

במדבר פרק יד:יג- יט

ויאמר משה אל ה':

"ושמעו מצרים כי העלית בכחך את העם הזה מקרבן, ואמרו אל יושב הארץ הזאת:

שמעו כי אתה ה' בקרב העם הזה –

אשר עין בעין נראה אתה ה', ועננך עמד עליהם, ובעמד ענן אתה הלך לפניהם יומם, ובעמוד אש לילה – והמתה את העם הזה כאיש אחד, ואמרו הגוים אשר שמעו את שמעך לאמר:

'מבלתי יכלת ה' להביא את העם הזה אל הארץ אשר נשבע להם וישחטם במדבר!'

ועתה – יגדל נא כח אד-ני, כאשר דברת לאמר:

'ה' ארך אפים ורב חסד נשא עון ופשע ונקמה לא ינקמה פקד עון אבות על בנים על שלשים ועל רבעים.'

סלח נא לעון העם הזה כגדל חסדך וכאשר נשאתה לעם הזה ממצרים ועד הנה."

פירוש ר' יצחק קארו לבמדבר יד:טז

"ושמעו מצרים כי העלית בכחך" –

איך אפשר שיאמרו מצרים כן, שהרי ראו כמה מכות וקריעת ים סוף?!

התשובה:

שחשבו שהקב"ה כל כחו הלך בגבורות שעשה במצרים

וזה הוא "כי העלית בכחך" – כלומר כל כחו נתן בהעלותם ממצרים,

וז"ש "ואמרו הגוים: מבלתי יכולת ה' להביא את העם הזה אל הארץ שחטם במדבר,

ולכן "יגדל נא כח ה' – עשה גבורות יותר מן הראשונות.

ואם לא יפורש כן, קשה איך נתן חסרון בכחו שיגדל עתה.

שמות פרק לב:יא-יד

ויחל משה את פני ה' אל-היו, ויאמר:

"למה ה' יחרה אפך בעמך אשר הוצאת מארץ מצרים בכח גדול וביד חזקה?

למה יאמרו מצרים לאמר: 'ברעה הוציאם, להרג אתם בהרים ולכלתם מעל פני האדמה'?

שוב מחרון אפך, והנחם על הרעה לעמך!

זכר לאברהם ליצחק ולישראל עבדיך, אשר נשבעת להם בך ותדבר אלהם:

'ארבה את זרעכם ככוכבי השמים, וכל הארץ הזאת אשר אמרתי אתן לזרעכם, ונחלו לעולם!'

וינחם ה' על הרעה אשר דבר לעשות לעמו.

Numbers 14:13-17 (translation very tentative)

Mosheh said to Hashem: But Egypt will hear! You have taken with Your power this nation from its core, and they will tell the inhabitants of that land.

Certainly they have heard that you Hashem are at the core of this nation –

that You have appeared to them eye-to-eye, and Your cloud stands watch over them, and in a pillar of cloud You go before them by day, and in a pillar of fire by night -

so when you put to death this nation as if they were one man, the nations who have heard Your repute, will say:

"It was from Hashem's lack of ability to bring this nation to the land which He swore to give them, that he slaughtered them in the desert".

Now – let the power of Hashem expand, in accordance with what You said:

R. Yitzchak Karo to Numbers 14:16

"And Egypt will have heard that You took up with Your strength (etc.)" –

How is it possible that Egypt would say this, when they saw many plagues and the Reed Sea splitting?

The answer is:

That they thought that the Holy Blessed One expended all His power doing the mighty deeds He did in Egypt.

This is the meaning of “that You took up with Your strength” – meaning that He put **all** is strength into taking them up from Egypt,

And thus it writes “And the peoples will say: It was because of Hashem’s lack of ability to bring this nation into the land that He slaughtered them in the wilderness”,

And therefore “Let the power of Hashem expand”- do mighty deeds even mightier than those that preceded.

If it is not explained thus, there is the difficulty of how he assigned a lack to His strength, so that it should now expand.

Exodus 32:11-13

Why cause Egypt to say: “He took them out of Egypt with evil intent, so as to kill them in the hills, and wipe them off the face of the earth”?

All traditional commentaries work within subjective boundaries of reasonableness, i.e. they generally only allow the text of Torah to mean things that they find plausible. Those boundaries vary by person, by place, and by era, and thus interpretations arise and then fall out of favor for reasons that have no direct textual connection. Often the most interesting and illuminating aspect of a particular comment is what it reveals about the plausibility structure of the interpreter.

These boundaries can be even more interesting when the interpreter is dealing with perspectives that the text presents but does not endorse. For example, how does one interpret the self-justifications of idol-worshippers, or of libertines, or of those who resist the authority of Mosheh? Sometimes these are read like science fantasy, with the goal being to imagine sinners as alien beings having nothing in common with the interpreter. But other readings engage in imaginative sympathy, with the goal being to present sinners as creatures very much like you and me who tragically succumbed to the wiles of our common yetzer hora, or fell prey to intellectual error. Some of the best of these are rabbinic dialogues in which the worst of killers make their decisions on the basis of sophisticated halakhic argument. Surely, for example, the brothers of Yosef would not have tried to cause his death had they not first convicted him of a capital crime!

The interpretation above from [R. Yitzchak Karo](#), uncle of the Mechaber (R. Yosef Karo), is one step further removed. R. Karo is interpreting Mosheh's presentation to G-d of what the Egyptians would say if G-d destroyed the Jews. Whose plausibility structure should be used? If we believe that it is Mosheh's argument that convinces G-d to refrain, despite the theological baggage involved in such a claim, then the task is to construct a claim that G-d would believe that the Egyptians would make. In other words, we are required to present what G-d would believe about human beings. But here we can claim that G-d's beliefs, even about hypotheticals, must be true, and so our construction must fit our own beliefs about Egyptians as well.

Mosheh claims that, were G-d to destroy the Jews suddenly, the Egyptians would say that He did so because he was unable to bring them to Canaan. R. Caro reasonably asks: Given that the Egyptians had just witnessed an extended display of awesome Divine might, how could G-d have believed that the Egyptians would have thought Him incapable of conquering Canaan?

We can add two questions of our own. First, why and how does Mosheh's argument here differ from the one in Exodus 32? Second, why does G-d care what the Egyptians would say?

R. Karo answers his question by saying that the Egyptians would have argued that G-d exhausted His powers by taking Israel out of Egypt. He claims an added exegetical advantage by noting that Mosheh's subsequent exhortation for G-d's power to be enlarged seems philosophically problematic, but now can mean that He should express his power yet more dramatically. Most commentators, however, dismiss this argument. They read that verse instead as a request for His power of mercy to overcome His anger, and this seems compelling to me.

The issue for us, then, is whether R. Karo provides a plausible reconstruction of Egyptian psychology, one that G-d appropriately took into account. Is it reasonable to suppose that the Egyptians would, in the aftermath of the destruction of Israel, have seen the Splitting of the Sea as exhausting G-d's power rather than demonstrating its inexhaustibility?

I think that the answer is yes, in part, and R. Karo does us a service by exposing this. As both Yeshayah Leibowitz and Rav Dessler point out powerfully, displays of Divine might do not generate enduring belief. Isaac Breuer argued (I learned this from Rabbi Chanoch Waxman) that what is miraculous about miracles is not their product, but rather our recognition of them as supernatural, as we instinctively assimilate all new data to models of comprehensible causality. Egypt would have been searching for a way to make G-d finite, and indeed, there is no logical objection to the argument here. Sometimes tremendous efforts lead directly to and immediately precede collapse.

But the answer is also in part no, because the instantaneous destruction of the entire Jewish people would itself have been a display awesome enough to put the lie to a claim of Divine exhaustion.

I suggest that there is really no plausible way for G-d to be worried that His reputation for power to suffer as the result of His destruction of the Jews. Moreover, the argument Mosheh makes in Exodus is equally unreasonable – if G-d always intended evil for the Jews, why go to all that bother to take them out of Egypt? It is this question that drives many rishonim to claim that

Moshe's argument in Exodus was that the Egyptians would see G-d as subject to astrology, but that too seems deeply unconvincing. Moreover – why does G-d care so much about His reputation for power? If necessary, He could always do yet more wondrous miracles and restore that.

However, there is something that the Egyptians, and everyone else, would have said, namely that it was G-d's inability to maintain a living relationship with a people that led to the destruction of the Jews. Clearly, G-d wished to take the Jews to Canaan; just as clearly, He would have failed. This, it seems to me, is the argument that Moshe must really be making, and that actually forestalls both threatened destructions.

The question then becomes why Moshe cannot say this explicitly. I suggest two reasons:

- a) There was a possibility it was true.
- b) Acknowledging it would have meant G-d giving up the capacity to control the Jews at all.

As always, I welcome your comments. Many thanks to Toviah Moldwin for providing the following links with regard to last week's dvar Torah.

<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=593&letter=M&search=small%20midrashim#1959>

<http://www.religiousstudies.uncc.edu/jcreeves/chronmosesjell.htm>

Shabbat Shalom

Aryeh Klapper

www.torahleadership.org