

Rabbi Ahron Lopiansky **Hashem's Descent**

As Yaakov is on the verge of leaving for Egypt, he experiences a prophetic dream. Hashem tells him, “Don't be scared of going down to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation there. I will descend with you to Egypt, and I will come up with you as well”. Rashi explains that the promise to ‘come up with him again’, refers to the fact that Yaakov’s body will return to *Eretz* Yisrael for burial. We can also understand it to mean that all of Israel will at some point get out of Egypt and come back to *Eretz* Yisrael. But the first half of the *passuk*, i.e. that Hashem will ‘descend’ into Egypt with him, is much less clearly understood.

The *medrash* (*Shemos* 15:16; 23:5) teaches us that Hashem “descended with us” into every exile that we have been cast into. Thus, in our *parsha* it says, “I will go down with you”. Similarly, the *medrash* quotes *pessukim* telling us that this is true in Babylon, as well as in the so-called Greek exile, and so too when Edom exiled us. The *medrash* adds that in each one of these exiles we were found to be “whole”, meaning, dedicated to Hashem and keeping our faith. But in what sense does it mean that Hashem “comes down with us” into exile? The term used to describe Hashem in the *medrash* is *Shechina* which means the Divine presence. That is almost by definition contradictory. For the “place” for the Divine presence is in *Eretz* Yisrael, more specifically, in the *Beis Hamikdash*. It is there that the presence was felt. *Galus*, by its very definition, is a period of separation from Hashem, and that of not really being able to sense him. The Hashem’s very description of *galus* periods is, “on that day [that *Klal* Yisroel does wrong], I will hide my face from them” (*Devarim* 31:16). The Torah then states it with a double emphasis (*ibid* 18), meaning a totality of obfuscation. So how has Hashem “been in exile” with us, when the core definition of exile is almost the exact opposite? The divine presence marks the sense that Hashem is there with us, and it is He who is endowing us with good, for He is pleased with us. We might call it a feedback mechanism, where Hashem lets us know, and reflects back to us, how satisfied he is with our conduct.

The answer lies in a deeper understanding of *galus*. A person who is shallow may describe the situation of *galus* as being one that Hashem has abandoned us. This means that I believe we deserve it and therefore Hashem has cast us off. A perspective like that really cuts us off from Hashem.

But there is a second perspective in the same situation. That is the perspective that Hashem has deemed the only way possible for us to rectify what we've done wrong is through suffering, remorse, and coming to the recognition of what is true and right. This means that Hashem has not cast us off but has put us in a situation where we taste the fruits of our wrongdoings, and rethink our actions. This means that we sense Hashem in the darkness and pain and suffering. We may not know exactly what and why, but we sense that we are going through a cleansing process. While it is painful and difficult and many times confusing when we go through a period like that, it is a world of difference than thinking we have been cast off. The first perspective certainly induces pain and remorse, but if we feel we have been abandoned, it breeds terror and despair. It means that there's nothing really to hope for, and the pain and suffering are pointless.

Dovid *Hamellech* said, “even if I go in the valley of death I fear not, for you are with me” (*Tehillim* 23:4). This does not mean that Hashem will necessarily save me - He may or may not - but whatever will come I'm not scared of it, because I know that it has meaning and a purpose. It is like the difference between a child in a hospital who is not only in pain, but frightened, bewildered and terrorized by everything around him, for he does not understand it. The adult may be in pain and apprehensive, but he knows and understands that there is a purpose and hope in the treatment at the hospital. That same child when he is holding on to his father's hand in the hospital, is still in pain and frightened, but he's not terrorized. He feels his father holding on to him and that there must be a rhyme and reason for what's happening; some sort of purpose.

Rav Hutner *zt"l*, in his letters, describes two friends of his: the first one said, “whenever I knock upstairs, there is no one home”. I got to know this *bocher* better, and he was a superficial person. On the other hand, the second one said, “whenever I knock upstairs, they hide from me”. I got to know this *bocher* better, and I found him to be a person of great depth.

Thus, Hashem is telling Yaakov that even when there will be times of *galus*, His Divine presence will be there. The person who has spiritual sensitivity will detect and feel Hashem in the very suffering and pain as well. It is appropriate, most appropriate, to do what we can to better ourselves and be relieved of our suffering. But still, the suffering itself is understood as being there to change us, to move us to do what's good for us.

This is an important understanding as we contemplate the difficulties that *Klal Yisrael* is enduring. Usually, the focus is on *bitachon* and hope for the ending of the sufferings. That certainly is worthy, most worthy, to pray for. But the more fundamental understanding is that we have not been cast off by G-d. They are not random acts of meaningless antisemitism or violence. Rather it is Hashem pushing us, prodding us, and awakening us to change into the people we need to be, so that Hashem can once again embrace us openly. When that happens, *iy"H* the second half of the *passuk* will also be fulfilled: Hashem will go up with us again to *Eretz Yisrael*.

More *divrei Torah* from Rabbi Lopiansky

More *divrei Torah* on *Parshas Vayigash*