

Parshas Nasso 5771

THE CLEAREST PICTURE

As we approach the festival which celebrates the giving of the Torah -- the Yom Tov of Shavuot -- let us turn to a familiar Mishnah which deals with this very topic. The Mishnah in Avos (1:1) states:

משה קבל תורה מסיני, ומסרה ליהושע, ויהושע לזקנים, וזקנים לנביאים, ונביאים מסרוה לאנשי כנסת הגדולה...

“Moshe received the Torah from (Hashem at) Sinai, and transferred it to Yehoshua; Yehoshua (transferred it) to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transferred it to the Men of the Great Assembly...”

VARIANT VERBS

This well-known Mishnah outlines the chain of the Torah’s transmission straight from Heaven down through the generations. A discrepancy that sometimes goes unnoticed, however, is contained in the Mishnah’s wording. When referring to the beginning of the chain, the Mishnah states: משה קבל תורה מסיני (Moshe **received** the Torah from [Hashem at] Sinai). But when relating the continuation of the chain, the Mishnah adopts different language: ומסרה ליהושע (and **transferred** it to Yehoshua). Why didn’t the Mishnah adhere to its usual practice of uniform terminology? It could have stated: משה קבל תורה מסיני, ויהושע קבל ממנו (Moshe **received** the Torah from [Hashem at] Sinai, and Yehoshua **received** it from him), or: הקב"ה מסר התורה למשה, ומשה מסרה ליהושע (Hashem **transferred** the Torah to Moshe, and Moshe **transferred** it to Yehoshua)!

According to R’ Chaim Volozhiner (*Ruach Chaim, Avos, ibid.*), the change in terminology reflects an essential difference in the level and nature of Moshe’s prophetic stature in comparison to other prophets. There is a passage

in the Torah where – speaking to Aharon and Miriam – Hashem clearly spells out this distinction:

“(Regarding) your prophets... I speak to them (only) in a dream. (This is) not so with my servant, Moshe... I speak with him speaker to speaker... as He gazes at the G-dly Image...” (*Bamidbar 12:6-8*).

The communication from Hashem received by the “average” prophet could in no way compare to that received by Moshe. The standard prophet could achieve only visions or dreams; but to Moshe, the message was delivered directly. “All (other) prophets peered through foggy glass; Moshe Rabbeinu peered through clear glass,” (*loose translation of Yevamos 49b*).

To what can this distinction be attributed? Why did Moshe merit a heightened level of prophecy, to the point that Chazal characterize Moshe’s prophetic abilities as “the Shechinah (Divine Presence) would speak out of Moshe’s throat”? R’ Chaim Volozhiner provides a lengthy elaboration of this subject, in which he touches on many esoteric and Kabbalistic concepts (well beyond the purview of this particular forum). However, one significant point he makes there (*Ruach Chaim, ibid.; cf. also Nefesh Hachaim, 3:13-14*) is that Moshe’s level is directly attributable to his classic trait of humility: “And the man, Moshe, was extremely humble, more than any other man on the face of the earth,” (*ibid. v. 3*). As evidenced by the following account, humility is a prerequisite to spiritual attainment; any lack thereof will serve as an obstacle to Divine inspiration.

A THWARTED MEETING

The Bach (seventeenth-century *Halachic* authority) served in the prestigious position as *rav* of the city of Krakow. While walking one day, he beheld a

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mysterious scene. He was passed by two travelers of radiant bearing, whose very faces shone. Four other men ran behind these two, as if trying (unsuccessfully) to catch up. The runners, however, had quite the opposite appearance, as their faces were black as tar. The Bach approached the latter and asked who they were. The response was quite astonishing.

“We are Geichazi and his sons. (Appearing in Melachim II, Geichazi was the attendant of the prophet Elisha, disciple of Eliyahu Hanavi. He and his offspring were eventually stricken with *tzara'as* as a result of unscrupulous behavior. According to Chazal, Geichazi was thoroughly wicked, having forfeited his share in the World to Come [*Sanhedrin 90a*].) It has been decreed upon us to constantly wander after Eliyahu and Elisha (the two figures who preceded them). Try as we might, we can never reach them.”

“Where are the two prophets headed now?” asked the Bach. They informed him that the pair were on their way to visit the Megaleh Amukos (R' Nassan Nata Shapiro, a venerated Kabbalist from that era).

This response caused the Bach to wonder: “Why did they not see fit to come and visit me?” He stopped by to see the Megaleh Amukos, and asked him to pose this very question to Eliyahu.

Eliyahu Hanavi's response was quite illuminating: “As a *rav* of the city,” he explained to the Megaleh Amukos, “the Bach must possess a minute measure of pride (*cf. Sotah 5a*); otherwise, he would be trampled by his congregants and unable to lead. Nevertheless, even a miniscule amount of this trait automatically disqualifies a person from receiving Divine revelations” (*She'al Avicha V'yagedcha, vol. II, pp. 84-85*).

Moshe Rabbeinu, who possessed not a trace of self-aggrandizement, was the quintessential receptacle for Divine prophecy. As such, he received it in full measure. This, explains R' Chaim, accounts for the Mishnah's varying terminology. קבלה – “receiving” – implies a reception from up close, as one who receives a gift from the hand

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of another. This was Moshe Rabbeinu's level of Torah acquisition: he *received* the words of Torah directly from Hashem – משה קבל תורה מסיני. To be sure, Yehoshua was also an *anav* (modest individual), as mentioned specifically by the Targum Yerushalmi to Bamidbar 13:16 (“When Moshe saw the humility of Yehoshua...”). Nevertheless, his *anivus* did not equal that of Moshe, his master. As such, Yehoshua could not attain Divine communication on that same level; therefore, his reception of Torah was consigned to the level of מסירה ליהושע – transmission (ומסירה ליהושע) – a term which implies a transference sent from a distance.

The principle emerging from the above is that receptivity to Divine communication is intertwined with a particular trait: humility is a facilitator, while pride is an automatic obstacle. Exactly what the connection is, however, requires further clarification, and will be explored more fully next week, *im yirtzeh Hashem*.