

Parashat Shemot 5782, 2021:

*Vayifan Koh va'Koh*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains the famous incident of Moshe striking and killing the Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Jewish slave: “He turned this way and that way (*vayifan koh va'koh*), and he saw that there was no man (*vayare ki ain ish*); so, he struck the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.”

(*Sefer Bereishit* 2:11-12, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Rashi (1040-1105) presents two glosses on this verse:

*vayifan koh va'koh*: He saw what he [the Egyptian] had done to him [the Jew] in the house and what he had done to him in the field (*Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 1:28). But according to its simple interpretation, it is to be understood according to its apparent meaning, that is, he looked and saw no man.

*vayare ki ain ish*: [That is, he saw that] there was no person destined to be descended from him [the Egyptian] who would become a convert. [Based on *Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 1:29]

Rashi views *vayifan koh va'koh* from the perspectives of *peshat* and *drash*, namely, Moshe ascertained that there were no witnesses present before killing the Egyptian and, with *ruach hakodesh* (divine inspiration), he saw what had transpired in the Jew's house prior to observing his life-threatening beating. Rashi does not, however, present a *peshat*-level analysis of *vayare ki ain ish*. Instead, he focuses solely on its midrashically-suffused interpretation, that this vicious Egyptian would not be the forebear of any converts to Judaism. Given the universal acceptance of

Rashi's *Commentary on the Torah*, these explications have become the primary lens through which our *pasuk* is viewed.

A fascinating and very different explanation of our verse, however, is offered by the Chasidic master, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Halevi Epstein *zatzal* (1751-1823) in his classic work *Ma'or VaShemesh*:

*vayifen koh va'koh vayare ki ain ish* and he struck the Egyptian: This means he turned this way and that way (that is, he analyzed the situation before him) and saw that the Egyptian was obligated in the death penalty on two levels: Firstly, he was a *rodef* [one who pursues another for the avowed purpose of murdering the one pursued] and secondly, Moshe determined that the principle of, "*haba l'horgecha hashkam l'horgo, if someone comes to murder you, rise up early and kill him first.*" was operable. (See *Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 21:4 and *Midrash Tanchuma*, Parashat Pinchas, 3, this, and the following translation, my own)

Based on these two halachic principles, Rav Epstein maintains that *Moshe Rabbeinu* "looked and did not see a man present [before him], since one who comes to murder another is as if he is already dead (*ain lo damim*), and is, in essence, like a corpse." Moreover, Moshe realized:

... there was no one else to save the one pursued from the hands of the *rodef*; he, therefore, ruled on his own: "In an instance where there are no other people present, one must endeavor to be the individual who will save the pursued, [even if it entails] killing the pursuer." [Therefore, the verse writes:] "And he struck [and killed] the Egyptian."

In relatively few words, Rav Epstein provides us with a novel way (*chiddush*) to interpret our *pasuk*. Rather than focusing on *peshat* and *drash*, he urges us to view our verse from the perspective of halachic principles. In so doing, he helps us understand the legitimacy of Moshe's actions. As the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) rules:

When, however, a person is pursuing his fellow with the intention of killing him [that is, the *rodef*]...every Jewish person is commanded to try to save the person being pursued, even if it is necessary to kill the pursuer...If there is no way to be precise in one's aim and save the person being pursued without killing the *rodef*, one should kill him, even though he has not yet killed his victim. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Rotzeach u'Shmirat HaNefesh* 1:6-7, this and all *Mishneh Torah* translations, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

The Torah obligates us to protect ourselves, as we find in the well-known phrase, “*u’shmor nafshecha m’ode* (and you should take every effort to guard your life).” (*Sefer Devarim* 4:9) This, in turn, leads to the corollary statement quoted by Rav Epstein, “*haba l’horgecha hashkam l’horgo.*” In our *pasuk*, the Jewish man being beaten was unable to rise and protect himself, leaving Moshe, alone, to champion his cause by applying the halachic principle cited by Rav Epstein and supported by the Rambam: “In an instance where there are no other people present, one must endeavor to be the individual who will save the pursued, [even if it entails] killing the pursuer.”

Fortunately, most of us are rarely faced with the challenge of protecting individuals who are in mortal danger. Yet, based upon the well-known Rabbinic dictum, “*kol yisrael aravim zeh l’zeh* (all of the Jewish people are responsible for the welfare of their fellow Jews),” we are obligated to aid our brethren in their hour of need. This concept is given voice through the practice of *gemilut chasadim*, acts of lovingkindness that emulate Hashem’s actions. As *Chazal* state:

Just as Hashem clothed the naked [in the case of Adam and Chava] ... so, too, should you clothe the naked. Just as Hashem visited the sick [in the case of Avraham after his *brit milah*] ... so, too, should you visit the sick. Just as the Holy One Blessed be He comforted the mourners [in the case of Yitzchak after Avraham’s passing] ... so, too, should you comfort the mourners. Just as the Holy One blessed be He buried the dead [in the case of Moshe] ... so, too, should you bury the dead” (*Talmud Bavli Sotah* 14a, translation my own).

This Talmudic passage provides the basis for the Rambam’s famous halachic ruling that defines many of the essentials of Jewish communal life:

It is a positive commandment of Rabbinic origin to visit the sick, comfort mourners, prepare for a funeral, prepare a bride, accompany guests, attend to all the needs of a burial, carry a corpse on one’s shoulders, walk before the bier, mourn, dig a grave and bury the dead, and bring joy to a bride and groom as well as to help them with all their needs. These are deeds of lovingkindness that one carries out with his person that have no limit. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avel* 14:1).

After noting the Rabbinic basis of these *ma'asim* (actions), the Rambam asserts that the performance of each one is a *kiyyum* (fulfillment) of *v'ahavta l'reicha kamocha*, a Torah-based *mitzvah*:

Although all these *mitzvot* are of Rabbinic origin, they are included in the Torah commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself." That charge suggests that whatever you would like other people to do for you, you should do for your fellow in Torah and *mitzvot*.

With Hashem's help and our fervent desire, may our efforts to live by the maxim, "*kol yisrael aravim zeh l'zeh*," lead us to acts of *gemilut chasadim* and, thereby, the fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *v'ahavta l'reicha kamocha*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

\*\*\* 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: [The Rav zatzal](#)