

Parschas Mishpatim 5771

IF THE TABLES WERE TURNED...

The narrative of the giving of the Torah at Har Sinai continues in this week's *parshah*. The Gemara in Shabbos (88b) provides a glimpse of some of the "behind the scenes" events. It seems that the transferring of the Torah to the Jewish people's domain was no simple matter at all. In fact, a great debate ensued between the angels and Moshe Rabbeinu, wherein the former argued that the Torah was too holy to be granted to mortals. Moshe's curious response was a challenge to the *malachim*. "Did you ever go down to Egypt?" he asked them.

Exactly what Moshe's intent was, and why this was a winning argument, is an issue that deserves examination. We will return to this point, *im yirtzeh Hashem*, after a slight foray into another area in order to lay the groundwork.

FROM MALACHIM (ANGELS) TO MELACHIM (KINGS)

There is a chapter of Mishnayos in Sanhedrin that discusses the topic of Olam Haba (the Afterlife): who merits a portion in Olam Haba, and who does not. At one point, the focus turns to certain high-profile figures of Biblical history. The Mishnah (10:2) states:

שְׁלֹשָׁה מְלָכִים... אֵין לָהֶם חֶלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא... יִרְבְּעָם,
אֲחָאָב, וּמְנַשֶּׁה.

נדפס לזכות ר' אברהם יצחק נ"י בן פיגא ריזא ע"ה
ברכה והצלחה ברוחניות ובגשמיות

"There are three kings (of Israel) who do not have a share in the World to Come: Yeravam, Achav, and Menashe."

These monarchs distinguished themselves by their abject wickedness, for which they forfeited their portion in Olam Haba. They were not completely devoid of favorable characteristics, however; their evil deeds simply outweighed whatever potentially redeeming qualities they may have possessed. The fact is that they were Torah scholars of note, as evidenced by the following fascinating story related by the Gemara (*Sanhedrin 102b*):

R' Ashi told his disciples that on the morrow they would be studying the (aforementioned) Mishnah about the three kings. In referring to this royal trio in his announcement, R' Ashi did not accord them any special regard, but merely stated: "Tomorrow, we will begin discussing our friends."

That night, in a dream, R' Ashi received a nocturnal visit from none other than King Menashe. In an effort to set the record straight, Menashe engaged R' Ashi in a *halachic* discussion; the latter was stumped by the query posed to him by the monarch. Duly impressed, R' Ashi expressed his wonderment to Menashe: "If you indeed were such a great Torah scholar, how was it that you sinned so grievously in your lifetime by worshipping idols?"

Menashe answered that the temptation for this particular transgression, which existed at the time,

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
שיינא אסתר בת נחום לייב ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with
no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her neshamah.

was so irresistible that R' Ashi himself would have zealously followed Menashe's lead had he lived then. "Had you been there," the king told him, "you would have grabbed onto the hem of my garment and run after me (in succumbing to the lure of idolatry)."

R' Ashi got the message. Despite their eventual downfall, the erudition of the kings deserved some respect. When he began the next day's lecture, he corrected his previous statement: "Today," he told his students, "we shall learn about our *teachers*."

A WINNING ARGUMENT AND A VORT (TORAH THOUGHT) FOR YOUR SEDER TABLE

The lesson emerging from this narrative can aid our understanding of Moshe's debate with the *malachim* on Har Sinai. The angels felt themselves to be the superior of the Jews; the Torah should remain in the upper spheres, they claimed, and not be transferred to the much more lowly mortals. Moshe Rabbeinu's reply – "Did you sojourn in Egypt?" – is actually somewhat reminiscent of the sentiment expressed in the conversation between Menashe and R' Ashi. The king chastised R' Ashi by invoking a circumstance in which R' Ashi had not been present. "Had you been there," Menashe told him, "you yourself might not have risen to the occasion."

This was also the essence of Moshe's answer to the angels. R' Yitzchak of Volozhin (*Peh Kadosh, parshas Bo*) explains: Moshe sought to dispel the angels' smugness by reminding them of the awful spiritual environment that existed in Egypt. The question *Did you go down to Egypt?* was meant as a rebuke. The Jewish people – Moshe was telling the angels – are really one step ahead of you and hence more deserving of the Torah. While the intense spiritual impurity of Egypt did have an effect on them, the Jews nevertheless

retained just enough merit to warrant redemption. But if you angels had been there, you would have been so influenced by the prevailing culture of depravity that you would not have been deserving of salvation. Instead, you would have remained in that land, enslaved to Pharaoh, and unable and ineligible to receive the Torah.

R' Yitzchak adds that this could also be the meaning of a familiar passage in the Haggadah of Pesach. Hashem declared that the Redemption would be performed by Him alone. "And *I* (Hashem) shall pass through the land of Egypt," states the verse (*Shemos 12:12*); and the Haggadah expounds: "*I* – and not an angelic agent." In light of the above, this exclusion is quite understandable. No angel could have "passed through the land of Egypt," for had they done so, they would never have been able to leave.

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