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בס"ד

Parashat Ki Tissa Part V Moshe's Prayers

I. Introduction

According to the terms of the Covenant the Israelites had entered into with Hashem, their most basic responsibilities were to have no other gods besides Him and to serve Him exclusively. The golden calf transgression abrogated the relationship and deserved the direst of retributions. Thus, after informing Moshe of Israel's apostasy, Hashem articulated His intention to destroy the nation and establish a new nation beginning with Moshe.

However, the latter statement began with *ועתה הניחה לי*, "and now leave Me," in other words, "do not stop Me," implying that Hashem was interested in having Moshe's agreement before implementing His decision. The virtually synonymous phrase Moshe ascribes to Him in the corresponding Deuteronomy account, "*הרף ממני*" (Deut. 9:14) confirms this understanding. In accordance with the rule formulated by the Sages as *דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם* (The Torah speaks in the language of man), the implication is clear. G-d Himself was undecided as to what to do or rather preferred not to destroy Israel, but He felt required to act in accordance with the basic demands of justice. The combination of His nature and the manner in which He chose to govern the world produced this predicament. Also implied in the phrase of "and now leave Me" is a hint to Moshe that there may be another way.

An individual of the spiritual stature and whole-hearted dedication of Moshe, who accepted G-d's mission to represent Him to the nation and who obviously identifies with His goals, has a say in the matter. If upon seeing the larger picture Moshe sincerely believes there is room for forgiveness of the nation and implores G-d to do so, G-d must

reconsider. And Moshe's immediately following prayer was of the utmost sincerity - it lacked any egoism or self-interest as he had just been given the glorious opportunity to himself be the progenitor of a new, great nation, which he ignored. And of course it must be borne in mind that he is the most humble of men (Num. 12:3), which eminently suited him for the position of being an honest broker.

It is a Divinely esteemed value that acts of providence should be comprehended and properly regarded by a truly worthy spiritual personage living in the sphere of the action, if there be one present. "For Hashem Elokim does not do anything without revealing His counsel to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). The intervention of an individual of exceptional holiness who is fully dedicated to Hashem while deeply caring and concerned for the people, makes a critical difference in Hashem's final judgment on a matter. This is a message transmitted a number of times in Tanakh.

Before destroying Sodom, Hashem brought Abraham into his decision-making process. He rhetorically asked, "Am I concealing from Abraham that which I am doing?," considering the leading role he had begun to play in bringing Hashem's program to the world, "that he... will instruct his children and household after him to observe the way of Hashem to do righteousness and justice in the world...?" (Gen. 18:17-19). Abraham exclaimed: "Far be it from You... to put to death innocent with guilty, that the fate of the innocent shall be the same as that of the guilty. Far be it from You! Shall the judge of the whole world not do justice?" (v. 25). And Abraham's several suggestions to spare the city if there were in it the required number of innocent were accepted.

When the spies prompted the people to reject the Promised Land, Hashem once again expressed the idea of destroying Israel and making a new nation from Moshe, one even greater than Israel. His unusual phraseology there led Moshe to recognize that, in a way, he was being “consulted” and he immediately entered into prayer, saving the nation (Num. 14:11-25). This Divine characteristic set a model for human behavior to be patient, consult others and carefully consider all sides of an issue before finalizing a decision, particularly in cases that may cause harm to others.

In our case, not only does Moshe refuse to consider his personal opportunity to found a new nation and requests that Israel not be destroyed, but he initiates a protracted endeavor to reconcile G-d with Israel. Of course, to progress from G-d’s revocation of a decree of annihilation to secure His forgiveness and expiation for Israel and ultimately to restoration of the Covenant must be a step-by-step process. It required Moshe’s entreaties on several distinct occasions as narrated in Exodus 32-34. In the later of these prayers he also requests insight into the ways of G-d’s providence and comprehension of His glory. The text provides a significant number of specific quotations from his prayers (Ex. 32:11-13, 31-32; 33:12-13, 15-16, 18; 34:9) and of the Divine responses. The topics are profound and there are many ambiguities and metaphoric expressions in the narrative, but the words are there to explicate and give us some understanding of these matters, limited as it may be.

II. Prayers and Responses

In Moshe’s prayer for forgiveness while still on the mountaintop, when he was made aware that Israel was sinning at that very moment, he does not base his pleas on any of the nation’s qualities. He begins - with the first למה - with the contention that Hashem should not allow His fury to rage against His nation in which He has invested so much and with whom much has already been accomplished. He specifies Hashem’s having brought the nation out of Egypt with a manifestation of His great power. The subtle point in this statement - without bringing it out explicitly, as it cannot be fully justified with the strict dictates of justice - appears to be that Israel is indeed “His” nation and there is a certain degree of flexibility

expected in recognition of such an intimate relationship. (It is not unlike the bond between parent and child, above and beyond the standard rules of justice.)

Furthermore - beginning with the second למה - Moshe argues that annihilating the nation now would not be properly comprehended by Egypt (and the other nations), but would lead to a serious distortion in their understanding of the true G-d and a desecration of His reputation. The backdrop to this argument is that a major purpose of the Exodus was that Egypt (and the other nations) should recognize Hashem’s sovereignty in the world. At that point he implores Him to turn back from his wrath and relent from the harm He was going to do to His nation.

In addition, Moshe adds, Hashem should consider the merit of the forefathers and His oath to them; He had made a commitment to them that He will exceedingly multiply their progeny and bring them into the Promised Land that they would possess forever.

G-d’s knowledge of these notions, in what may be termed the abstract, was insufficient to override Israel’s apostasy. There are two sides to judging the effects of the close relationship as well as to assessing considerations of His glory. His name remaining attached to the nation may further be desecrated. As to past pledges, all guarantees are to some degree conditioned on the worthiness of the recipients. And if Moshe agrees to father a new nation it will still be Abraham’s progeny. But Moshe brought up important perspectives, and if in all sincerity he sees Israel as deserving another chance (not necessarily the last chance), Hashem goes along to some extent. He relents from His intention to annihilate the nation. But of course this is not equal to forgiveness. The people below are engaged in their idolatry and revelry!

The day after he returned to the camp, destroyed the calf and punished the guilty, Moshe ascends the mountain again to entreat G-d a second time. He first informs the people that they have grievously sinned and he will pray on their behalf, trying to achieve *kapara* (atonement) for them (Ex. 32:30). Although they do not say anything, their complete acquiescence to his series of actions the previous day and to his present statements indicates that they consented to his

words. It is assumed that they recognize the enormity of their transgression and accept him as their delegate to transmit their prayer on high.

This time, after beginning with an expression of pleading (*a'na*), Moshe acknowledges their sin and straightaway requests Hashem to forgive the nation. He links his request with his total personal identification with Israel. If Hashem does not forgive their sin, he asks to be erased from His book - probably the book of His future plans although many have thought of it as the book of life. Together with his greatness in prophecy and closeness to G-d, undoubtedly including exceeding love for and loyalty to Him and His program, in fulfilling his mission to Israel Moshe had bonded with the nation. He believed in its potential and could no longer perceive himself as living independently of it. His position seems to be that he understands progress is necessarily an evolutionary process with bumps in the road. G-d replies that He will only erase from His book those who sinned to Him, essentially rejecting the major thrust of Moshe's plea.

But G-d does respond to the prayer to a significant extent. He now agrees that Moshe may proceed to lead the nation to the Promised Land and He will have His angel proceed before them. This implies a manner of a reduced relationship from what had originally been planned, with an angel in place of His own presence accompanying them. According to the original plan His own presence was to have been manifested in the Mishkan (assuming that the Mishkan was not a response to the golden calf), a project set aside by the transgression and at this point not yet reinstated. As concerns retribution, He states that He will mete it out in its proper time. In the following passage He explains His purpose in substituting His angel for His more direct presence; it is for the nation's safety, to offer them more latitude, "for you are a stiff-necked people, lest I destroy you on the journey" (33:3).

Upon hearing the news of a reduced Divine attachment to them, despite the positive development of being allowed to proceed to the land under Hashem's auspices, the people are extremely upset and desist from wearing their finery (v. 4). This is a

most positive sign as it signals a significant stage of remorse and repentance.

As the Mishkan is on hold, Moshe establishes a tent outside the camp, distant from it, for those who wish to seek Hashem, "and he called it *Ohel Mo'ed*" (v. 7), paralleling the *Ohel Mo'ed* of the Mishkan that cannot yet be constructed. The substitute tent is clearly one of greatly subdued activity, without priests, sacrifices or a ritual program. The verse states that "Moshe would take the tent and pitch it outside the camp," indicating that this was his ongoing practice. It seems that he retained this other *Ohel Mo'ed* even after the Mishkan was built (apparently used in Num. 11:34-30, 12:4 and Deut. 31:14-15, see Destination Torah p. 102). Hashem manifested His presence there, relating prophetically to Moshe at the highest level, פְּנִים אֶל פְּנִים. The people are depicted as being reverent to Hashem as well as to Moshe (Ex. 33:7-11), further indicating their contrition and preparing the way for Moshe to go further in his intercessory prayers on their behalf.

In the third stage of Moshe's prayers, he capitalizes on the warm relationship he has with G-d. He requests insight concerning the details of the Divine leadership G-d planned for the journey and deeper comprehension into His ways. Moshe stresses that his request is linked to Israel's status of being G-d's chosen people. He also requests that He accompany the nation with a more direct presence, accentuating the importance of Israel being recognized as a special nation on the face of the earth as a result of the Divine presence accompanying it. (This is in accordance with G-d's intention proclaimed in His introduction to the Lawgiving.)

In these multi-faceted prayers Moshe manifests his noble character, the depth of his spiritual yearning and his unwavering concern for Israel. In a dynamic process, G-d consents (v. 14) and further consents, because, He tells Moshe, "You have found favor in My eyes" (v. 17). Each favorable reply appears to encourage Moshe to go a step further. He asks G-d to reveal His glory to him (which will give Moshe more wherewithal to request further forgiveness for Israel) and He does agree to reveal to Moshe the maximum that can be perceived by a human being.

Finally, G-d instructs Moshe to ascend Mount Sinai with new Tablets upon which He will write that which was on the first Tablets - signaling restoration of the Covenant. On this occasion He grants Moshe insight into His characteristics (designated in rabbinical literature as *The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy*). In the closest contact possible with G-d and achieving his personal goal of perceiving the most sublime insights into His glory, Moshe quickly takes the opportunity to request, "please, Hashem, go in our midst, because this is a stiff-necked people and forgive our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your portion" (34:9). Whereas the stiff-necked attribute was part of Hashem's reason to reject Israel and to be reluctant to have His presence accompany it (32:9, 33:3), Moshe now presents it as a reason for His return to a complete relationship with Israel and to comport with a full measure of forgiveness.

A direct response to this request is not forthcoming. Perhaps an explicit answer must await Israel's actions,

for there is a limit to how much can be done on the basis of Moshe's requests. However, at this point Hashem does commit Himself to a renewed Covenant - with stipulations to follow - and to performing wondrous deeds on behalf of the nation (34:10). Moshe remains on the mountain for forty days and forty nights while G-d provides him additional insights and teaching for Israel and gives him the second set of Tablets.

Moshe had accomplished a monumental task. Confronted with a most serious crisis he rose to the challenge, demonstrating his faithfulness to G-d and Israel, setting a superlative example for all time. When he descended his face was radiant - he had reached the heights of human contact with the Divine and had become a beacon of light - and he proceeded with teaching Israel and launching the Mishkan project.

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