

Meshech Chochmah Parshas Shemos

The Scales of Redemption

פָּקֹד פְּקֹדֹתַי אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת הָעֲשׂוּי לָכֶם בְּמִצְרַיִם. וְאָמַר אֶעֱלֶה אֶתְכֶם מֵעֵנִי מִצְרַיִם

I have surely taken account of you and what has been done to you in Mitzrayim. And I have said, "I shall bring you up from the affliction of Mitzrayim" (3:16-17)

The Meshech Chochmah cites a most beautiful interpretation of these pesukim in the name of his father, R' Shimshon. When Hashem judges a person, or a group of people, there will typically be merits and demerits to consider. These will represent arguments for and against that person which need to be balanced against each other, with the "weightier" side determining the person's judgment. The precise weight of each act is something that can only be truly assessed by Hashem Himself, taking into account all the factors which led to its commission. This idea is expressed by the Rambam in Hilchos Teshuvah:¹

*This weighing up is not determined by the **number** of merits and demerits, rather, by their **magnitude**... and this can only be weighed through the assessment of the God of all knowledge, for He alone knows how to assess one's merits against one's demerits.*

נושא עון – "Raising Sin"

Thus, it emerges that a compassionate view of a wrongdoing can render it "lighter," by factoring in certain circumstances which can serve to mitigate on the person's behalf. This idea will give us a new understanding of one of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy known as "נושא עון".² We normally translate this phrase as saying that Hashem bears (נושא) a person's sin. However, in light of the Rambam's words, we can understand this attribute as that of "raising up sin," i.e. reckoning it as lighter on the scales of judgment, so that the merits on the other side weigh down, raising the side of demerit higher, and thereby yielding a positive verdict.

¹ Perek 3, Halachah 2.

² Shemos 34:7.

With this in mind, let us return to our pesukim. Hashem says “ פָּקֹד פִּקְדֹתַי אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת הָעֲשׂוּי לָכֶם בְּמִצְרַיִם.” The standard translation of the double expression “פָּקֹד פִּקְדֹתַי” is “I have surely taken into account.” However, R’ Shimshon explains that Hashem uses a double expression here because He is, in fact, taking two things into account, namely:

1. “You,” – i.e. your behavior. As we are told by Chazal, Bnei Yisrael had become involved in numerous unacceptable practices while in Mitzrayim.³ These could potentially mitigate against their being considered worthy of redemption.
2. “That which had been done to you in Mitzrayim” – referring to the intense persecution which placed them in a state of duress and led them to these objectionable acts on their part.

This second consideration constitutes an argument on the Jewish People’s behalf and hence, which places it on the other side of the scale, leaving them equally weighted, and their fate hanging in the balance. At this point, Hashem proceeds to invoke the principle of “נושא עון – raising up the side of sin” by seeing it as the lighter of the two sides. Thus, He continues, “*And I have said, ‘I shall raise you up from the affliction of Mitzrayim’*”. Here, the intensity of the persecution is considered the determining factor, outweighing the wrongdoings of Bnei Yisrael. With their demerits thus “raised up,” the path towards deliverance is thereby set and its process of redemption can be initiated!

וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בַּמְלוּךְ וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ ה' וַיִּבְקֶשׂ הַמִּיתוֹ

It was on the way, in the inn, Hashem encountered him (Moshe) and sought to kill him (4:24)

The Gemara⁴ informs us that the danger which confronted Moshe on this occasion was in reponse to his delaying the *milah* of his second son, Eliezer.

³ Such as discontinuing *milah* and serving Avodah Zarah (see Mechilta to Shemos 12:21)

⁴ Nedarim 31b, cited in Rashi s.v. *vakevakesh*.

Indeed, as the Torah proceeds to relate, as soon as Tziporah performed the *milah*, the danger to Moshe ceased.

Moshe's Dilemma

The Gemara, however, raises the question: In what way is Moshe considered to have been neglectful of the mitzvah of *milah*? After all, Moshe has been charged with the mission of delivering Bnei Yisrael from Mitzrayim, one which he should presumably initiate straight away. As the Gemara outlines Moshe's considerations:

- If he will perform the *milah* and immediately set out for Mitzrayim, he could thereby endanger the life of Eliezer, who will be in a fragile state for the ensuing three days.
- If he should wait for Eliezer to recover, he will delay commencing the mission on which Hashem has sent him.

Based on these considerations, the Gemara concludes, Moshe was surely justified in delaying the *milah*. Why, then was he punished?

The Gemara answers that the reason Moshe was punished is because even when he reached the inn where he could perform the *milah* safely, he delayed somewhat, involving himself first in the arrangements pertaining to their accommodation.

The Meshech Chochmah offers a stunningly different explanation of this matter, whereby Moshe was punished, not for delaying the *milah* of his son while bringing him with him to Mitzrayim, but for bringing him with him in the first place!

Moshe's Mission to Mitzrayim

He prefaces by asking a basic question: Why did Moshe bring his family with him to Mitzrayim? Presumably, their presence there was not required for him to be able to fulfill his mission. Indeed, it could be argued that he should specifically not bring them with him into a place of danger and oppression for no reason!

The answer to this question is rooted in a concern which Moshe voiced as part of his dialogue with Hashem at the Burning Bush;⁵ namely, that the Jewish People would not believe him when he said that Hashem had appeared to him and charged him with taking them out of Mitzrayim. It was due to this concern that Moshe decided to bring his family with him. For if Hashem had not really appointed him as His agent for the redemption, there is no way he would have placed his wife and children in danger! By bringing his family to Mitzrayim, Moshe was demonstrating the veracity of his claim, in the hope that the people, upon seeing this, would accept his words as true.

However, Moshe is considered to have been unduly doubtful regarding the faith of the Jewish People, and his concerns over this matter were unfounded.⁶ This means that, ultimately, bringing his family with him to Mitzrayim – as a display of confidence to bolster their faith – was entirely unnecessary. This, says Meshech Chochmah, is why he was punished for delaying the *milah* of his son. Had he been meant to bring his son with him, he could not have been faulted for his delaying the *milah*, for the reasons outlined above. In fact, however, there was no actual requirement to bring his family, which means that the correct course of action should have been to perform the *milah* immediately and then proceed *by himself* to Mitzrayim, leaving his son to recuperate back in Midian. As such, Moshe could not excuse himself for delaying his son's *milah* on account of the dangers of a journey on which there was no take him.⁷

⁵ 4:1.

⁶ See Rashi 4:2 s.v. *mazeh*.

⁷ In his commentary to this section, Rav Copperman cites the suggestion of his brother, Dr. Yitzchak Copperman א"ח"ל, as to why the danger which confronted Moshe on that occasion specifically took the form of a snake which threatened to swallow him whole (See Rashi to our pasuk s.v. *vayevakesh*). Since the fault in Moshe's delaying his son's *milah* was sourced in his negative statement concerning the willingness of Bnei Yisrael to believe him, it was effectively a progression of what was judged on his level to be Lashon Hara about the Jewish People, a sin which is symbolized by the snake.