

Of Man and Men

Rabbi Maury Grebenau

According to the Midrash (part of the oral tradition), the angels objected to the miracle of the splitting of the sea. They didn't understand how Hashem could justify saving the Jews and killing the Egyptians. "They are both idol worshippers" the angels exclaimed, referring to the low level of spirituality that the Jews had sunken to in Egypt. The angels' objection, while it may be justified, seems misplaced. The Jews are leaving Egypt on the heels of the greatest miraculous display of power the world had ever seen. In each of the ten plagues the Egyptians were punished with all sorts of natural and supernatural means while the Jews were spared time and time again. If there was a bone to pick with Hashem over the justification behind saving the Jews, then such an argument should have been made long ago. What prompts the angels to delay their complaint until the splitting of the sea?

Rav Meir Simcha from Dvinsk (19th century) answers this question by first identifying a basic theme that runs through Jewish History. He first points out a distinction between commandments that are between man and man, and those that are between man and Hashem. When we are dealing with the individual we notice that commandments that are social in nature don't have as strict punishments as those that are between man and Hashem. Capital punishment and even Kares (literally the cutting off of a soul) are never meted out because of violations such as Lashon Harah (evil speech), theft, slander and the like. However, historically we find many occasions where on the national level very serious punishments are chalked up to violations between man and man. For instance we are told that the second temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred (T.B. Yoma 9b). The generation of the flood had their fate sealed because of thievery despite their numerous other offenses (T.B. Sanhedrin 108a). The plague that decimated 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva was because they didn't accord proper respect to one another (T.B. Yevamos 62b). How are we to understand these severe punishments for behavior that is between man and man?

Rav Meir Simcha explains that the strict punishments such as Kares are given only to a "Nefesh", one soul alone. However, when a person is part of a functioning whole then his punishment is delayed. When the sins are on a national level then as long as the Jewish people are a cohesive unit we merit having our punishments put off so that we can rectify our actions. However, when there is a rift in the Jewish people then we lose the power of the whole and are judged as individuals. As individuals, the violations between man and Hashem whose punishments were previously delayed come crashing down around our ears. So in reality the seemingly harsh punishments are not directly related to the violations between men. The lack of unity caused by the violations among men act to break down the protection that our national unity normally provides for us. The lack of togetherness opens us to being judged as individuals, and thereby leaves us in a position of being punished for our sins against Hashem.

With this new insight we can understand why the angels only complained at the splitting of the sea and not earlier. The Midrash tells us that when the Jews reached the sea and saw that the Egyptians were giving chase, they felt that they were trapped and they became understandably very agitated. They immediately broke up into different groups arguing about the best course of action. Rav Meir Simcha explains that this splintering of the Jews caused the angels to take on a prosecutorial role. While the Jews were in Egypt and exhibited a proper attitude towards one another and a sense of unity the angels were silent despite the many sins of the Jews against Hashem. However, once the Jews began to fight and to split into factions at the sea this protection disappeared and the angels complained to Hashem. The message for us is clear; much like the proverbial musketeers, 'united we stand, divided we fall'.