

Parshas Vayelech

CRUTCHES AND TRAINING WHEELS

In Moshe's parting words to the nation, having dispensed his duties, he informs them how they need to face their responsibilities:

ה אֶלְהֵיְךָ הוּא עֹבֵר לְפָנֶיךָ, הוּא-נִשְׁמָיֵד אֶת-הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה – Hashem, your God; He will cross you over, He will destroy the nations before you. (31: 3)

The repeated emphasis on הוא, that "He" will do it, seems strange. Why not just describe how God would take care of them in general?

The Ohr HaChaim explains that the Jews were worried that by losing Moshe, they would lose two advantages; first, that he could and would intercede on their behalf if they erred, such as with the Golden Calf, where his prayer ended the plague and prevented their annihilation; and second, that he would not be leading them in the wars they would inevitably fight on entry into the Land of Israel. They did not (could not?) lose a war with Moshe at the helm.

Moshe addressed the first concern by telling them that they were misplacing their trust – it had never been about him. הוא עֹבֵר לְפָנֶיךָ – the same word used to describe Hashem's characteristic of forgiveness – עוֹבֵר עַל פֶּשַׁע. Moshe explained that in reality, it had been Hashem all along, that He had planted the idea of praying for the Jews in Moshe, and that the desire to forgive would remain. Moshe had simply been a tool for forgiveness, and not the root cause.

Regarding the concern of losing battles, Moshe expressed the same idea – it had never been him leading them to victory – הוא-נִשְׁמָיֵד אֶת-הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה – Hashem had been with them all the time, and would remain so evermore. They didn't win wars because of Moshe, but because Hashem was orchestrating events.

Perhaps it also sheds light on the law that an army preparing for war did not enlist men who were frightened to fight. Someone who has done all they can to train and prepare must have proper faith in God – fear indicates a lack of belief, and such people cannot take up arms in His name.

The Seforno explains that the whole speech conveys this critical message – that they ought not get caught up in the medium. Hashem supervises and controls everything, and wanting a conduit is dangerous, and in parentheses, possibly idolatrous – this was precisely the rationale behind the Golden Calf. Moshe emphasised that every person alone has a relationship with Hashem, and that intermediaries are not valid representatives for the people themselves.

R Tzadok HaCohen notes how the whole Sefer Devarim – Moshe’s entire speech – can be read as speaking directly to the reader.

Teachers and guides are critically important influences – the Mishna in Avos requires it of us. But living vicariously through a proxy is something else entirely. Moshe was telling the Jews that after 40 years of maturation, they were finally ready to become what they left Egypt to be.

Eventually, the training wheels have to come off.

THE SENSES

As part of Moshe’s final speech, he recounts what the Jews went through on their journey through the desert, and how central the Torah was to how they perceived reality:

וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל, וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם: אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם, אֶת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְהוָה לְעֵינֵיכֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, לַפְרָעָה וּלְכָל-עַבְדָּיו, וּלְכָל-אֶרְצוֹ. הַמַּסּוֹת, הַגְּדֹלֹת, אֲשֶׁר רָאוּ, עֵינֵיךָ-הָאֵלֶּת וְהַמִּפְתִּיּוֹת הַגְּדֹלִים, הֵם. וְלֹא-נָתַן יְהוָה לְכֶם לֵב לְדַעַת, וְעֵינַיִם לְרִאּוֹת וְאָזְנוֹיִם לְשָׁמֹעַ, עַד, הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה – And Moshe called all the Jews, and said to them: “You saw all that Hashem did in Egypt, with your own eyes, to Paroh, his servants, and his land. The great miracles and signs; you saw. Hashem didn’t give you a heart to understand, eyes to see, nor ears to hear, until this day.” (29: 1-3)

Rashi elaborates that *עד היום הזה* refers when Moshe wrote the Torah in the form we have it, and give it to the Levi’im, who were the tribe entrusted with the responsibility of safeguarding and teaching Torah. What changed then, that he recognised in them understanding and perception?

Rashi explains that when Moshe gave his Torah to the Levi’im, the other Jews protested them being singled out for keeping it, with the worry that perhaps Levi could exclude the other tribes with their monopoly. When Moshe saw their passion and the esteem in which they held the Torah, he praised them.

R’ Leib Salomon inquires what the line of protest may have been. They couldn’t be concerned that perhaps Levi would misappropriate the Torah for themselves; because how could they? Levi are clearly delineated for public service – would would they serve?

R’ Matisyahu Salomon explains that they were not concerned about an exclusive claim to mitzva performance, but the capacity to be a Torah scholar. When Moshe saw people fighting for the right to study the Torah, he understood how much the Torah meant to them.

R’ Matisyahu points out that “The great miracles and signs you saw” were not enough to persuade Moshe that they had *לְשָׁמֹעַ לְרִאּוֹת וְאָזְנוֹיִם לְדַעַת* – it was their desire and passion for Torah that precipitated this realisation.

Seeing miracles don’t makes someone a true ambassador of God; it is the struggle, the toil, that comes with intensive Torah study that transforms a Jew; which Moshe called the heart, eyes and ears.

Without it, we are dull, deaf, dumb, blind, and insensitive.

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