

Parashat VaYatze 5774, 2013

Understanding Hashem's Justice

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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 Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

The 19th century English novelist, George Borrow (1803-1881) once said, “translation is at best an echo.” Try as we might, translations seem to be similar to pouring perfume from one bottle to another. Practically speaking, in the end, we have nearly the same amount of perfume. Yet, we have invariably lost a good deal of the essence. If this is true regarding translations in general, it is even more accurate when we try to translate the beauty and majesty of the Torah’s prose into another language. No language other than the original Hebrew can truly capture the nuances of its meaning. All other languages truly are mere echoes of the original.

Our *parasha* provides us with an excellent example of this idea in the *pasuk* (verse) that focuses upon Hashem’s regard to Rachel *Emaneu*’s (our Matriarch’s) inability to have a child: “*Vayizkor Elokim et Rachael...*” (*Sefer Bereishit* 30:22) The Artscroll Tanach translates this verse as: “G-d remembered Rachel.” It follows this approach, as well, in the two other examples of “*Vayizkor Elokim*” that are found in *Sefer Bereishit*: 8:1 in reference to Noach and 19:29 in reference to Avraham. The problem with this translation is quite straightforward: If G-d “remembered” at various points in the respective narratives, does that mean that until those junctures He had, so to speak, “forgotten?”

This idea is absurd. Within the purview of the Torah's worldview, it is axiomatic that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* is omniscient and the Master of all knowledge. Thus, He never "forgets." If so, since "G-d remembered" cannot be taken at face value, what then does *Vayizkor Elokim* actually mean?

I believe we can answer this question by focusing upon the name of G-d that is used in each of our three *pasukim* (verses). In each instance, G-d is referred to as "*Elokim*." This appellation of our Creator connotes the idea of judgment. This concept is clearly expressed in the eighth century Midrash *Mishnat D'Rabbi Eliezer*: "Every instance where it states *Elokim* refers to the quality of judgment (*din*) whereas *Hashem* refers to the quality of mercy (*rachamim*)." (*Parashat Shiviit*) In a word, G-d, as *Elokim*, renders judgment using His standards of absolute equity. With this thought in mind, let us take another look at our verses.

"*Vayizkor Elokim et Noach...*" (*Sefer Bereishit* 8:1) is followed by a reference to all the wild animals and beasts that Noach had with him on the ark. They, too, were "remembered." If we focus upon G-d in His divine role of rendering objective decisions, what did Noach and the animals do that entitled them to the judgment of ending the Flood? The Ramban (1194-1270) suggests that *Elokim's* remembrance (*zechirah*) of Noach was that he was a "*tzaddik tamim*" ("pure and righteous individual," *Sefer Bereishit* 6:9) with whom He had made a covenant of salvation. According to Rashi (1040-1105), the animals on the ark merited salvation because they had not interbred with other species prior to the flood, and had refrained from relations while on the ark, in recognition of the destruction that was engulfing the rest of the world. Thus, in absolute

midah k'neged midah (“measure for measure”) manner, *Elokim* ruled that Noah and the animals deserved to be spared any more pain and suffering. They were, therefore saved at precisely this moment in time.

Sefer Bereishit 19:29 is actually written in reference to Avraham’s nephew Lot and his having been saved from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah: “And so it was when G-d destroyed the cities of the plain that G-d remembered Abraham; so he sent Lot from amidst the upheaval when He overturned the cities in which Lot had lived.” (Translation, Artscroll Tanach) It appears, at first blush, that *Elokim* saved Lot because of the *zechuyot* (the merits) of Avraham. The Siftei Chachamim (R. Shabbetai Bass, 1641-1718) points out that this creates a serious exegetical problem since: “In every instance where the Torah states ‘*vayizkor*’ one must perforce conclude that the *zechirah* was stated specifically in regards to the one who needed the salvation and saving.” This is why, he suggests, Rashi quotes *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* wherein it states:

What was the remembrance of Avraham in reference to Lot [that was remembered in Lot’s favor?] It was remembered [by *Elokim*] that Lot knew full well that Sarah was Avraham’s wife when upon entering Egypt he heard Avraham say regarding Sarah: ‘She is my sister’ and nevertheless he refrained from revealing the truth since he [Lot] had mercy upon him [Avraham]. Because of this, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* had mercy upon him.

The *zechirah* of *Elokim*, in this instance, is therefore not referring to the multifold and manifest *zechuyot* of Avraham at all. As Rav Bass concludes: “[*Elokim*] remembered the good that Lot had done with Avraham. Moreover, ‘*et Avraham*’ should therefore be understood, instead, as ‘*im Avraham*’ (‘with Avraham’).” Here too, *Elokim* saving Lot may be viewed as direct and absolute justice in light of his meritorious action on behalf of Avraham. In short, Lot got exactly what he deserved, nothing more and nothing less.

In truth, Lot's salvation may be homiletically interpreted as G-d's answer to Avraham's famous question: "Will the Judge of the entire universe not render justice?" (*Sefer Bereishit* 18:25)

Our *parasha's* narrative of "*Vayizkor Elokim et Rachael...*" wherein *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* finally rewards Rachael with her firstborn child, Yosef, is viewed by *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* (73) as another example of *midah k'neged midah*. Thus we find: "What remembrance was remembered on her behalf? Silence – when she remained silent upon her sister Leah's behalf – when they [Lavan] gave her to Yaakov with her [Rachael's] full knowledge and she remained silent." Herein, Rachael is rewarded for the nearly super-human sisterly loyalty she expressed on Leah's behalf. The man she loved and adored, indeed her very soul mate, was to become her sister's husband rather than her own! Her conniving and devious father was potentially ruining her life for all time. Yet, she met this nearly overwhelming challenge with equanimity and *emunah* (faith). She knew to the depths of her being that Hashem rules the world and determines every outcome. Based upon this demonstration of faith, and her steadfast unwillingness to embarrass her beloved sister, she was ultimately rightfully rewarded with the birth of Yosef.

Each of us face countless personal challenges. Our lives are the arena wherein we strive to translate the Torah's eternal laws and principles into the realm of practical action. With G-d's help, may we live lives that emulate the *emunah* and *ma'asim tovim* (exceptional actions) of *Rachael Emaneu*, and the other *Avot* and *Emahot*. In that way, when it is our

time to be judged by the Almighty, may we, too, merit “*Vayizkor Elokim. V’chane yihi ratzon.*”

Shabbat Shalom

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