

THE FIRE OF THE WISE

Shemot 1996

V'amru li ma sh'mo, ma omar aleihem? When the Jews ask me, "What is His name?" asked Moshe, "what shall I tell them?" And G-d said, *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*, I shall be what I shall be. *Ko tomar livnei Yisrael Ehyeh shelachani aleichem*, "thus shall you tell the Jews, 'I shall be' sent me to you."

What happened to the second, "*Ehyeh*?"

The Gemara explains as follows. "I shall be what I shall be," means, *Ani hayiti imachem beshibud zeh va'ani v'eheyeh imachem beshibud malchuyot*, just as I was with you in the servitude of Egypt, so will I be with you later on, when kings of other nations subjugate you. *Amar lo, Ribono she Olam*, said Moshe, Master of the Universe, *daya letzara besha'ata*, one suffering at a time, if you please! Will it really console the Jews to know that once they recover from the suffering of Egypt they will suffer again, and You will be with them then too. *Daya letzara besha'ata*, better to tell them of that *tzara* in its own time! And G-d, *kevayachol*, agreed. Very well, He said, just tell them a single *Ehyeh*, one, 'I shall be.' *Zeh shemi le'olam*, this is My eternal Name."

What does this dialogue tell us about the role of Moshe as interpreter of G-d's word? Just this: that he did more than just repeat what G-d said, but took an active role in deciding how it should be told.

The Gemara and Midrash call Moshe a *sarsur*, a term which derives from the world of commerce where it has a precise meaning: agent, broker, middleman. An agent must not only present a message but do so in a way people are likely to accept it. Sometimes this means holding back part of the message for later. Would G-d be with us when other kings oppressed us? Of course, but this was not the right time to bring it up. What sounds like a peremptory mandate -- *ko tomar livnei Yisrael*, thus shall you tell the Jews -- is instead seen not as command but collaboration.

Moshe was the first and greatest *Chacham*, the model for those who followed, whom we know collectively as *Chazal*, *chachameinu zichronam livrach*. If they did not equal Moshe in degree, they did emulate him in kind. Just as he needed at times to hold back and modify G-d's message, so did they. Rabbi Yochanan said, A *chacham* should teach his students the four-letter name of G-d -- its spelling, its meaning, its implications -- at most only once or twice a week. *Amar Rabi Nachman bar Yitzchak*, in a view codified *lehalacha* by the Rambam in *Hilchot Tefilla*, *mistavra keman de'amar pa'am achat bashavua*, it is reasonable to accept the view that a *Chacham* should discuss G-d's name no more than once a week. *Zeh shemi le'olam -- le-alem ketiv. Chazal*

noticed that the word, *le'olam* is written *chaser*, without a *vav*, and the root *ayin lamed mem* means, "hidden, invisible," as in the word *ne'elam*, "gone, disappeared." I once heard a scholar explain that the word *olam*, which we translate as, "the world," or "eternal," conveys the sense of being hidden, too big or too far away for anyone to see.

In any case Rabi Nachman bar Yitzchak took this to imply that the *Chacham* should be careful about revealing too much too often. *Rava savar lemidresheh bepirka*, the great *amora Rava* thought to discuss G-d's name in open *shiur*. *Amar lo hahu saba, le'alem ketiv*, said an old man to him, "Better not, for it is written, "*zeh shemi le'alem*, This is my name to hide."

Sometimes then the task of the *Chacham* is to reveal, sometimes to hide. At times he must hide the message, and at times he must hide himself.

When Moshe came down from *har Sinai* his face shone, and his brother Aharon and the Jews saw *ki karan or panav*, that his face glowed with light. You know of course how mistranslation of the word *karan* as "horn" made Michelangelo portray Moshe with horns, an image with a long shelf-life, but *karan* just means that Moshe's face gave forth beams. When the Jews saw this they were alarmed, *vayir'u migeshet elav*, and feared approaching him. And so Moshe had to cover himself, *vayiten al panav masveh*, he wore a mask so others could come near.

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An instance of how the *Chachamim* followed Moshe's example and perhaps even expanded upon is the famous tale of Hillel and the stranger who wanted to convert under peculiar conditions. I refer not to the most famous story, about the man who wanted to learn the whole Torah while standing on one foot, but another which appears on the same page.

Tanu Rabbanan, the Rabbis taught, *Ma'aseh benochri echad sheba lifnei Shammai*, once a stranger came before Shammai. *Amar lo, kamah Torot yesh lachem?* He asked: how many Torahs have you got? *Amar lo, shtayim, achat shebichtav v'achat sheb'al peh*. Two, answered Shammai, one written and one oral. *Amar lo*, said the stranger, who was a cheeky sort, *shebichtav ani ma'amincha, sheb'al peh eini ma'amincha*, I believe you about the validity of the written Torah but not about the oral one. *Gayereni al menat shetelamdeni Torah shebichtav*, convert me on condition that you teach me only the written Torah.

Knowing irascible old Shammai, you can guess what came next. *Ga'ar bo vehotzio benezifa*, Shammai became enraged and threw him out on his ear. *Ba lifnei Hillel, gayereh*, he came to Hillel, who converted him at once.

Yoma kamma amar lo aleph bet gimel dalet, on the first day Hillel began by teaching the alphabet. "This is an *aleph*," he said, "this is a *bet*, this a *gimel*, this a *dalet*." *Lemachar ipecha leh*, the next day he reversed them; he showed an *aleph* and called it a *dalet*, he showed him a *bet* and called it a *gimel*. *Etmol lo amret li hachi*, protested the perplexed convert, yesterday you didn't say that!

Lav alay didi ka somchat, did you not rely upon me? asked Hillel. *Ad'al peh nami semoch alay*. Then rely upon me in the matter of the validity of the Oral Torah as well.

Hillel was a gentle and kindly man; his forbearance was legendary. But we should not let his mild manner hide his blunt message. What he told the convert was this: You think you can approach the text in a direct and unmediated way, but you are quite wrong. You cannot grasp the essence, you cannot appreciate the nuances, you cannot even figure out the alphabet without interpretation. And as the *Chacham*, I am the authorized interpreter.

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Mi kehechacham umi yode'a peshar davar? Chochmat adam ta'ir panav, ve'oz panav yeshuneh.

You would expect *sefer Kohelet* to have trenchant things to say about the *Chacham* and his role. *Chazal*, after all, tell us that *Kohelet* was written by Shelomo, who was *chacham mikol adam*, the wisest of men, who knew a thing or two about the subject. And you would expect further that, given the tenor of the *sefer*, some of the things *Kohelet* has to say about the *Chacham* and *chochma* would be ambiguous and double-edged. And on both counts your expectations would be fulfilled.

Mi kehechacham, as Rashi says, *mi ba'olam chashuv ka'adam chacham*, who in the world is as important as a wise man? *Umi yode'a peshar davar*, and who knows the *peshar*, the meaning of things. Rashi identifies this with a number of men, including Moshe, *oseh pesharim ben Yisrael va'avihem shebashamayim*, who brokered compromises between the Jews and the Father in heaven. *Chochmat adam ta'ir panav*, the wisdom of a *Chacham* causes his face to shine, *v'oz panav yeshunah*, and his strength causes his face to differ, *mish'ar habriyot*, Rashi adds, from that of ordinary people, *ad ki yir'u migeshet elav ki karan or panav*, so that they will be afraid to approach him because his face beams forth.

Kohelet has several passages like this one, which tell of the power and importance of the *Chacham*, but there is another side as well. The terrible final chapter begins with a stately procession of beautiful and lacerating images which describe the sad end of mortal life. And when the procession is past and the dust, so to speak, has settled, Shelomo brings one more image, of the *Chacham* and his work, an image consistent with the mood of utter despair he has set so well:

Divrei Chachamim kadorvanot, the words of the wise are like goads.

Now “goad” is a good and useful word. If I goaded you to use it, you would know what I was doing: urging, prodding, stimulating. But like many words we use in an abstract sense, “goad” began life as a metaphor. We are oblivious to its origins because the concrete image to which it once referred belongs to a world foreign to us.

Years ago, when our children were young, we went to Vermont for a few days. After a short stay in White River Junction, we headed south to a town called Springfield, which as far as I know lacks all distinction other than being the birthplace of Carlton Fisk. There was little to do; because the Howard Johnson’s swimming pool, heated to 85 degrees, was home to every elderly arthritic in the area, my children wouldn’t go in the water. And so I drove them across the Connecticut River where, just inside New Hampshire, we found Old Fort Four, a reconstructed fort dating from the French and Indian War. Though my indifference to colonial history is vast, I found it a helpful linguistic experience.

Old Fort Four turned out to be a neat little place, a mini-Sturbridge Village or Plimoth Plantation. Small rooms housed a number of period exhibits. In one a practicing phrenologist delighted my children by divining my character from palpating the slope of my skull.

Another had a comely young lass plying the distaff -- in other words, a nice girl weaving at a loom. Describing her work she held up a clump of flax and told us that the fine, pale strands were called, “tow.” Aha, thought I, so that’s what all those charming towheads in Booth Tarkington novels are about. Then she held up a primitive brush, a crude affair which was no more than a block of wood with coarse bristles sticking out. She said it was useful for combing both flax and for the hairs on the back of a dog. She added that the hairs on a dog’s neck become erect when the dog is threatened or angry. These hairs are called “hackles.”

Now I could provoke you and raise your hackles and you would know in a general sort of way what I was up to. But having in mind the image of a snarling dog, with bared teeth and erect neck hairs, gives the term a vivid, visceral impact it would otherwise lack.

A goad is a long stick with a sharp point, which herdsmen use to keep their flocks walking a straight line. *Divrei chachamim kadorvanot*, as Rashi explains, *mah dorvan zeh mechaven et haparah litelameha, kach divreihem mechavenim et ha’adam ledarchei hachayim*, just as a goad directs a cow to follow her furrow, so do the words of the wise direct men to follow the paths of life. *Divrei chachamim kadorvanot ukemasmerot netu’im ba’alei asupot*, the words of the wise are like goads, like nails fixed in prodding sticks.

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No one knew this aspect of the *Chacham's* role better than one who was a Chacham himself, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanos. You all know Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanos, even if you think you don't, for he is the central figure in the often-told story of the *tanur* of Achnai, the Achnai oven.

You recall: Rabbi Eliezer disputed the rest of the *Chachamim*. He held that this kind of oven is not *mekabel tum'ah*, cannot become ritually impure, while they held that it can. Unable to convince them, he adduced evidence from unusual sources. If I am right, he said, let the carob-tree testify! And a carob-tree uprooted itself and jumped 100 *amot*. Let the stream testify, he said, and the stream ran backwards. Let the walls of the *bet midrash* testify, he said, and the walls threatened to collapse and crush all the disputants. But the other *Chachamim* were unmoved.

Finally Rabbi Eliezer asked Heaven itself to testify, and a *bat kol*, a heavenly voice, came down and proclaimed, *Mah lachem etzel Eliezer shehalacha imo bechol makom*, what is your problem with Rabbi Eliezer, when the *halacha* is according to his view in every case? *Amad Rabi Yehoshua al raglav*, Rabbi Yehoshua stood up and declared, *lo bashamayim hi*, the Torah is no longer in heaven, but in the province of the *Chachamim* authorized to interpret it.

The reason you have heard this story so often is because of the excellent homiletic uses to which it can be put. The story of this dispute is usually invoked to suggest the autonomy of man's intellect and the ongoing partnership between man and G-d in the halachic process.

Well, perhaps, but perhaps not quite, or not quite all men. For this is not the end of the story. Rabbi Eliezer refused to accept the ruling of his colleagues and became a *zaken mamreh*, a rebellious elder. And so his colleagues took all things Rabbi Eliezer had declared pure, and burned them. And they sent Rabbi Eliezer's student Rabbi Akiva, who dressed in black, sat four *amot* away from his former master, and said, "It seems to me, Rabbi, that your colleagues have begun to distance themselves from you." And that is how Rabbi Eliezer came to realize that his colleagues had excommunicated him. So Rabbi Eliezer left the *bet midrash* and returned to his home in Lod. There he waited for the rest of his days for his colleagues to call him to return to their midst, a call which never came.

As one of the leading pupils of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, Rabbi Eliezer had some of his maxims quoted in the second *perek* of *Pirkei Avot*. I don't want to draw facile biographical correlations. I don't know when in his life Rabbi Eliezer said these things, nor can I know to what if anything he was referring when he said them. In the end the maxims must stand on their own. Yet you will appreciate, I think, a certain ironic poignance to each of these four statements, when you consider them in light of even the brief memoir I have just sketched.

Hu haya omer, for this is what he said. *Yehi kevod chavercha chaviv alecha keshelach*, let the honor of your fellow be as dear to you as your own. *V'al tehi noach lich'os*, and do not be quick to anger. *V'shuv yom echad lifnei mitat'cha*, and repent one day before your death, which is to say every day, for one cannot know the day of his death.

His last maxim is most pertinent to our discussion and concludes it. I think you will be struck by his vivid metaphors, even if he chooses to mix them:

Hevei mitchamem keneged uram shel chachamim, warm yourself opposite the fire of the wise, he said, *vehevei zahir begachaltam shelo tikaveh*, but be careful of their coals lest you be wounded, *sheneshichatam neshichat shu'al*, for their bite is the bite of a fox, *va'akitzatam akitzat akrav*, and their sting is the sting of a scorpion, *u'lechishatam lechishat saraph*, and their hiss is the hiss of a serpent, *v'chol divreihem kegachalei esh*, and all their words are like fiery coals.

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Mi kehechacham? Who is like the *Chacham*, who sends forth prodding beams into the darkness to light our way and guide our steps? Of whom else do we make such demands, asking him to parse the text of our lives and lay bare *pesher davar*, the nature of the way things really are. And when we ask him for the name of G-d Himself, we expect him to know what to say.

Such responsibility is daunting, knowing when to make plain the Eternal Name, *zeh shemi le'olam*, and when to hold back, *zeh shemi le'alem*. And so it is no wonder that the sheer effort of trying to encompass and discharge this responsibility should produce a visage which shines with such blinding, blistering intensity that the rest of can only step back, and watch, and register the warm and luminous rays from a prudent and respectful distance.