

SHEMOS

THREE SIGNS OF MOSHE RABBEINU

A

The Rejected Mission

Towards the beginning of the *parsha*, Moshe Rabbeinu and Hashem have a conversation that is difficult to understand. When Moshe met Hashem at Har Sinai, Hashem told him to take the Jews out of Mitzrayim. In the course of a long dialogue—Rashi says that it lasted a whole week—Moshe resisted accepting this mission. Why didn't Moshe want to accept the mission?

The Shem Mishmuel focuses on a part of that dialogue in order to explain some deep Chassidic teachings which can answer our question. We now paraphrase the dialogue as follows:

Hashem told Moshe to take the Jewish People out of Egypt. "I will be with you," He assured Moshe. "You will bring them to Har Sinai and receive the Torah."

Moshe asked, "When I come to the Jewish People and I tell them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' they will ask me, 'What is His name?' What should I tell them?"

God told Moshe, "I will be what I will be. Go tell the Jewish People, 'Ehkeh has sent me to you.'"

God said more to Moshe:

Tell the people that Hashem, the God of your fathers Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, has sent me to you. This is My name forever, and this is My name for all generations. Go gather the leaders of Israel and tell them, “Hashem, the God of your fathers, has sent me. I have brought your situation to My mind. I know what has happened to you in Egypt. I will bring you to the land that flows with milk and honey.” Then they will listen to you. Then go with the elders to Pharaoh and say, “Let us go bring sacrifices to our God in Egypt.” He will not listen to you. I will then perform miracles there and he will release you. I will have the Egyptians lend you clothing and all sorts of things.

Moshe objected that the Jews would still not listen to him. They would protest that God had not appeared to him. Hashem asked Moshe, “What is in your hand?”

“A stick,” Moshe replied.

“Throw it down,” Hashem responded. It turned into a snake. “Pick it up,” Hashem said. It became a stick again. “Do this sign and they will believe that God has appeared to you,” He concluded.

Hashem then gave Moshe another sign. “Put your hand into your chest, then take it out,” and it was white with leprosy. “Put your hand back,” and it returned to its normal color. “If they don’t listen to the first sign, they will listen to the second. And if they don’t listen to the second sign, then here is one more. Take water from the river and pour it onto the ground, whereupon it will turn into blood.”

B

God’s Names

There are many difficulties with this part of the dialogue.

What was the issue of God’s name? Furthermore, why did Hashem give Moshe three signs? Additionally, this whole

discussion seems to be backwards. If Moshe thought that the Jewish People wouldn't believe, it would make sense for Hashem to give the signs. When Moshe would first give them the message, either they would believe or they wouldn't believe. If they wouldn't believe, then he would show them the signs. Once they would believe based on the signs, then they could discuss God's name. But the discussion of God's name appears first. This seems completely out of order!

Additionally, how is it possible that the elders of the Jewish People did not know who God was? They were Jews! They had a tradition that God would redeem them from the Egyptian exile. Yosef had told them so, as recorded in Parshas Vayechi. They certainly had a tradition about God himself. What is the meaning of the question about God's name?

Chazal say that Moshe was mistaken when he said that the people would not believe him. He spoke out of line; they would have believed even without the signs. But why did Moshe think otherwise?

There is still one more astounding question. Hashem told Moshe, "*V'sham'u l'kolecha*. They will listen to your voice." Then Moshe challenged Hashem, saying, "*V'heim lo ya'amino li v'lo yishme'u b'koli*. They will not believe me or listen to me." How could Moshe brazenly contradict Hashem?!

These are just some of the questions concerning this puzzling dialogue.

C

The Argument for Redemption

The Shem Mishmuel addresses these questions by explaining the themes of *chesed* and *din*. Hashem created the world using two pillars upon which the world stands: kindness and justice. God has mercy, kindness, and love for His creations. At the same time,

He demands justice and is strict about adherence to the law. This is the dialectic between *chesed* and *din*, both in the way God created the world and in the way He runs it (see above Parshas Chayeis Sara). *Chesed* and *din* are at the very root of creation. With this in mind, we will investigate the exodus and redemption of the Jewish People from Egypt. Was it a redemption based on *chesed* or on *din*? Was it God's mercy or God's justice at work when He redeemed His people?

The Midrash (*Shir Hashirim Rabba* 2:8) comments that when Moshe came to the Jewish People and told them that they would be redeemed, they responded that it cannot be. "We have a tradition that Hashem told Avraham at the *bris bein habesarim* that the Egyptians will subjugate the Jews for 400 years. We have been here for only 210 years. How can you claim that Hashem will take us out now?" Moshe responded, "Hashem wants to take you out and I am His messenger. He will pay no attention to these calculations of yours."

But still, Hashem did give a time frame of 400 years to Avraham. How could Moshe honestly say that if Hashem wants, He can take them out before 400 years have passed?

The Midrash continues that the Jews said, "What you are saying cannot be true, because we do not have *maasim tovim*. We are slaves busy with survival and don't have time to do good deeds. We have bad deeds. Why would Hashem take us out?" Moshe responded, "Since Hashem wants to take you out, He will not pay attention to your evil deeds."

Then the Midrash says the Jews challenged Moshe by asking, "How could we be redeemed? All of Egypt is full of our idols. Why would Hashem take us out now?" Moshe said, "Since Hashem wants to take you out, He will not pay attention to your idolatry."

The Midrash thus presents three reasons why the Jewish People objected to the proposition that the time had come for their redemption:

1. It was before the time promised to Avraham.

2. The Jews had performed evil rather than good deeds.
3. The Jews were idol makers and worshipers.

Moshe's answer in all three instances was that, nevertheless, God indeed wants to redeem you, and He will do so despite your objections.

Thus, the Jews were saying, "We understand that Hashem wants to take us out based on justice, *din*, and you are his messenger. But according to the perspective of *din*, because of these three reasons, we do not deserve it. How can *din* say that God will take us out and make us His holy nation? This goes against the prediction to Avraham!"

Moshe answered, "If Hashem wills your redemption, He can and will redeem you. There is a Divine desire that goes beyond logic. It is an expression of goodness, kindness, and mercy. God wants to take you out as an act of *chesed*, divine mercy that goes beyond any rational justification. You really do not deserve this according to the rules of justice, but God loves you and will take you out anyway."

D
Unjust Kindness

What a lesson for us in our dealings with other people! If Hashem had dealt with the Jewish People only with *din*, they would not have left Egypt at all. According to Chassidus, they never would have left Egypt because they were already at the forty-ninth level of *tuma*. They would have become completely lost in Egypt had they stayed another 190 years. Yet Hashem did redeem His holy people with Godly love and generosity.

The Exodus was an act beyond justice and logic. It was pure kindness, an undeserved gift due to Hashem's intense love for the *avos*. This is why Hashem refers to Himself repeatedly in the conversation with Moshe as the God of Avraham, Yitzchak, and

Yaakov. In our very birth as the Jewish People, Hashem made the act of kindness the very center and seed of our creation as a people.

This is how we must behave in our families and with our colleagues. We cannot be so demanding so as to always expect fairness. We have to do good even when there is injustice. We have to show mercy even when it is not deserved. This is fundamental to our creation as a holy people. The Torah repeatedly reminds us to be kind to all people, especially to the poor and disadvantaged. *Paso'ach tiftach*, give to the poor person, say Chazal, even 100 times. Even if he is exaggerating his demands for charity, you should respond.

So much of the Torah is *chesed*. For example, there is a *mitzva* in the Torah to give interest-free loans. The *mitzva* of *shmitta* cancels outstanding loans every seven years. Another requirement of the *shmitta* year is to allow anyone to come into our property and take from the produce of our crops, even from our own backyards. These *mitzvos* are amazing acts of kindness. We don't always live up to these standards now, instead using *halachic* loopholes to evade these laws. But we are not proud of this and hope to elevate ourselves to the point that we will be able to keep these *mitzvos* properly.

This kindness has its root in the Exodus. Hashem took us out of Egypt with kindness that was far beyond what we deserved.

E

What's in a Name?

With this background, we can understand why Moshe expected the Jewish People to ask about Hashem's name, since Hashem interacts with the world using alternating modes. Sometimes, He utilizes the mode of *din*, while at other times, he uses the mode of *chesed*. The name that God is called at any particular time serves

to indicate the mode that He is using. The Divine name describes how God behaves toward us. Understanding by which name Hashem should be referred to was therefore a key to appreciating the possibility of the Exodus.

The Gemara (Shevu'os 35a) teaches that there are seven primary names of God. Six of them represent different levels of judgment: *Adnus*, *Keil*, *Elokim*, *Tzvakot*, *Shakai*, and *Eloka*. Each one has a unique connotation. Each of them represents some level of *din*. According to Chassidus, each name represents a level of *tzimtzum*, confinement of God's presence. The names give us a restricted point of view. The seventh four-letter name of Hashem, though, relates to the essence of Hashem. It represents His very existence, not just how He behaves. The existence of Hashem is limitless, and this is the Name of *chesed*.

Chesed does not have any rules that confine it. It is beyond recognition or definition. The closer we get to the essence of God, the more *chesed* we discover. This is a very important concept in Chassidus. At the essence of things, kindness is more strongly pronounced. The further from the essence, the more *din* you have. A great deal of Hashem's relationship with Am Yisrael is based on *din*. The Torah is full of law, punishment, and earned rewards. It is a system of justice, a legal system, *halacha*. But at the core of Hashem's relationship to us, which is beyond the law, the relationship is *chesed*. *Chesed* is an amazing love, mercy, attachment, and a will to shower goodness and blessings on all people and especially on the Jewish People. This is the essence of our relationship with Hashem.

This also is at the essence of our view of a fellow Jew. Sometimes, when we look at a Jew, we might pass harsh judgment on him. He doesn't measure up according to *halacha*, according to *din*. Sometimes Jews are *tzaddikim*, very righteous, because they follow the law perfectly. Others, God forbid, are *resha'im*, wicked people, and face severe consequences in Torah law. At the essence of the Jew, however, there is a boundless attachment and ability

to express *chesed*. Just as when you come closer to God's essence you get closer to *chesed*, so too the closer you get to the core of a Jewish soul the more *chesed* you can see.

God told Moshe that He was about to go into Mitzrayim to save the Jewish People. There were two parts to the plan. Firstly, He would save the Jewish People. Moreover, He would punish the Egyptians for their atrocities and wickedness. Saving the Jewish People could have happened through *din* if they had deserved it, or through *chesed* if they didn't. Punishing the Egyptians, however, had nothing to do with *chesed*. The punishment of the Egyptians would be due to *din* alone.

F

The Name of God Associated with the Exodus

Moshe started off by asking Hashem what the basis would be for saving the Jewish People. Would it be *din*? Did they deserve it, did justice demand it? Or would it be kindness?

So, Moshe asked, "What is Your name?" Why and how are the Jewish People going to leave Egypt? Is it through justice or kindness?

Hashem answers, "*Ehkeh asher ehkeh*, I will be what I will be." This is similar to the more common, four-letter name, albeit in a different form. God is pure goodness and eternity itself. Hashem would bring the redemption because of His loving-kindness for the Jews. God has mercy on them and does not want them to totally degenerate in Egypt.

Hashem says to Moshe, "Call My name and they will listen to you." Then He adds, "I will punish the Egyptians, and every Jew will be able to take out gold and silver." While the gold and silver benefit the Jews, this also clearly is a punishment for the Egyptians. This indicates that God is activating His *din* as well. Thus, there appears to be a contradiction in God's statement. He

will take out the Jews with kindness and simultaneously punish the Egyptians. Accordingly, Moshe contends that the Jews will be confused. The people have three reasons to believe they don't deserve redemption. The time for redemption has not yet come; they have evil deeds; they have served idols.

God answers that He has mercy. So, the people will then ask: If so, why is God punishing the Egyptians? He is compensating us for our work by giving us their wealth. It seems to be an accounting. Do we deserve God to change history for us? Do we deserve Him taking us as His chosen people from among the whole world?

G

Today's Arguments Against the Chosen People

Until today, other peoples have argued that according to strict justice, the Jewish People do not deserve to be God's chosen people. For centuries, Catholicism was adamant that God has abandoned the Jews. Nowadays, Islam claims the same. Ironically, Christianity, which claims to be the religion of love, asserts that God has rejected the Jews. But why would the God of love abandon His people because they are not deserving? This is a glaring paradox within their argument. We know that God relates to our people with loving-kindness and mercy and does not abandon us even when we, God forbid, abandon Him.

Today's extreme forms of Islam feel that God uses only justice in this world, not love. They are absolutely wrong. God indeed uses love in this world even more than justice. Love is at the core of Hashem's *middos*. In His great love for the Jews, He never abandons us.

Back in Egypt, the Jews were confused. They asked, "If God is taking us out with love, why is He punishing the Egyptians?" The truth is that God was using both *middos*. With Jews, He would use pure mercy and love, and with the Egyptians, He would use

din. He would take the Jews out even though they didn't deserve to leave, as a father or mother does things for a child even though the child doesn't deserve it. Look at the dedication of the mother who wakes up every night to change her baby's diaper. The child doesn't deserve it. I once read that the value of the housework of a mother is about \$250,000 a year. This is aside from the love and personal care that she brings to the house, which is priceless.

The kindness and mercy of a father and mother is at the root of our relationship with Hashem. This started with the *avos* and continued to the nation of their children. Hashem said, "*B'ni bechori Yisrael, The Jews are My firstborn son*" (*Shemos* 4:22). This expression of God's mercy for His own child rises above what is deserved, just like a father loves his child beyond any logic. He will do what he can for his child when he is suffering. This is *chesed*.

But when it came to His interaction with the Egyptians, Hashem replaced *chesed* with *din*. "You are wicked," God said to the Egyptians. "You were not told to be the enforcers against My people. No one appointed you, Pharaoh, to be the jailer and enforcer of God's justice." God's justice protests that the Egyptians hurt the Jews more than the Jews deserved. They threw Jewish babies into the river. They beat Jewish slaves to death in the slime pits of Egypt. This was the cause of Divine justice against them.

This is why today's Islamic jihadists are totally wrong when they say that they will punish the Jews in the name of God's justice. No one can appoint himself to be God's executioner. The Rambam states this explicitly when discussing why the Egyptians were punished (*Hilchos Teshuva* 6:5). Hashem did not instruct the Egyptians to act as His enforcers. Yes, the Jews were supposed to be punished. But God takes care of His children in His own way. If a boy misbehaves, do parents want their neighbors to punish their own child? No parent would be that stupid! Even a grandparent has no right to enforce the law on a child. Only parents have that right! The Egyptians had no right to punish the Jews for idolatry or other *aveiros*. Even if Jews were hitting one another and informing

on one another, no one other than their God had the right to punish them. The Egyptians therefore deserved to be punished. This is the Rambam's opinion. Justice demanded that the Egyptians be punished. The Exodus then turned out to be a double platform. Hashem expressed kindness for the Jews and punishment for their Egyptian taskmasters.

H

The Three Signs—*Chesed, Din, and Rachamim*

Moshe thought that the Jews would not understand this double message. This was his intention when he said that the Jews would not listen to him. Hashem then responded with the three signs: the stick that turned into a snake; a hand becoming leprous and then being healed, and the water turning into blood. Each of these signs came to counteract the claims of the Jewish People that they didn't deserve redemption from the perspective of *din*.

Hashem explained to Moshe that, even within justice, there is a concept of *chesed* together within *din*. In Chassidus, this is called *rachamim*. Avraham represents *chesed*, pure kindness. Yitzchak is *din*, pure justice. And Yaakov is *rachamim*. We can translate *rachamim* as merciful justice or justified mercy, a combination of the two perspectives.

Hashem told Moshe, "You will teach them that there are combinations. I can have mercy on the Jews and visit strict justice upon the Egyptians at the same time, and it is not contradictory."

The first claim was that 400 years hadn't passed. God gave the leprosy sign to Moshe, noting how quickly his hand became leprous and then reverted to normal. Leprosy is a disease that normally takes a long time to develop. It then takes many weeks to heal, as is clear from Parshas Tazria. In Moshe's case, though, it went from healthy skin to leprosy instantly, and then it instantly healed. Time defines and limits things. Justice and *halacha* depend on time. For

example, when we light Shabbos candles at 4:14, Shabbos starts at exactly 4:32. *Din* is narrow and defined. But the *chesed* of Hashem is beyond and independent of time. Something that normally develops over the course of years can take place in a few months or even in a few moments with divine *chesed*. This sign signaled that Bnei Yisrael would leave Egypt soon, even though the preordained time had not yet arrived. Hashem is *mekapeitz al hageva'os* (Shir HaShirim 2:8). Hashem will jump over the mountains to redeem Israel, unfettered by the boundaries of time.

Chazal say that the greatest event in Jewish history, the anticipated coming of Mashiach, can come either *b'ita*, at its appointed time, or *achishena*, in a moment. The Chafetz Chaim had his bags packed for *achishena*, because he understood that God jumps over mountains to redeem Israel. This is the message of the leprosy on the hand of Moshe.

The Jews' second claim was that they had done too many bad deeds. The sign of water turning into blood directly addressed this objection. What is blood? According to Chassidus, blood represents a combination of water and fire. Blood connects the soul (fire) with the body (water). In order to connect an otherwise dead body with the living soul, we need blood. We need this combination in order to maintain the connection between our body and our soul. In Chassidus, water represents *chesed* and fire represents *din*. Thus, blood represents *rachamim*, the combination of *chesed* and *din*.

Bnei Yisrael thought that they didn't deserve to be redeemed because they had so many bad deeds. They felt overwhelmed and wondered how they ever could change. The answer, in the form of miraculous blood, is to do one good deed. One good deed performed with conviction—with burning, coursing, fiery red blood—can counter a million bad deeds.

This is the secret of *chesed* and *din*, the combination of mercy and justice, of *rachamim*. God knows that we often have a heavy burden of sins. And God knows that we need His mercy. But we

have to behave in a way that elicits His mercy. One great deed of fire and water, of blood, can connect heaven and earth, can bring the soul and body together and connect Hashem to His people.

In the same vein, Hashem commanded the people to perform the Korban Pesach, a *mitzva* that involves blood. The message was clear—you will deserve to be redeemed despite the sins of hundreds of years in Egypt. This is the great power of one good deed—to overpower, through *rachamim*, all of the bad deeds that came before it.

The sign of the snake addresses the objection regarding idolatry. The Jews said that God couldn't possibly be ready to redeem them because their *avoda zara* filled the land. Ironically, the ubiquity of idolatry in Egypt made it easy to overcome. The snake of the third sign carried the poison of idolatry. Moshe grabbed it by its tail and turned it back into a stick. Because there was so much idolatry, God said, the Jewish People could turn it into a stick. They could run away from the evil they knew so well and thereby become righteous, God-fearing believers.

The famous *pasuk* says “*Sur mei'ra va'asei tov*. Go away from evil and do good” (*Tehilim 34:15*). Sometimes, though, it is difficult to do both of these things. In that case, says the Shem Mishmuel, just stop doing evil. You may not feel you have the strength to do good. Then just stop the evil, and Hashem will help you do good. It will truly be a miracle! Moshe told the Bnei Yisrael, “Just stop serving idols, and you will see that you will find Hashem so quickly. *He* will find *you*. If you stop the evil, good will come rushing towards you. *Sur mei'ra* will create the *asei tov*.”

Sometimes, we are so deeply embroiled in our misguided ways, we think that it is impossible to turn around and do good. The message of the snake-stick sign is to just stop the evil, and then the good will come forth on its own. Throw away the snake and it will turn into a stick. The Shem Mishmuel says Hashem wanted Moshe Rabbeinu to truly understand this idea. He wanted Moshe to explain to the Jewish People that spiritual-based depression is

inappropriate. God also has mercy, *chesed*. That mercy may just be *chesed* without *din*. Sometimes, the mercy contains both *chesed* and *din* in it, that is, *rachamim*. Bnei Yisrael will leave Egypt with a combination of *chesed* and *din*, with *rachamim*.

I

The Final Redemption

Sometimes we feel depressed regarding our present situation in the Land of Israel. How will we ever get out of this precarious situation? We are too embroiled in our sins, especially *sinas chinam*. We cannot extricate ourselves from it. How can God redeem us? We don't deserve it.

This is an incorrect attitude according to Chassidus. We must be optimistic. Even if we don't deserve it, Hashem will redeem us anyway because of His love for us as a father for his child. Hashem has boundless and unconditional love for His Jewish children. We also need to have confidence in ourselves that we will stop the evil and that *asei tov* will come forth. We will do one good thing with fiery energy that will be the merit for us to evoke God's *rachamim*.

Midas hadin by itself may never redeem Israel; but it is completely unnecessary. We were redeemed from Egypt with *chesed* and *rachamim*. The Jewish People will be redeemed from its horrible exile of nearly 2,000 years as well. The final great redemption of Israel will come quickly in our days, *b'chesed u'vrachamim!*

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the purpose of Moshe's discussion with Hashem regarding His names before the beginning of Moshe's mission?
 2. What are the meanings of the three signs Hashem gave Moshe to show Bnei Yisrael?
 3. How do we counter the argument of Catholicism and Islam that God has abandoned the Jewish People forever?
 4. Why were the Egyptians punished? Weren't they fulfilling God's will to punish the Jewish People for their sins?
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EXERCISE

1. For a week, classify your behaviors as *din*, *chesed*, and *ra-chamim*.

Answers and Exercises

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