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PARSHA ENCOUNTERS

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Parshas Shemos  Rabbi Dovid Rifkind

You Are What You Choose

In this week's parsha the focus turns to Moshe Rabbeinu and the plight of Bnei Yisroel in Mitzrayim.

The Meshech Chochma points out that our acceptance of Moshe as a true navi (prophet) differs from our acceptance of any other navi. By other neviim, the obligation to accept them as a true navi, based on either the word of an established navi or some wonderous act they perform, is akin to the Torah's mandating that we accept the word of two valid witnesses. It's not that the witnesses **can't** be giving false testimony, but rather that Torah law tells us that they are to be accepted. So too, the Gemara (Sanhedrin 89a) tells us of Chananya ben Azur, who began as a true navi but then eventually became a false navi. Yet, nonetheless, the Torah tells us to accept anyone who meets the criteria of a navi, as a true navi.

The case with Moshe, however, was altogether different. In his case, all of Bnei Yisroel saw him speak to Hashem by Mattan Torah. They didn't have to be told by Hashem to accept him as a navi. They **knew** his nevuos (prophecies) were true. As the pasuk says, (Shemos 19:9) "Hashem said to Moshe, behold, I come to you in the thick of the cloud, so that the people will hear as I speak to you, **and they will believe in you also forever.**" The pasuk indicates that as a result of the Bnei Yisroel seeing Moshe speaking with Hashem, his credibility was sealed forever, and his word would always be accepted as Devar Hashem (the word of G-d). The Meshech Chochma points out an intriguing question here. The Gemara tells us that everything is in the hand of Hashem other than fear of Hashem. A person always has free will to sin. Just because Bnei Yisroel saw Moshe speaking to

Hashem, how were they guaranteed that in the future he wouldn't sin and present his own word as a prophesy from Hashem (chas veshalom)? It must be, says the Meshech Chochma, that Moshe had attained the level of an angel and no longer had free will to sin. He had literally conquered his yetzer hora.

Although we are accustomed to the idea that it is man's bechira- free will- that makes him unique, the Meshech Chochma is teaching that through one's actions he can merit the total nullification of his free will.

The converse of this is found by Pharoh. Several times during the next parshiyos, Hashem says that He has hardened Pharoh's heart, seemingly denying him his free will. The Rambam (Hilchos Teshuvah perek 6) explains that it is possible for a person to do aveiros which are so severe that the retribution is that he loses his ability to do teshuva. Rav Dessler quotes a Midrash (shemos Rabba 13:3) that seems to concur with the Rambam. Rav Dessler explains this concept not so much as a punishment, but rather as part of the nature of a person that the longer they have acted a certain way, the more it becomes part of their nature and the harder it is to change. Again we find the concept that a person literally **is** who he chooses to be- whether for good or for evil. We mold ourselves through our actions. May we merit to learn the lesson of Moshe and always improve ourselves through our actions until through our actions we are zoche to bring Moshiach B'mheirah v'yameinu.

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Abrakadabra!

Rabbi Ari Friedman

In the parshios to come we learn about the miraculous acts which Moshe performed in Mitzrayim and the attempts of the sorcerers of Pharaoh to match them. Sorcery and witchcraft have been a source of fascination for thousands of years. Today, aside for being clearly prohibited by the Torah, “black magic” is virtually non-existent. What remains today and which will be our discussion is the seemingly more innocent practice of magic tricks.

The Gemara in Sanhedrin¹ refers to the pasuk “Lo se'oninu” and gives three possible definitions, one of which refers to the practice of “achizas einayim” – tricking of the eyes. The Rambam,² when defining the act of “achizas einayim” describes astonishing acts performed by a magician such as the placing of a rope under one’s clothing and pulling out a snake, or tossing a ring in the air and subsequently retrieving it from the mouth of a member of the audience. Such acts, says the Rambam, are prohibited by the Torah and are deceiving and confuse the minds of people. In another place³ the Rambam lists “achizas einayim” under the prohibition of “kishuf” – black magic. The Bach⁴ explains the two references to “achizas einayim” as follows. There are two types of tricks:

- 1 – Supernatural magical powers are employed thereby causing the audience to hallucinate and perceive incredible and impossible things to be happening.
- 2 – Tricks performed which do not use any supernatural powers but rather a quick slight of hand by a talented performer.

The Chochmas Adam⁵, based on the latter form of “achizas einayim,” prohibits the current popular form of magic tricks. He writes that those who entertain guests at a wedding by performing various tricks using slight of hand are transgressing the Torah law and should be stopped. According to the Chochmas Adam there does not seem to be much room for the popular magic shows common today. However, Hagaon Rav Moshe Feinstein זצ”ל wonders how it could be forbidden for one to display his natural talents. R’

Moshe reasons; didn’t the brothers send Naftoli who was an exceptionally swift runner to retrieve their father’s documents?⁷ Did not Shimshon who was blessed with extraordinary strength publicly use his G-d given strength to fight the P’lishtim? Certainly they were not transgressing Torah law. Similarly, says R’ Moshe, one who is blessed with an ability to perform certain tricks would not be prohibited from using his natural talents to do so. R’ Moshe concludes that in deference to those opinions that prohibit such tricks, he would attempt to abstain from rendering a ruling on the matter, but if he were pressed to respond he would permit it. The B’tzel Hachachma⁸ has a similar take on the matter. He writes that only those tricks which deceive the audience would be forbidden. For example, in the trick mentioned earlier – throwing a ring in the air and retrieving it from someone’s mouth – if the performer did not really throw the ring in the air or did not actually pull the ring out of the person’s mouth, rather it just seemed that way, this would be deception and would be forbidden. However, if he indeed threw the ring in the air and somehow, through quick-handedness, managed to pull the same ring out of someone’s mouth it would be permitted, since there is no deception involved, but rather the talents of a skilled performer at work. In any case, the performer should make it clear that he does not possess any powers, but skill, so as not to mislead the audience.

As far as attending magic shows is concerned: If the types of tricks are of the forbidden kind and the performer is a Jew, one should not attend since this would be encouraging the transgression of Torah. However, if the performer is a non-Jew it is permitted to attend⁹.

¹ 65b see Dvarim 19

² Sefer Hamitzvos Lo Taseh 32 see also Hilchos Avodah Zarah 11-9

³ Hilchos Avodah Zarah 11-15

⁴ Yoreh Deah 179 see Beis Yosef

⁵ 89-6

⁶ Igros Moshe Y.D. 13

⁷ See Sotah 13

⁸ Vol 4-13

⁹ Chochmas Adam

Rabbi Friedman learns full-time at the kollel.