

Parshas Re-eh

PERSONAL CHOICE

When Rivka was pregnant, she was in pain all the time:

וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים, בְּקִרְבָּהּ, וַתֹּאמֶר אִם-כֵּן, לָמָּה זֶה אֲנֹכִי; וַתֵּלֶךְ, לְדָרֵשׁ אֶת-ה'
(25: 19-20)

Chazal understand that each time she walked past a holy place, one child would agitate, and each time she walked by a place of idolatry, the other would agitate.

Not yet knowing it was twins, she could not understand what she was going through – לָמָּה זֶה אֲנֹכִי – (Literally) “Why is this happening to me?”.

But her resolution was quite odd:

וַתֵּלֶךְ, לְדָרֵשׁ אֶת-ה' וַיֹּאמֶר ה' לָהּ, שְׁנֵי גַיִם בְּבֶטְנְךָ
– She went to a prophet, and he said to her, “There are two nations within you”.

After learning she was expecting twins, she was no longer distressed by what bothered her earlier. This is quite odd, as seemingly, the fact she was expecting twins does not address the issue that bothered her – her pain. What was the dialogue and resolution?

R' Chaim Brown suggests a fascinating resolution. When Moshe reviews the Torah in his final speech to the people, he tells them:

רְאֵה אֲנֹכִי נָתַן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה – See how I place before you a blessing and a curse... Good and Evil. (11: 26)

The obvious meaning is that there is a choice between two archetypes: good and evil, and we are implored to choose wisely.

But there is a different implication. אֲנֹכִי means the first person, the self, “I”. What kind of אֲנֹכִי do you want to be?

Tying this to Rivka’s problem, R’ Brown frames her problem and resolution in a different light:

אָנְכִי לָמָּה זֶה אָנְכִי – where is the אָנְכִי in this child? Does he want to go to holy places, or serve idols? This child has no אָנְכִי – he is confused!

And the prophet replied to her:

שְׁנֵי גַיִּים בְּבִטְנָךְ – It is not one confused child, it was two distinct אָנְכִי archetypes. With this, she was comforted. This is also the choice laid before the Jews. What's it going to be?

THE LIMITS OF CHARITY

The Torah affirms the importance of charity:

עֶשֶׂר תַּעֲשֶׂר – you shall tithe... (14: 22)

A double statement means to repeatedly do it, an unlimited amount of times. The difficulty this poses is that the Gemara in Kesubos caps the permissible amount of charity at no more than 20% income. These are mutually exclusive concepts.

The Vilna Gaon deduces that if the Torah requires endless generosity, it can only be that the reward for charity is the ability to give more, without hindering the giver. The Gemara in Taanis therefore says that עֶשֶׂר בְּשִׁבִיל שְׁתַּעֲשֶׂר – a person will never be limited in their ability to to give charity over time.

SEIZE THE DAY

The people are presented with a very clear choice regarding their futures:

רְאֵה אָנְכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה – Behold, I am giving before you today a blessing and a curse. (11: 26)

Curiously, there is transition from singular – רְאֵה – to the plural – לְפָנֶיכֶם. The choice presented is clearly by God – why specify אָנְכִי then; who else would be speaking? It is also given in the present tense – נֹתֵן – when it ought to say נֹתַתִּי – ‘I have given’, and with emphasis on הַיּוֹם – today. Further, why is the choice לְפָנֶיכֶם – ‘before you’, and not לָכֶם – ‘to you’?

The Vilna Gaon explains that the choice is not a general stand alone principle; it is a personal, ever-relevant choice. Anyone, at anytime, can become something more, and can repair past misdeeds. Hashem is נֹתֵן – ‘giving’ us the choice – in the present tense. The opportunity is always there.

This is accentuated – הַיּוֹם – ‘today’; forget about yesterday. Chazal understand that a Baal Teshuva is like a newborn; a new person by turning over a new leaf.

Despite the niggling self-doubt in the recesses of the mind at the ability to change, Hashem assures that you are not alone – אָנְכִי – “I am with you in the struggle”. The Gemara teaches that the evil inclination seeks to consume and destroy mankind, and without God’s help we would be powerless to resist. God is with us.

But the choice remains ours. We have to exercise our free will and make the decision. God can only present the opportunity – אָנְכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם.

R Yitzchak Lande points out that the Torah frequently switches from plural to singular, to teach that although there is an expectation of society – every single Jew has to participate. And if society aren't doing it, you have to do it on your own.

In a world of fugitives, the person taking the opposite direction will appear to be running away.

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