָּׁמַיִם',
וב'הן' אתה גוזר עלי מיתה? אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא... אי אתה זוכר בשעה ששלחתיך לגאול
אותם ממצרים ואמרת לי "וְהֵן לֹא יֶאֱמִינוּ לִי"?

So said Moshe: "Master of the universe, I praised You with the word "הֵן", as it says, 'Behold (הֵן), to Hashem, your God, are the heavens and the highest heavens,' and with the word "וְהֵן" You are decreeing death upon me? Said the Holy One, Blessed be He, to [Moshe]: "Do you not remember at the time I sent you to redeem them from Egypt that you said 'Behold (הֵן) they will not believe me'?"

With these words, Hashem was telling Moshe, "You may have been entitled to consider the possibility that they may not believe in you, but you were not entitled to not believe in them."

We may not be on Moshe's level where a single misplaced word can have such dire consequences, but we can, and should, certainly learn from this episode to our own lives in our dealings and interactions with our fellow Jews. As we regard others whose standards or sensitivities may be lacking in some respects, we can never consign them to such conduct or discount the possibility that they might change. They too, are children of our Patriarchs and Matriarchs, and one never knows when their Jewish soul will shine through.

14 Devarim Rabbah 9:6.

15 Devarim 31:14.