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Ya'akov *ben Shmuel a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Yosef and Trust

PARSHAS VAYEISHEV 5777

There appears to be an element of mystification surrounding the matter of Yosef's display of *bitachon* (reliance on Hashem), as it relates to his incarceration. Toward the end of this week's *parshah*, false allegations landed Yosef in jail, where he successfully interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's officers: the fortunate butler and the ill-fated baker. Upon reporting to the former on his imminent release, Yosef requested that he aid his own release by mentioning Yosef's name to Pharaoh: **כִּי אִם-זִכְרְתָנִי אֶתְדַּבֵּר בְּאָזְנֵי פַּרְעֹה וְיִטַּב לְךָ וְעָשִׂיתָנָא עִמָּדֵי הַסֹּד –** “But may you bear my memory in mind when goodness befalls you, and perform kindness for me and mention me to Pharaoh, thereby extricating me from this place” (*Bereishis 40:13,14*).

Conflicting Intimations

The issue seems to be if Yosef was faulted for his reliance on the butler. Quoting the Medrash, Rashi (*ibid.* v. 23) states that Yosef remained in jail for an additional two years, corresponding to the double phrasing of his request to the butler: “*Zechartani... V'hizkartani* (Remember me... and mention me).” This would seem to indicate that he should not have solicited his help. But the matter becomes somewhat more perplexing when we view the remainder of Chazal's teaching on this point. The Medrash (*Bereishis Rabbah 89:3*) focuses on the following *passuk* from Tehillim (40:5): **אַשְׁרֵי הַגִּבּוֹר אֲשֶׁר-שָׁם דִּי מִבְּטָחוֹ וְלֹא-יִפְּנֶה אֶל-הַקְּבִים –** “Fortunate is the man who places his reliance on Hashem and does not turn to the haughty.” Somewhat mystifying is the fact that the Medrash proceeds to expound that both halves of this verse refer to the same individual: “Fortunate is the man who places his reliance on Hashem: **this is Yosef**; ‘And does not turn to the haughty’: Because he said to the butler, ‘*Zechartani... V'hizkartani*,’ two years were added (to his incarceration).” So – which is it? Did Yosef conform to the strictures of *bitachon* or not? How could he be praised for his reliance on Hashem, and at the same time, apparently faulted for relying on another man?

In truth, many commentators weigh in on this issue, and, in fact, a wide-ranging discussion involving the thorny issue of “*bitachon vs. hishtadlus*” (reliance vs. practical involvement) ensues. For various reasons (e.g., space constraints), this is not the venue for a full-blown airing of this intricate topic. For the purpose of addressing the questions on the Medrash, however, we attempt to present just a few (out of many) approaches of interest.

A Sign of Excellence

To clarify this Medrash, the Rashash (in his comments to *Bereishis Rabbah*) references the incredible story of R' Elazar ben R' Shimon. This account contains certain parallels to Yosef's situation. As recorded in Bava Metzia (84b), this sage, upon his passing, was placed in the attic by his wife (see there for reason). His body rested there for close to two decades without decomposing. One time, however, his wife became alarmed when she noticed a worm exiting his ear. However, her departed husband appeared to her later in a dream with the reassurance that this was a one-time affair and he was not beginning to deteriorate. He viewed the event as retribution for an occurrence that had taken place in his lifetime.

Apparently, R' Elazar once overheard an individual denigrating a Torah scholar, but neglected to protest. R' Elazar felt that the worm episode was retribution for this failure. This may relate to the sentiment expressed in the Mishnah in Avos (4:6), which states:

כָּל הַמְכַבֵּד אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, גּוֹפּוֹ מְכַבְּד עַל הַבְּרִיּוֹת. וְכָל הַמְחַלֵּל אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, גּוֹפּוֹ מְחַלֵּל עַל הַבְּרִיּוֹת.

“Regarding one who honors the Torah – his own self shall be honored by others. But regarding one who profanes the Torah – his own self shall be profaned among others.”

The Rambam (Commentary to Mishnah) states that the obligation of respecting Torah scholars is included in the injunction of “honoring the Torah.” As he witnessed an instance in which the “Torah” was disgraced and failed to take action, R' Elazar felt that his own body was disgraced as a consequence.

What is somewhat surprising, however, is that R' Elazar is cited elsewhere as the model for protecting the honor of Torah scholars! The Gemara in Makkos (24a) lists a number of pristine qualities, attaching to each one a real-life example. In mentioning the quality of “*lo shama b'zilusa d'tzurba mei'rabbanan v'shasik* – He does not remain silent upon hearing the denigration of a Torah scholar,” the Gemara cites R' Elazar ben R' Shimon as the prototype for this behavior!

Once again, then, we are faced with the dilemma: Was he the epitome of preserving the sages' honor? Or was he faulted and punished for this very matter?

The issue appears to be addressed by the comments of Rashi (*Makkos ibid.*). He explains that there is, in fact, no contradiction. On the contrary – it is the fact that he was held to account in this manner that serves as the greatest evidence that this was his very strongpoint. R' Elazar's exact words to his wife were: **יּוֹמָא חַד שְׁמַעֵי בְּזִלּוּתָא דְצוּרְבָא מֵרַבָּנֵן וְלֹא מְחָאֵי כְּדַבְעֵי לִי** – “One day I heard the denigration of a Torah scholar, and I did not protest **as was befitting me.**” Chazal do state along these lines that, “Hashem is exacting to a hairsbreadth with the conduct of those close to Him” (*Yevamos 121b*). Rashi in Makkos thus concludes: “Apparently, we see that during his lifetime, (R' Elazar) must have been most particular about this (safeguarding the sages' honor); that is why Hashem was so exacting for that single time that he neglected to protest.”

The meaning of the Medrash is thus illuminated in light of the above. The righteous Yosef, of course, excelled in the quality of *bitachon*; the description “*asher sam Hashem mivtacho* – who places his reliance on Hashem” is most appropriately applied to him. What the Medrash states further – that he incurred additional years of incarceration for relying on the butler – is no contradiction. On the contrary; this itself is evidence of his mastery of *bitachon*. It is why someone of his level was held to account for the one instance of slight deviation.

Im yirtzeh Hashem, we will elaborate more on this trait of Yosef next week. And we shall see, as well, the central role it plays in the miracle of Chanukah.

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