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בס"ד

Parashat Ki Tissa Part V Moses' Prayers

1. Introduction

According to the terms of the covenant that the Israelites had entered into with G-d, their most fundamental 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 Moses of Israel's apostasy, Hashem articulated His intention to destroy the nation and establish a new nation beginning with him.

The latter statement began with *וְעַתָּה הַבִּיחָה לִי* ("and now leave Me"), in other words, "do not stop Me," implying that Hashem was interested in having Moses' agreement before implementing His decision. The virtually synonymous phrase that Moses ascribes to Him in the corresponding Deuteronomy account, *הֲרַף מִמֶּנִּי* ("let Me be" [Deut. 9:14]) confirms this understanding. In accordance with the well-established principle that "the Torah speaks in the language of man," the implication is clear. G-d felt required to act in accordance with the basic demands of justice but He Himself preferred not to destroy Israel. The combination of His nature and the manner in which He chose to govern the world produced a predicament. Accordingly, He would only carry out His intention if an honest human representative such as Moses deemed it proper to so act. The phrase "and now leave Me" hints to Moses that there is another way.

An individual of the spiritual stature and wholehearted dedication of Moses, who accepted G-d's mission to represent Him to the nation and who obviously identifies with His goals, but who also is an outstanding human being concerned for the welfare of others, has a say in the matter. If upon seeing the larger picture he sincerely believes there is room for

forgiveness of the nation and implores G-d to do so, G-d would reconsider. And Moses' 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 would not consider. 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.

An aspect of this situation is described by Amos: "For Hashem Elokim does not do anything without revealing His counsel to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). 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. The intervention of an individual of exceptional holiness, who is deeply concerned for the people and is fully dedicated to Hashem, makes a critical difference in Hashem's final judgment on a matter. This is a message transmitted a number of times in Scripture.

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 the innocent with the 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 earth not do justice?" (v. 25). And Abraham's several suggestions to spare the city if there were in it the required number of innocent individuals were accepted.

When the spies prompted the people to reject the promised land, Hashem once again brought up the notion of destroying Israel and establishing a new nation beginning with Moses, one even greater than Israel. Of course the obvious question is what guarantee is there that the new nation would exercise its free will in a preferable manner? But the statement must be understood from the perspective of the way a man might speak. In any event, Hashem's unusual phraseology led Moses to recognize that, in a real way, he was being "consulted" and he immediately entered into prayer, saving the nation (Num. 14:11-25). This divine characteristic set an important model for human behavior that an individual should 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 Moses 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, progression from the basic step of G-d's revocation of a decree of annihilation to the next step of securing His forgiveness of Israel and expiation for its transgression, and ultimately to restoration of the covenant must be a step-by-step process. It required Moses' entreaties on several distinct occasions as narrated in Exodus 32-34. In the latter 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 (Exod. 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 provide us some surface understanding of these matters, limited as that may be.

2. Prayers and Responses

In Moses' prayer for forgiveness while still on the mountaintop, when he was made aware that Israel was grievously sinning at that very moment, he does not base his pleas on any of the nation's qualities. He begins – remarkably opening with the word *מָה*, "why" – 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. There are considerations that should be taken into account. He specifies Hashem's having brought the nation out of Egypt with a manifestation of His great power. The subtle point in this statement – not explicitly articulated since it cannot be fully justified within the strict dictates of justice – appears to be that Israel is indeed "His" nation and there is a certain degree of compassion and flexibility expected in recognition of such an intimate relationship. (It is not unlike the bond between parent and child, which is above and beyond the standard rules of justice.)

Furthermore – again beginning with *מָה* (albeit with a different accentuation), which this time does not refer to Hashem but recalls to mind the first use of that word – Moses 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 Moses implores G-d to turn back from His wrath and relent from the harm He was intending to do to His nation.

After asking Hashem to relent, Moses adds that He should consider the merit of the patriarchs 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 as part of an eternal heritage.

G-d's conceptual knowledge of these notions was insufficient to override the requirement that justice be rendered and Israel receive the appropriate retribution for its apostasy. There are two sides to judging the effects of the close relationship G-d had with Israel and to assessing considerations of His glory. Allowing His name to remain attached to the nation may lead to further desecration of it. As to the pledges to the patriarchs, it is understood that all promises are conditioned on the continued worthiness of the recipients. And if Moses agrees to father a new nation it will still be the patriarchs' progeny. But Moses brought forth different perspectives on these issues. 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 this is not equal to forgiveness. The people below are engaged in their idolatry and revelry!

The day Moses descended from the mountain he destroyed the calf and punished the guilty. The next day he ascended the mountain to entreat G-d a second time. But first he informs the people that they have committed a great sin and he will pray on their behalf, trying to achieve atonement for them (Exod. 32:30). Of course they realized they committed a great sin from the day before. This statement of Moses formally establishes him as their delegate to transmit their prayer on high. 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 recognize the enormity of their sin and that they consented to his words.

This time, after beginning his prayer with an expression of pleading (*ana*, “please”), Moses 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, “erase me, please, from Your book which You have written” (v. 32). (This book probably refers to the “book” of G-d’s future plans; some 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 and goals, in fulfilling his mission to Israel Moses had bonded with the nation. He believed in its potential and destiny 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 major bumps on the road. G-d replies that He will only erase from His book those who sinned against Him, essentially rejecting that aspect of Moses’ plea.

But G-d does respond to the prayer to a significant extent. He now agrees that Moses may proceed to lead the nation to the promised land and He will have His angel proceed before them. This implies 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

Tabernacle, a project set aside by the transgression and at this point not yet reinstated. As concerns retribution, G-d 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 Tabernacle is on hold, Moses establishes a tent outside the camp, distant from it, for those who wish to seek Hashem, “and he called it *Ohel Mo’ed*” (“Tent of Meeting,” [v. 7]). That Moses “called it *Ohel Mo’ed*” indicates that he established it as a substitute of sorts for the official *Ohel Mo’ed* of the Tabernacle project that he knew about from G-d’s instructions but which 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 “Moses would take the tent and pitch it outside the camp,” informing us that this was his ongoing practice. Hashem manifested His presence there, relating prophetically to Moses at the highest level, figuratively described as פְּנִים אֶל פְּנִים (“face to face”). The people are depicted as being reverent to Hashem as well as to Moses (Exod. 33:7-11), further indicating their contrition and preparing the way for Moses to go further in his intercessory prayers on their behalf.

It seems that this other *Ohel Mo’ed* was retained even after the official one was constructed and at least occasionally used (apparently used in Num. 11:34-30; 12:4 and Deut. 31:14-15, see *Destination Torah* p. 102).

In the third stage of Moses’ prayers, he capitalizes on the warm relationship he has with G-d. He requests insight concerning the details of the divine leadership that G-d has planned for the journey and deeper comprehension into His ways. Moses stresses that his request is linked to Israel’s status of being G-d’s chosen people. He also requests that G-d 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 multifaceted prayers, Moses 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 Moses, "You have found favor in My eyes" (v. 17). Each favorable reply appears to encourage Moses to go a step further. He asks G-d to reveal His glory to him (which will provide Moses more wherewithal to request further forgiveness for Israel), and He does agree to reveal to Moses the maximum that can be perceived by a human being. ("You cannot see My face for no man can see Me and live" [v. 20].) The meaning seems to be that humans cannot perceive G-d's essence; they only have access to his attributes and modes of governance.

Finally, G-d instructs Moses 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 Moses insight into His personal characteristics (designated in rabbinical literature as *The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy*). In the closest contact possible with G-d and having achieved his personal goal of perceiving the most sublime insights into His glory, Moses 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), Moses now presents it as a reason for His return to a complete relationship with Israel and to relate to them 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 Moses' requests without Israel's involvement. 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). Moses remains on the mountain for forty days and forty nights while Hashem provides him with additional insights for teaching Israel and gives him the second set of tablets.

Moses had accomplished a monumental task. Confronted with a most serious crisis he rose to the challenge. In demonstrating his faithfulness to G-d and Israel, he set a superlative example for all time for all humanity, especially for serious leaders. 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 Tabernacle project.

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