

Parashah One Hundred and Twenty-Eight

Deuteronomy 3:23–29; Jeremiah 32:16–23; John 5:28–29

notes by Tim Hegg

In our *parashah* today we have a remarkable passage, a text which records the sincere and heartfelt prayer and request before HaShem of none other than Moses, the very one of whom it is said that he spoke “mouth to mouth” with the Almighty (Num 12:8). Moses, the “man of God” (Deut 33:1), had approached HaShem with what one must characterize as sincere repentance for his disregard of God’s instructions, and asked Him to rethink the punishment He had prescribed, namely, that he would not be allowed to enter the Promised Land with the rest of the nation but would die before realizing the final goal of their journey.

Notice how the text begins: “I implored...” (וַיִּתְחַנֵּן). This Hebrew verb (חנן) means “to be gracious” in its base form. Here it is used in the hitpael and thus has the sense of “plead for grace.” Moses is simply asking God to be gracious, to overturn His former decree (Num 20:12), in which He declared that Moses would not lead the people into the Land.

We should note well that the request of Moses in this prayer is a righteous one: the Sages see in his prayer an expression of how much he loved the Land, and how deep his longing was to see HaShem’s promises fulfilled to the people of Israel. What is more, Moses prays on the basis of his clear right-standing before HaShem. His previous act of disobedience (failing to honor God as he should have), in which he struck the rock rather than speaking to it as he was instructed by God, had not severed his relationship with HaShem. Moses and God continued to speak to each other, and by Moses’ own confession, HaShem had made known His mighty hand and power to him and to the nation as He guarded and guided them in the wilderness, bringing them to the very entrance of the Land.

Why, then, would not God have received the sincere request of Moses? If, as we are supposed to believe, sincere repentance (returning to HaShem) is sufficient to overcome all the negative (unrighteous) deeds which we have committed, why would not HaShem have received the request of His chosen leader and granted him the opportunity to enter the Land with the rest of the nation? Does it not seem harsh and even arbitrary for God to punish Moses in this way? After all, the first time God *did* instruct him to strike the rock. Could striking the rock in the second instance have been so bad as to keep the man who had so fully served HaShem from realizing the goal of a 40 year journey?

Moses, in his recounting of the issue, gives us some hints as to why HaShem would not, (or should we say) could not, grant the request of Moses. First, Moses says, “But HaShem became angry with me because of you...” HaShem was angry (עבר, used only 9 times and always in the hitpael, cf. Ps 78:21, 59, 62; 89:38; Prov 14:16; 20:2; 26:17) with Moses on account of the people? How does this figure? In fact, God’s response makes it clear that the issue was not with the people but with Moses and Aaron: רב־לךְ, “Enough already!”

The answer lies in the very reason that God had prescribed the consequences of Moses’ disobedience in the first place: (Num 20:12), “But Adonai said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.” In fact, if we look at the text more closely, it appears that in Moses’ angst toward the people, he had ascribed the miracle of the water to himself and Aaron:

...and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, “Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?” (Num 20:10)

Note carefully the words: “...shall *we* bring forth water for you...” which gives the notion to the people that somehow Moses and Aaron were to bring forth the miraculous event rather than God Himself.

So Moses, in his words and actions, was ascribing to himself and Aaron something that belonged only to God, and thus the subsequent discipline of God was absolutely necessary to make the people understand: no leader, even one as prestigious as Moses, could ascribe to his own efforts what rightly belongs only to God. Therefore, had God granted Moses’ request to rescind or withdraw the punishment it would have sent a very confusing and even erroneous message to the people.

In short, Moses is demonstrating to us that his punishment was necessary in order to teach the true character or nature of God when it comes to how His attributes of grace and justice coexist. Our actions—our deeds—have consequences. In the infinite and eternal realm of HaShem’s justice, those deeds which He has decreed to require punishment must, in the course of time, receive that punishment or God ceases to be just. He simply cannot turn His head, as it were, and pretend the offence never occurred. If such were possible, surely we would have expected it to occur in this instance. But here we have a most remarkable illustration of the principle of God’s justice. His justice must be satisfied because He is holy, and any thought to the contrary is a misunderstanding of God as He has revealed Himself to us.

When we read of Moses’ request and the divine response, one cannot help but reflect upon a similar request thousands of years later after the time of Moses. Our Master, after celebrating the Pesach with His talmidim, retired to the Mt. of Olives to pray. There He laid open His heart to the Father, and realizing the penalty for sin He was about to accept for the redemption of His people, He said, “Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will” (Mk 14:36). In similar fashion to that of Moses, Yeshua requested that the punishment might be swept aside. And, like our *parashah* today, the reality was that it could not be removed, because God’s justice and holiness required payment. Indeed, one has to believe that ultimately the very reason Yeshua made this request, and it was recorded in the Scriptures, was so that we would understand the justice of God. Sin requires payment because the existence of sin in God’s universe brings into question His very character.

This is why, for those of us who are disciples of Yeshua, a part of the daily Shacharit (morning) service in the standard siddur needs to be recast. Following the reading of the *Akedah* (binding of Isaac, Gen 22), the standard liturgy continues:

Master of Universe, May it be Your will, Adonai, our God and God of our fathers, to recall for our sake the covenant of our fathers. Just as our father, Abraham, suppressed his compassion for his only son and would have slaughtered him to do Your will, so may Your compassion suppress Your anger against us; and may Your compassion prevail over Your *other* attributes, to deal with us more leniently than the letter of Your law. Deal with us, Adonai, our God, kindly and with compassion. In Your great goodness, turn Your fierce anger away from Your people, and from Your city, and from Your land, and from Your territorial heritage. (quoted from the *Metsudah Complete Siddur*, p. 25)

While in many ways, this prayer resonates with biblical truth, in one crucial way it is wrong. We dare not ask God to allow one of His attributes (compassion) to overcome or diminish another of His attributes (justice/holiness). Nor do we hope that He will deal with us more leniently than the letter of His law. To do so is to ask Him to be less holy than He is! Ultimately, to do so is to ask Him to be what He is not—to become like us (cf. Ps 50:21). Rather, what we realize as we pray for God’s mercy and compassion is that for Him this is possible *because His fierce anger has been fully poured out upon our Savior, Yeshua*. We do not want Him to deal with us “more leniently than the letter” of His law. We recognize that God’s unflinching and unwavering holiness is the very basis upon which we can trust Him never to change, and never to be unfaithful to what He has promised. Rather, the Almighty has been completely faithful to the letter of His law, because the very condemnation that the Torah requires for disobedience and rebellion has fallen entirely upon Yeshua as the sin-bearer for His people. “Lovingkindness and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (Ps 85:10).

Therefore, in our siddur we have changed the wording of the traditional prayer to read:

Master of Universe, May it be Your will, Adonai, our God and God of our fathers, that You remember for our sake the covenant of our fathers. Just as You provided a ram for Isaac, Abraham’s son, so You have sent Messiah Yeshua to die in our place. Deal with us according to Mashiach, for by His stripes we are healed. May His sacrifice rise before You as a sweet aroma, and thus may You deal with us, Adonai our God, kindly and with compassion, and in Your great goodness make known Your compassion upon Your people and upon Your city and upon Your Land and upon Your inheritance.

The need to see Yeshua's death as the means by which God's justice is satisfied has been greatly diminished as the doctrine of "easy grace" has been taught in our times. "Not perfect, just forgiven" is a bumper sticker that betrays a much wider and more serious error, namely, that it really, in the end, does not matter what I do, because God's grace—His kindness—always overshadows His need to see justice done. Such an idea is rightly termed by some as "cheap grace" because it does not seem to cost either the sinner nor God anything. With the idea that He can simply "hit the delete button" and the sin is gone, people live out their lives without much, if any, concern for the eternal consequences of their sin. For Paul, such a mindset was abhorrent! "Shall we continue to sin that grace may abound? May it never be!" (Rom 6:1). The hatred of sin, as far as Paul is concerned, is proof that one is truly born again—that one has come under the healing and cleansing blood of the Lamb. To be numb to sin, or to be unconcerned about it is simply not the perspective of the true believer. This ought to be a strong warning to all who might live their lives saying, "I'm not perfect, just forgiven." It is a false hope to think that one can live one's life in unrighteousness and then hope that in the day of judgment God's grace will "overcome" His justice. Never is the ledger of His grace and justice out of balance, for wherever His grace is manifest, its payment has been purchased by the blood of Yeshua. If HaShem forgives sins, it is because in His grace He has caused the death of His own Son to satisfy His justice on behalf of those sins. And for those who are born again through His sovereign grace, this realization changes the way we live.

In fact, Paul characterizes those whose sins are forgiven as those who, through the indwelling Ruach, actually do live in a way that fulfills the righteous requirements of the Torah (Rom 8:1-4, cf. 2:13). Once again, it is not that we gain forgiveness by doing good deeds—that's an impossibility. Nor that once we have been born from above through faith we live perfect lives. But once we have come to receive the free gift of salvation, there is a change within us that results in our both loving God's righteous ways, and striving through the power He provides to walk in them. Righteousness becomes our way of life because God has transformed us from those living in darkness to those walking in the light. We strive for righteousness, not in an attempt to become something we're not, but because we are living in accordance with who we are and who we are becoming.

To be judged by our deeds, therefore, is not contrary to the message of grace, but is in every way in concert with it. For we are those who walk "not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:4).