

Parashat Pinchas, 5771, 2011:

The G-d of all Spirits and the Three Weeks

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

A certain [*baal tefillah*, reader] went down [to lead the congregation in prayer] in the presence of R. Hanina and said: “O G-d, the great, mighty, awesome, majestic, powerful, awe-filled, strong, fearless, sure and honored.” He waited till he had finished, and when he had finished he said to him: “Have you concluded all the praise of your Master? Why do we want all this? Even with these three that we do say, had not Moses our Master mentioned them in the Torah and had not the Men of the Great Assembly come and inserted them in the *Tefillah* [Silent Prayer], we should not have been able to mention them, and you say all these and still go on! It is as if an earthly king had a million *denarii* of gold, and someone praised him as possessing silver ones. Would it not be an insult to him?” (*Talmud Bavli, Berachot 33b*, translation, *Soncino Talmud* with my emendations)

This Talmudic passage is fascinating on a number of accounts. At the very least, it serves as a guide as to how we should address *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He) when we approach Him in heartfelt prayer and devotion. Rabbi Hanina clearly teaches us that the *Amidah* (Silent Prayer) is not a time to give vent to our creative urges and attempt to praise Hashem according to the momentary feelings that bestir themselves within us. Instead, we are obligated to follow the accepted text of *Tefillah* as formulated for us by the Men of the Great Assembly (approximately 400-300 BCE). Moreover, within the context of our prayers, we are in no position to invent so-called descriptors of G-d that lack the explicit precedents of *Sefer Devarim* 10:17 “For the L-rd, your G-d, is G-d of gods and the L-rd of the lords, the great mighty and awesome G-d, Who will show no favor, nor will He take a bribe,” and *Sefer Shemot* 34:6-7 “And the L-rd passed before him [Moshe] and proclaimed: L-rd, L-rd, benevolent G-d, Who is compassionate and

gracious, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness and truth, preserving loving kindness for thousands, forgiving iniquity and rebellion and sin.”

With rare exceptions, the above-quoted *pasukim* (verses) contain the classic phraseology through which Hashem’s actions are depicted throughout the Torah. Therefore, we are somewhat baffled by the following description of our Creator that appears but twice in all of Tanach (the Hebrew canon of Scripture) – in Parashat Korach, and in our *parasha*:

They [Moshe and Aharon] fell on their faces and said, “O G-d, the G-d of the spirits of all flesh, if one man sins, shall You be angry with the whole congregation?” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 16:22)

“Let the L-rd, the G-d of spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation” (Ibid., 27:16, these, and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The Hebrew original for the phrase “the G-d of the spirits of all flesh” is “*Elokei haruchot*.” It is a difficult expression to understand since it is subject to multiple interpretations. Fortunately, as in many instances of this nature, Rashi (1040-1105) provides us with an authoritative approach to understanding its meaning. In his view, it is best translated as “He who knows the innermost thoughts of man” (“*yodayah machavashot*”). This, in turn, is based upon the following Midrashic passage from *Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Korach, 7*:

...But You know the thoughts of man; You know who has committed a sin and who has not committed a sin. You know who has rebelled and who has not rebelled. You know the spirit [i.e. nature] of each and every one of them. Therefore the Torah utilizes the expression: “*Elokei haruchot l’kol basar*” (“the G-d of the spirits of all flesh,” translation my own).

Now that we have a better understanding of the elusive expression, “*Elokei haruchot*,” it is fascinating to note that it is preceded and modified by two different names of G-d in our above-mentioned verses. In the passage from Parashat Korach, we find G-d’s name as “*Kale*” (“the All Powerful”) whereas in our *parasha*, the appellation “*Hashem*” (“G-d

of Mercy”) is employed. The question, of course, is “why?” I believe the answer is rather straightforward. In the first instance, Moshe was pleading with G-d to save the Jewish people and to recognize that while Korach and his compatriots rebelled against Him, the rest of the nation was not culpable and should be preserved. Since G-d was ready to act with *midat hadin* (the attribute of strict and swift justice), and eradicate our people, Moshe quite properly addressed him with the name “*Kale*.” In stark contrast, Parashat Pinchas portrays Moshe as pleading with G-d to provide the people with an appropriate leader to take his place upon his imminent demise. This would be an act of consummate sensitivity and kindness for *klal Yisrael* (the entire people). Therefore, Moshe used the name, “*Hashem*,” since it represents *midat harachamim* (the attribute of Divine mercy).

We are about to enter the dark and frightening period of the Three Weeks. It is a time during which G-d consistently exercised His *midat hadin* with the destruction of the two holy Temples in Jerusalem, the annihilation of the City of Beitar, the beginning of the Spanish Expulsion (1492), and the loss of countless Jewish lives. Clearly, *Kale Elokei haruchot* knew our collective nature and our multiple sins. Yet, Yermiahu the Prophet alludes to Tisha b’Av - the final and most chilling day of the Three Weeks – as a *moed*, a festival! (*Megillat Eichah* 1:15) Thus, *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) forbade the recitation of *Tachanun* (the supplicatory prayers) on this day, and the afternoon prior thereto – just as they did on any other Festival (*Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chaim* 552: 12).

I believe Yermiahu’s allusion to Tisha b’Av as a *moed* is a very powerful statement of faith. In my view, he is actually giving us a ray of hope and light to pierce the enveloping darkness and depression. Moreover, it seems to me that Yermiahu is telling us that “*Kale*

Elokei haruchot” will eventually act toward us, once again, as “*Hashem Elokei haruchot*” – with full beneficence and unmitigated kindness. This means that we, who so poignantly feel the loss of our Temples and mourn for the uncountable deaths of our people, will eventually be *zocheh* (merit) to witness the coming of *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (the one true righteous Messiah), the ingathering of the Jewish people to Israel, the destruction of Amalek and his heirs, and the rebuilding of the *Beit Hamikdash* (the Holy Temple) in Jerusalem. As our Sages taught us in *Talmud Bavli, Taanit 30b*: “All who mourn over (the destruction of) Jerusalem will merit to see her in her joy.”

May we be *zocheh* to see the days of *Hashem Elokei haruchot* soon and in our time, and may we celebrate all future days of Tisha b’Av as a *moed* in the soon to be rebuilt holy city of Jerusalem. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

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