

Parashat Bo 5776, 2016

Our Potential: Greater than the Angels

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzhak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains two *pasukim* (verses) that initially appear to be quite similar:

It came to pass at the end of four hundred and thirty years, and it came to pass in that very day, that all the legions of the L-rd went out of the land of Egypt. (12:41)

It came to pass on that very day, that the L-rd took the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt with their legions. (12:51, quotes from *Sefer Shemot*, Parashat Bo; these and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Both of these *pasukim* (verses) contain the Hebrew words “*va’y’he b’etzem hayom hazeh*” (“it came to pass in that very day”) and make reference to “legions.” In the first verse, however, the legions are given the appellation “of the L-rd,” while in the second this terminology is not found. Then, too, in the first verse, “the legions of the L-rd went out (*yatzu*) of the Land of Egypt,” and in the second instance, Hashem took them out directly (*hotzi*). Let us now turn to an analysis of these similarities and differences in order to understand the lessons the Torah is conveying to us.

Rashi (1040-1105) addressed the singular import of the expression, “*b’etzem hayom hazeh*,” in several sources, including his commentary to *Sefer Devarim* 32:48. Therein, he utilized the *Sifrei*, the halachic *Midrash* to *Sefer Devarim*, to clarify the “story behind the story” as to why our two verses stressed this expression:

... regarding Egypt, Scripture states, “On that very day (בְּעֵצָם הַיּוֹם הַהוּא), the L-rd brought [the children of Israel] out [of the land of Egypt]” (*Sefer Shemot* 12:51). The Egyptians said: “We swear by such and such, that if we notice them about to leave, we will stop them! And not only that, but we will take swords and other weapons, and kill them!” So, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: “I will bring them out in the middle of the day, and let anyone who has power to prevent it, come and prevent it!”

In sum, according to the *Sifrei* and Rashi, “on that very day” is deployed in our two verses in response to the Egyptians’ manifest challenge to Hashem’s authority when they refused to accept the Divine decree of the Master of the Universe. He, therefore, acted in a completely public manner that demonstrated the abject futility of man’s rebellion against Him. In a word, no force or power can stand before the Master of the Universe.

We are now ready to examine the differences between the terms, “the legions of the L-rd” and “their legions,” and “*yatzu*” and “*hotzi*.” Rav Yaakov Yosef ben Tzvi ha-Kohen Katz of Polonoye, Russia *zatzal* (1710-1784) was the author of the first published Chasidic work entitled, “*Sefer Toldot Yaakov Yosef*,” and the most celebrated student of the Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760) *zatzal*. In the course of his Kabbalistically-imbued explication of Parashat Masei in *Sefer Bamidbar*, Rav Yaakov Yosef discussed our *pasukim*:

“All the legions of the L-rd went out (*yatzu*)” [connotes the idea] that through their own positive choice they went out of Egypt. This means that they separated themselves from the materialism of this world, which is called “Egypt...” [At this point,] they became completely spiritual, almost as if they were separate angelic intelligences – to the point wherein they were called “the legions of the L-rd” as a result of their [volitional] departure from Egypt. Afterwards, they came to sanctify themselves, and the Holy One blessed be He helped them to do so. Therefore, “the L-rd took (*hotzi*) the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt” when they reached the highest level possible, namely, “their legions,” which was an even higher level than the ministering angels had attained in [the *sefirah* of] *Yetzirah* (Formation)... (Translation, underlining, parentheses and brackets my own).

Rav Yaakov Yosef's statement, "Afterwards, they came to sanctify themselves, and the Holy One blessed be He helped them to do so," is highly reminiscent of the following

Talmudic passage:

Reish Lakish said: What is the meaning of: "If [one goes] to the scoffers, he will scoff; but [if he goes] to the humble, he evokes grace?" (*Sefer Mishle* 3:34). This means, if a man comes to defile himself, the doors are opened to him, but if he comes to purify himself, he is helped (*ba l'tahare m'sayin lo*). In the school of R. Ishmael it was taught: It is as when a man sells naphtha [an ill-smelling oil product] and balm: If [a purchaser] comes to measure naphtha, he [the shopkeeper] says to him: "Measure it out for yourself;" but to one who would measure out balm he says: "Wait, till I measure together with you, so that both you and I may become perfumed." (*Talmud Bavli, Yoma* 38b-39a, translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my emendations, some brackets and underlining my own)

At this juncture we may well ask, "What is the conceptual content of the expression 'if one comes to purify himself, he is helped (*ba l'tahare m'sayin lo*)?'" I believe an answer may be found in the thought of my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as the "Rav" by his followers and disciples. The Rav repeatedly emphasized his interpretation of the phrase "He is the One who extends His hand to effectuate *teshuvah* (repentance) in order to accept the purposeful and inadvertent sinners..." (Source: the complete *Tachanun* supplication). As Rav Soloveitchik noted, while it is most assuredly man's obligation to initiate the *teshuvah* process, once a person has done so, the Almighty does everything in His power to foster and encourage the efforts of the penitent – a crystal clear example of *haba l'tahare m'sayin lo*.

In my estimation, the significance of *haba l'tahare m'sayin lo* gains further strength when viewed in the light of *Dovid Hamelech's* (King David) famous declaration:

What is man that You should remember him, and the son of man that You should be mindful of him? Yet You have made him slightly less than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and majesty. (*Sefer Tehillim* 8:5-6)

Rashi explained *Dovid Hamelech*'s pronouncement of man's status as "slightly less than the angels" in the following manner:

Yet You have made him slightly less than the angels, etc.: Heb. מאלהים, which is an expression of angels, for You gave power to Joshua to still the sun and to dry up the Jordan, and to Moses to split the waters of the Sea of Reeds and to ascend to the heavens, and to Elijah to resurrect the dead.

Based upon these additional sources, the *chidush* (novel idea) in Rav Yaakov Yosef's explanation is now quite clear: True, mankind was created slightly lower than the angels, in that we can serve as the vehicle for miraculous deeds and wonders. Yet, with Hashem's assistance, we are capable of achieving "an even higher level than the ministering angels had attained," as illustrated by the Talmudic statement, *haba l'tahare m'sayin lo*. With Hashem's blessing and our heartfelt desire, may we fulfill our ultimate potential to become even greater than the angels in our service and dedication to the Almighty. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom,

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.