CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership
חרות ואחריות
www.TorahLeadership.org
"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

KBYAKHOL[2]

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

On a good teaching day, my high school students raise at least one broad philosophic question in class that should take them a lifetime to answer. Sometimes even on a not-so-good teaching day. This past Wednesday, for instance, they asked how G-d can refer to Nebuchadnezzer as His servant in Yirmiyah 27:6's foreshadowing of the first Churban; what the purpose of prophecy is if it doesn't remove the possibility of honest error about the future, or about religious and ethical fundamentals; and how G-d can both say that He sent false prophets to mislead Israel to destruction and also blame Israel for being misled.

Every Jewish human being answers these sorts of questions in the way they live their lives. That's why answering takes a lifetime, however long or short, and answers can be of highly variable quality. Teachers can try to boil their own experiences down to aphorisms or analytic frameworks. But the goal is not to answer the questions for students, rather to improve students' own answers. To a significant extent this approach assumes the superiority of an examined over an unexamined life.

A common source of these questions is the way that Tanakh presents G-d as experiencing emotions. He is angry, jealous, loving, nostalgic, and so forth. My first-level classroom response is to tell students that there is magic word – "*kbyakhol*" (= "as if it were possible) – that must be said before any attempt at answering. (If there's time and interest in staying after class, I might briefly mention Heschel, and Berkovitz's critique of Heschel as too Christian, and Wyschogrod. But *kbyakhol* is what enables me to both honor the question and not get bogged down trying to answer it.

It's sometimes tempting to take the same approach with regard to human characters. For example: How could King David commit adultery with Batsheva? Well, Dovid HaMelekh was on a spiritual level so much higher than our own that we simply can't understand his decisions.

This approach is probably better than claiming that, like Mrs. Potiphar, he misinterpreted a suddenly felt Divine imperative. And it is almost certainly better than explaining why Batsheva was technically not married at the time because all Dovid's soldiers gave their wife gittin before going into battle. I don't think that students' moral development is advanced by the thought that it's not so bad when a king commandeers the wife of a soldier at the front, so long as the king ensures that she is technically divorced. For that matter: would David's soldiers have agreed to write such divorces knowing that this was a possible consequence?

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein framed the issue regarding human beings as "Reverence vs. Relevance". The same framing applies to our discussions about G-d. *Kbyakhol* is an attempt to have it both ways. Does it work to say *kbyakhol* about the morally baffling acts of great human beings? Would that enable us to simultaneously hold their apparent mitzvot up for emulation and wave away their apparent sins as fake news? Remember that we use *kbyakhol* for ALL of Hashem's actions and attributes, not just those that challenge or disturb us.

This question came up for me while reading II Shmuel 6:6-8 from this week's haftorah (translation modified from the 1917 JPS).

וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד־גֹּרֶן נָכֹון
וַיִּשְׁלַח עֻזָּה אֶל־אֲרֹון הָאֱ-לֹהִים וַיֹּאחֶז בֹּו
כִּי שָׂמְטוּ הַבָּקָר׃
וַיִּחַר־אַף יְקוק בְּעֻזָּה
וַיַּכֵּהוּ שָׁם הָ-אֱלֹהִים עַל־הַשַּׁל
וַיָּמָת שָׁם עִם אֲרֹון הָאֱ-לֹהִים׃
וַיִּחַר לְדָוִד
עַל־אֲשֶׁר פָּרֶץ יְקוק פֶּרֶץ בְּעֻזָּה
וַיִּקְרָא לַמָּקֹום הַהוּא פֶּרֶץ עֻזָּה
עַד הַיֹּום הַזֶּה׃

When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon,
Uzzah extended toward the Ark of God and grasped it,
for the oxen had stumbled.
Vayichar af Hashem = Hashem was incensed at Uzzah.
The E-lohim struck him down on the spot for his indiscretion,
and he died there beside the Ark of The E-lohim,.
Vayichar leDavid = David was distressed
regarding Hashem having breached a breach in Uzzah;
and that place was called Breach of Uzzah,
as it is still called.

The emotions of Hashem and David are literarily and linguistically parallel – verses 7 and 8 each begin *vayichar*. Nevertheless, JPS 1917 translates:

Hashem was **incensed at** Uzzah ...
David was **distressed regarding** Hashem.

By contrast, Metsudah preserves the literary parallelism while adding in a parenthesis undercutting it:

A-donoy became angry with Uzoh ...
Dovid was angered [with himself] concerning . . .

It seems to me that the purpose of both translations is to avoid saying that David was angry with G-d.

This avoidance has a long pedigree. Here for example is the medieval philosopher Rabbi Yosef ibn Caspi:

חלילה שחרה לדוד פועל השם,
אבל חרה לו פעל עזא שעשה שהשם פעל בו מה שפעל.
G-dforbid that David was angered by the act of Hashem,
Rather he was angered by the act of Uzzah that caused Hashem to act on him as He acted.

This seems to me an extremely difficult reading of verse 7. Malbim, however, who is almost certainly Metsudah's direct source, makes a characteristic effort to break the linguistic parallel:

ויחר לדוד –
מזה הבין דוד כי לא הזהרו בכבוד הארון כראוי,
ויחרה לו על עצמו.
כי זה ההבדל בין "ויחר אף", שיוצא לזולתו, ובין "חרה לו", ששב אל עצמו,
כמו (בראשית ד:ה) ויחר לקין ויפלו פניו, ואמרו חכמינו זכרונם לברכה (סוטה לה.)
שנשתנו פניו כחררה.
Vayichar leDavid –
From this David understood that they had not been properly attentive to the Ark,
and he was angered at himself.
Because this is the difference between *vayichar af*, which applies to an other,
and *vayichar lo*, which returns to the self,
as in *vayichar leKayin = and his face fell*,
about which the Sages say (Sotah 35a)
"(Kayin's) face changed/darkened like a baked loaf.

I think Malbim's intended distinction is actually that *vayichar af* takes the preposition ב. whereas ויחר without אף takes the preposition ל. That distinction holds up fairly well (although see Iyov 19:11, ויחר עלי אפו).

However, IMHO Malbim's semantic claim that ויחר ל by itself always means "was angry at themself" rather than "was angry at another" is almost impossible to sustain. Consider first the following examples:

Bereishis 31:36, where ויחר ליעקב because Lavan suspects him of stealing his terafim

Bereishis 34:37, where the sons of Yaakov are ויחר להם מאד because of the rape of Dinah

Bamidbar 16:15, where ויחר למשה מאד by one or another complaint during Korach's revolt

I Samuel 15:11, where ויחר לשמואל because G-d rejects Shaul's monarchy

I Samuel 18:8, where ויחר לשאול מאד because the women's songs praise David more than him

2 Shmuel 3:8, where ויחר לאבנר מאד because Ish Boshet objects to his sleeping with Shaul's former concubine

2 Shmuel 13:21, where David is ויחר לו מאד over the rape of Tamar

Yonah 4:1, where Yonah takes issues with G-d's plan to forgive Nineveh.

See also Nechemiah 3:33, 4:1, and 5:6.

I don't think, for example, that Yaakov's sons are angry at themselves rather than at Shekhem, or that Shaul is angry at himself for not killing more Philistines than David.

I do think that a psychologically focused variation of Malbim can add depth to our understanding of many of these verses. Anger at another is often deeply rooted in shame; it is a displacement of responsibility onto another. So for example: Avner may realize that sleeping with Shaul's concubine betrayed his disrespect for Shaul's heir, and thus undercut the political cause he was promoting; Yaakov may suspect that Rachel has taken the terafim; and Mosheh may recognize that he has forced a confrontation that will lead to the death of many of Korach's followers. I encourage you to send me your own development of this insight for each example.

But however powerful, this insight still leaves David (and Shmuel, and Yonah) experiencing anger toward G-d, even if we readers/psychoanalysts know that this anger is in a deep sense at himself for not properly instructing Uzza. I don't think that satisfies Ibn Caspi's theological problem.

Moreover, I contend that the effort to satisfy Ibn Caspi in this case is misguided, because that would make the (IMHO) clearly intentional literary/linguistic parallelism meaningless.

So I think there are four options:

1) Acknowledging that anger toward G-d is legitimate when from a human perspective He has acted unjustly
2) Acknowledging that even great religious figures sometimes experience the illegitimate emotion of anger toward G-d,
3) Acknowledging that Tanakh sometimes portrays great religious figures *kbyakhol* as/if they experience the illegitimate emotion of anger toward G-d, although of course that can't actually be so
4) Tanakh portrays great religious figures as if they are experiencing the illegitimate emotion of anger toward G-d. But their experience is actually legitimate, because they always keep in mind that G-d could not actually have acted with the intent that angered them so what they are angry at is only their own construction or projection of G-d. This might be described as *kbyakhol* squared.

Which do you prefer today? Which would you have preferred while in high school? What do you think Tanakh intends us to learn from its paralleling of Hashem's *vayichar af b'* with David's *vayichar lo al*?

Shabbat shalom!